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5

衣笠彰梧

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TOMOSESHUNSAKU

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J

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Youkoso Jitsuryoku Shijou Shugi no Kyoushitsu e

Welcome to the Classroom of the Know-It-Alls

vol.5

by Kinugasa Syohgo

[Jnovels](#)

Translation: Mp4directs Community

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Illustrations

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「伊吹ちゃんって運動神經いいのかな？」

「知るかよ。勝つのが
堀北ってことだけは間違いねーけどな」

他の男子は知る由もないが、
伊吹の運動能力は高い。僅かな
情報しかないがどちらが勝つの
かオレには断言することが出来
なかつた。



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高度育成高等学校学生データベース

7/1時点

氏名

白波千尋

しらなみ ちひろ

クラス

1年B組

学籍番号

S01T004744

部活動

美術部

誕生日

11月28日

評価

学力

C

知性

C

判断力

D

身体能力

D-

協調性

C+



面接官からのコメント

物腰が落ち着いており柔らかい物腰は好感が持てる。協調性もあり勉強においても平均的なものを持っているが、身体能力が低い点と弱腰な部分は改善が必要かと思われる。

担任メモ

千尋ちゃんは優しくて皆の癒し的マスコット！ 一之瀬ちゃんを見る目がちょっと怪しい？ ひょっとして……。



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高度育成高等学校学生データベース

7/1時点

氏名 金田悟

かねだ さとる

クラス 1年C組

学籍番号 S01T004662

部活動 美術部

誕生日 1月9日

評価

学力 B

知性 C+

判断力 C

身体能力 D-

協調性 C



面接官からのコメント

落ち着きのある生徒で、感情発露の起伏の少なさは欠点でもあるものの物事を客観的に見ることが出来る点を評価したい。全国平均よりも高い学力も魅力であり、不足している点を磨いていくことを望む。

担任メモ

クラス内では勉強ができる生徒のため他の生徒を引っ張ってもらいたい。

高度育成高等学校学生データベース

7/1時点

氏名 戸塚弥彦

とつか やひこ

クラス 1年A組

学籍番号 S01T004681

部活動 未所属

誕生日 5月12日

評価

学力 C

知性 C

判断力 D

身体能力 D

協調性 B



面接官からのコメント

際立った成績を残していた生徒ではないものの、優れた指導者からも慕われる傾向があり、一定の処世術を身に着けていると判断される。

担任メモ

クラスメイトの葛城を慕っており慕われている。現在は特に問題行動もなし。

氏名

石崎大地

いしざき だいち

クラス

1年C組

学籍番号

S01T004656

部活動

未所属

誕生日

4月14日

評価

学力

E

知性

E

判断力

E

身体能力

C+

協調性

C-



面接官からのコメント

運動能力は平均よりやや上のレベル程度ではあるが、中学校では少々有名な不良生徒だったことを把握している。当校ではこういった生徒にも救済措置を与え成長を促す必要があると考える。

担任メモ

粗暴な面があるものの、クラスメイトの力によって周囲と打ち解け始めている。



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高度育成高等学校学生データベース

7/1時点

氏名 柴田颯

しばた そう

クラス 1年B組

学籍番号 S01T004666

部活動 サッカーチーム

誕生日 11月11日

評価

学力 C

知性 D

判断力 B

身体能力 B+

協調性 B-



面接官からのコメント

小、中とサッカーを中心に部活動で活躍。学力も平均的なものを持っており優れた生徒であると判断される。仲間を思いやる気持ちの強さから教師、クラスメイトから信頼も置かれ、評判が高い。当校にて更なる成長を見届けたい。

担任メモ

一之瀬さんの男の子バージョンみたいな子で、皆さんに慕われています。運動、コミュニケーション共に立派で将来が楽しみな生徒です。



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高度育成高等学校学生データベース

7/1時点

氏名

橋本正義

はしもと まさよし

クラス

1年A組

学籍番号

S01T004690

部活動

テニス部

誕生日

4月24日

評価

学力

B+

知性

B+

判断力

B

身体能力

B

協調性

C



面接官からのコメント

受け答えもハッキリしており、将来への目標意識も高く持っている。集団に溶け込むことを得意としており、長所をさらに伸ばせるよう指導したい。

担任メモ

総合的に高いレベルの生徒であり、高校1年生ながら鋭い着眼点も持っている。



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高度育成高等学校学生データベース

7/1時点

氏名 篠原さつき

しのはら さつき

クラス 1年D組

学籍番号 S01T004742

部活動 料理部

誕生日 6月21日

評価

学力 D-

知性 D-

判断力 D

身体能力 D

協調性 C



面接官からのコメント

基本的に問題を起こす生徒ではなく、社交性も人並みに兼ね備えている。ただし学力身体能力共に平均より下回っており、集団行動の中で成長していくことを望む。

担任メモ

クラスメイトとは打ち解けた様子で、問題行動等は現在ありません。



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<https://mp4directs.com>

高度育成高等学校学生データベース

7/1時点

氏名 神室真澄

かむろ ますみ

クラス 1年A組

学籍番号 S01T004714

部活動 美術部

誕生日 2月20日

評価

学力 C

知性 D+

判断力 B-

身体能力 B+

協調性 D



面接官からのコメント

学力知力共に平均的だが、口数が少なく協調性が不足している。また言動にも改善の必要あり。

担任メモ

大人しくクラスに対する妨害行為などは皆無。しかし、親しくしている友人の存在もほぼないことが確認されている。



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Prologue: Sudou Ken's Monologue

To be honest, I'm not a proper human being. I don't need someone else to tell me that. I decided to become strong and stand for myself when my mother, who worked in the entertainment business, left me. The small presence of my father's back. He spent every day living somberly as a mere janitor. I felt sick looking at that sight. Being the idiot I am, I gave up on my studies and decided to enter the world of sports. I was into sports like tennis and table tennis at first but they never really clicked with me. I could practice all I wanted, but I could never reach the top ranks in those sports. Then I had my first encounter with basketball.

Normally, I dislike playing with others as a team, but miraculously, I was able to make it work in the case of basketball. That was why my skill with it increased. I even got a recommendation for the high school with one of the best basketball teams in the country. But I got entangled in violent activities, and my application was rejected. And that was when I realized it. That I am scum born from scummy parents. That is why I chose to enter this school instead. A place where I won't have to pay money for education, and a dream school where even my future could be guaranteed---

Chapter 1: Sports Festival Begins

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Part 1

"The surnames of the students divided up in order of the zodiac animals were the key to figuring out the 'target' then".

The location was the table furthest back in the crowded cafe 'Palette'. The close of summer vacation. I, along with Hirata and Karuizawa, and also Horikita, with those bizarre members, surrounded the lunch table. The purpose was to review the shipboard special exam that had taken place in the midst of the summer vacation. We were verifying the answer to the search for the 'target' that took place in mixed teams divided up into groups of the 12 zodiacs.

"The rabbit is the 4th in the zodiac. Ayanokouji-kun, Ichinose-san, Ibuki-san and Karuizawa-san. It would continue in that order".

"I see. If that's the order then I'm the 4th. That's why I was the 'target' then".

As though impressed, Karuizawa nods. But even so, the two girls here, at first glance, should have appeared mismatched but through the existence of Hirata, for some reason, the incompatibility between them was erased. It's a mystery.

"But you know, that rule is extremely simple. Almost anyone could understand it. That means the Dragon group Horikita-san and the others belonged to was the 5th so Kushida-san would have been the 'target', right?"

Having heard the answer, Karuizawa inserted the straw into the pack and sipped milk from it.

"That's right. Certainly, if you know the answer, it's simple. However, to arrive at this answer in the middle of the exam is no easy matter. Just with the three 'targets' in your own class, you won't be able to find proof of the rules that determine the 'targets'".

Including oneselfs, if the names of all 3 'targets' for a class were known, it could be said that one would finally begin to see the possibility.

And besides, even if one realizes that the order of the surnames that correspond to the order of the zodiac is how the 'target' is determined, there is still no changing the fact that the first time answering is risky regardless. Because, by some chance, if the wrong answer were to be given, one would incur a considerable amount of damage.

Of course, if one wins the bet, then it's possible to overturn everything in one stroke.

"What worries me is Class C. I think during the middle of the exam, Ryuuken discovered the rules".

Hirata's conjecture is most probably spot on. If that's not the case, he would not have been able to do all that.

"But, isn't it strange? If that's the case, why did he make a mistake?".

"I was also uneasy about that too. Even though there was a massive risk involved, if he understood the rules then ultimately it wouldn't have been strange even if he had seen through all the 'targets'. In other words, there should have been no mistake".

However, judging from the situation, Class C gave a wrong answer. Horikita then voiced her deduction she had made from a slightly different perspective.

"Even if Class C is seemingly dominated by Ryuuen-kun, couldn't it be that it's not monolithic? There should be more than a few people dissatisfied with his dictatorship".

"Certainly, that's true. The right to answer is given to all students, so students who did not comply with Ryuuen-kun's plan or those he failed to control making a blunder. That line of thought cannot be ruled out either. If they gave a correct answer, they stand to gain a massive amount of points after all".

The conjectures of Horikita and Hirata follow a good line of thought. However, it's also a fact that one cannot say that for certain. As for why, if there was a traitor, Ryuuen would thoroughly root out that individual.

Even if they deleted the mail and overcame that, if it's him, he might even go as far as to check their private points.

"What do you think about this, Ayanokouji-kun?".

Due to such an act from Horikita, both Hirata and Karuizawa turned their eyes towards me. I ended up unconsciously choking from that overconcentrated gaze on me.

"I don't know, I have no clue at all".

As I said that to deceive them, perhaps they lost interest in me in one stroke but their gazes scattered away.

But since Karuizawa alone was still looking at me, I returned her gaze and after a slight delay, she averted her eyes.

"Either way, right now our first priority is to establish this relationship. It makes me happy that I'm able to talk like this with Horikita-san and Ayanokouji-kun".

Up until now, Horikita had not wanted to hold the discussion Hirata had desired. However, after the end of the special exam for the two of them, it probably meant that changes have begun to appear in Horikita's mindset. From being cornered herself, she's begun to realize the fact that she cannot fight alone.

"It can't be helped, right? The zodiac exam was a special one where you absolutely cannot overcome it alone. If this can be predicted to be the same in the future too, a certain degree of connection will become necessary".

That seems to be the biggest factor behind Horikita changing her mind. However, that is correct. There is a limit to fighting alone in solitude. From now on too, one can expect many small trials from society that one cannot fight against alone.

"But even so, you successfully managed to escape Ryuuen-kun's grip".

Unlike Horikita's team, Karuizawa who was the 'target' of a different group, brilliantly managed to overcome the exam without having her identity be discovered. The indirect benefits that brought to Class D are by no means small.

"Well, I suppose. I have a surprisingly good poker face. Right, Yousuke-kun?".

Clinging to Hirata's arm, Karuizawa smiled with upturned eyes. It was almost unbelievable that the relationship between those two had once soured. It's beyond my interest whether or not this is just an act or not though.

"It was because before Ryuuen could answer, someone else gave the wrong

answer after all. It was thanks to that".

But since when did she start calling Hirata by his first name?.....Yousuke. I'd like to call him that too for a bit but it's impossible. Hirata and Karuizawa, it may be a new relationship created from the complicated situation between those two. Hirata returned Karuizawa's smile, then turned towards Horikita.

"I have a proposal to make, would that be ok?".

In response to Hirata's proposal, Horikita persisted in remaining silent without answering. It's an expression of her intention of wanting him to speak.

"Firstly, in order to bring the class together as one I'd like to bring Kushida-san into the fold. I think she will be able to supplement the four of us in parts we cannot compensate for. Starting with Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun, there are few people capable of bringing the majority of the boys together as one, you see".

Indeed, it may very well be that the one qualified to rein in the students of that sort is Kushida. However, I don't know whether or not Horikita will easily greenlight that. From enrollment up until now, the relationship between those two was constantly bad.

"Unnecessary. I won't deny it in the sense that she is capable of controlling them, but it's something we can do on our own. For that purpose, I've reached out to you and Karuizawa-san. If the two of you will lend your power, then this problem can be beaten. It may be a different story if you prove uncooperative like a certain someone though".

She looked at me with a side glance. What a rude person.

"Certainly, if it's Ayanokouji-kun, he may not follow our lead".

The two of them, with the exception of Hirata, nodded in agreement.

"It's a big misunderstanding if you think of me as the uncooperative one. For lengthy things, I'm just one amongst the crowd obediently falling into line. Truly, I'm a person you can control like you said yourself. In other words, I'm a person with a small presence".

"The ones who claim to be people with a small presence are the ones who aren't so. That is one answer".

"Then are you a person with a small presence?".

"Me? There's no way I could possibly be a person with a small presence, right? Do you mind not mocking me?".

".....s-sure".

At this point, it was a flow that couldn't be considered as anything other than sketch comedy but it doesn't seem at all like Horikita was telling a joke. It's incredibly difficult to judge whether or not she's playing the fool but without a doubt, she's probably being serious.

Part 2

As for the afternoon class, it has become a 2 hour long homeroom. When the instructor for Class D, Chabashira-sensei, arrived, she began to explain indifferently.

"From today the classes will resume again. However, in the 2nd semester, from September to the start of October for a period of one month, in anticipation for the sports festival, there will be increased physical education classes. Keep that in mind for the distribution of the new timetables. And also, along with the timetables, material regarding the sports festival will also be distributed. The students from the front will distribute the printouts to the back".

The moment they heard the word sports festival, screams rose up from a part of the class. Of course there are students who are anticipating the arrival of the event but there are also plenty of students who feel antipathy towards an event that is focused mainly on sports.

"Once again, the school's HP will be presenting the same details as the printouts. If necessary, remember to use it as reference".

"Sensei, is this also one of the special exams?".

As the class representative, after raising his hand, Hirata asked that question.

'Obviously that's the case' was the reply everyone had thought would come back but.....

"You lot are free to interpret it however you want. Either way, there's no mistaking the fact that it will have a massive influence on each and every class".

Saying that, Chabashira-sensei opted for a vague answer that was neither an affirmation or a repudiation. From the unathletic students, a further scream arose. If this were a normal school, it would have been possible for them to hold back on or skip it entirely as they wish, but since this is an event on which the fate of the class rests even if they happened to be unathletic they simply avoid it.

"Sha".

On the other hand, a portion of students who had confidence in their athleticism like Sudou were in high spirits as though saying 'this is it'. It could be said that for them, this is the first exam in which they can contribute to the class other than intellectually.

"Ayanokouji-kun, here---".

In the midst of the surroundings that were becoming restless, Horikita, who had been reading the material bit by bit, noticed something and pointed to the printout.

I too, turned over the page and checked that part. And when I did, what was written there was unexpectedly the examination system. It was only for a moment, but I felt as though Chabashira-sensei had looked at me.

"There are probably already those who have seen through it and noticed but this sports festival has adopted the method of dividing all school years into two separate groups and have them compete against each other. You lot in Class D have been assigned to the Red Team. And Class A too, will be competing in the same Red Team. For the duration of this sports festival, it means Class A will be your allies".

Class B and Class C were part of the White Team and the sports festival will be the Red Team vs. the White Team.

"Woah, seriously? It'll actually be something like that!?".

It couldn't be helped that Ike would be surprised. Regardless of whether it was a written exam or a special exam, the basic idea was that it was a fight between separate classes. He must have assumed this stance wouldn't break. By the way, what would a complete team battle be? It would be a different form of cooperation than the previous shipboard special exam. On top of that, it would be a cooperative battle that goes beyond school years. The dweller beside me was pretending to be calm, but inside, she must have been panicking.

Her brother, Horikita Manabu, belongs to Class A of the 3rd years. Depending on the circumstances, we may have to hold talks with him.

"At last it's an opportunity for you to make contact with him, huh?".

".....don't talk about that here".

Just by lightly touching on that, she got angry. Apparently, I made a verbal slip and Horikita glares at me. The sharp pencil glinting at the tip she's gripping in her hands is ominous so I'd like her to stop it.

"First of all, look over the outcomes that can come of the sports festival. I don't feel like explaining many times over so make sure to listen up well this once".

Chabashira-sensei taps the printout while explaining the vital checkpoints.

Lending my ears to her, I simultaneously dropped my gaze down to the printout. What was written there is as follows.

(Rules and Groupings of the Sports Festival)

The sports festival's competitive system is built upon dividing all school years between the Red Team and the White Team.

The classification will be Class A and Class D in the Red Team. The White Team will consist of Class B and Class C.

- Allocation of points for all participants in the competitions (Individual Contests)

Depending on the results 1st place 15 points, 2nd place 12 points, 3rd place 10 points, 4th place 8 points will be allocated.

1 point each will be deducted for placing lower than 5th place. In the case of team competitions the winning team will be allocated 500 points.

- Allocation of points for participants of recommended competitions

Depending on the results 1st place 50 points, 2nd place 30 points, 3rd place 15 points, 4th place 10 points will be allocated.

2 points each will be deducted for placing lower than 5th place (The relay which will be the final contest will be awarding 3 times the points)

- The impact of the outcome of Red Team vs. White Team

From the totality of all the school years the losing team will have 100 points equally subtracted from their class points across all school years.

- The impact of separate ordering of school years

From the total count the class that takes 1st place will be awarded 50 class points.

From the total count the class that takes 2nd place will not have any change to their class points.

From the total count the class that takes 3rd place will have 50 class points subtracted.

From the total count the class that takes 4th place will have 100 class points subtracted.

"It's a simple matter, it means it's necessary to compete by going all out without letting your guard down. Because the penalty that the losing team incurs is by no means a light one".

Certainly to have 100 class points be subtracted is a huge matter, but there are several other points I'm worried about too.

"Umm, sensei. How many points does the winning team get? There seems to be no mention of that".

In response to that simple questioning from Hirata, Chabashira-sensei utters a single, cruel word.

"Nothing. Only that there will be no minus to their points".

"Uge, are you serious? That doesn't sound good at all".

Pandemonium. It couldn't be helped that the class would become restless. Up until now, in exchange for the huge risks, there was also an unfathomable compensation that had been prepared. In this sports festival, that could barely be seen at all.

"Remember the class-specific points have also been properly calculated so keep that in mind too. Even if Class A leaps forward into action and the Red Team you lot belong to wins, in the case where the total count of Class D happens to be the lowest ranking, you will still be incurring a 100 point penalty".

In other words, even if we enjoy ourselves and our team happens to win, rather than make a profit we would in fact lose out. What this setup means is 'to fight with all of one's power and not let up' and that is the emphasis here.

But even if we say that, even if Class D alone goes into action it's still pointless. Even if by separate school years we take 1st place and receive 50 points if we lose to the White Team it will still mean a 100 point loss. On top of losing, if we end up placing 4th place then in total it would be a penalty of 200 points. On the premise that the Red Team will win, Class D must also contribute majorly. Looking at it like this, it can be seen that it's far stricter than the other exams but at least something like a special bonus is also within sight.

- Individual Competition Rewards (May be used in the next midterm exam)

For students placing 1st in the individual competitions 5000 private points or

the equivalent of 3 marks in a written exam will be awarded (in the case that the marks are chosen endowing another individual with them will not be permitted).

For students placing 2nd in the individual competitions 3000 private points or the equivalent of 2 marks in a written exam will be awarded (in the case that the marks are chosen endowing another individual with them will not be permitted).

For students placing 3rd in the individual competitions 1000 private points or the equivalent of 1 mark in a written exam will be awarded (in the case that the marks are chosen endowing another individual with them will not be permitted).

For students ranking the lowest in the individual competitions 1000 private points will be subtracted. (In the case that the points in the student's possession are lower than 1000 they will incur a loss of 1 mark in a written exam instead).

- Regarding Foul Play

Remember to comply with the rules of each competition on top of perusing the rules. The violators will be treated in the same manner as disqualification.

Those acting with malicious intent may be withdrawn. The expropriation of points acquired by those individuals up until then will be considered as well.

- Best Performing Student Reward

For the student who receives the highest score across all competitions 100,000 private points will be awarded.

- Best Performing Student Reward For Individual Classes

For the 3 students of each school year who have received the highest scores across all competitions will receive 10,000 private points individually.

Although it is unfavorable compared to the previous exams until now, a broad range of privileges have been properly prepared from the difficult ones to the easier ones. And what needs to be paid particular attention to are the merits and demerits of the reward for the individual competitions.

Information that we have never heard up until now have been added to them.

"S-Sensei! These privileges you get when you come in at 1st place and 2nd place! What do you mean you can receive marks for written exams with them!?".

Right away, Ike requests an explanation of the details from Chabashira-sensei at the front.

Perhaps that was strange but Chabashira-sensei unusually lets out a slight laugh.

"It's exactly what you think it is, Ike. From the prizes you win at the sports

festival, you can acquire marks you can use to supplement your written exams. In particular, you're bad at English and Mathematics, right? It means the marks you've acquired can be used in any way you like. For each mark you acquire it just means it'll be incredibly useful for your next test".

It couldn't be helped if they became restless from that but for those students whose sole speciality happens to be sports, screams of delight also rose up. If they spring into action in the sports festival and acquire marks, they can use them to supplement their scores in the case that they get failing grades later. In other words, it means the possibility of them evading expulsion had risen.

Looking at it from the perspective of students who are skirting the failing grade, it could truly be described as a situation they have been waiting for.

It isn't a huge blessing for honor students like Hirata and the others but for that, even if unnecessary they can still simply acquire private points. Ultimately, either way there's no mistaking the fact that it's a reward to be grateful for.

Even leaving the 3 Idiots aside, there are more than a few students who feel anxious regarding their academic abilities. Since in regards to the written exams, the ultimate penalty of expulsion awaits, it seems they cannot afford to let their guard down at all.

However, for such a nice story obviously there is a flip side to it.

- After completion of all competitions, within a school year a total count of all points will be conducted and the bottom 10 individuals will be penalized

Since the penalties will differ based on each school year remember to confirm with the instructor in charge.

Such troublesome contents were also written at the bottom of it.

"Sensei, what kind of penalty is this going to be?".

"For you 1st years the penalty imposed will be a score deduction on your next written exam. The bottom 10 students score-wise will be receiving a deduction of 10 marks so beware of that. As for how the deduction of scores will be applied, that will be explained as the next written exam draws near so I won't be taking any questions on that here. Again, the announcement of the bottom 10 will be conducted similarly and will be announced on the occasion of the explanation regarding the written exam".

"Geeeeh!?!? Seriously!?".

In other words, if Ike happened to place at the bottom of his school year then on the next written exam it would mean that he would have a further 10 marks deducted from him on top of skirting the failing grade. It would probably mean he has to face a considerably difficult exam.

Having received a brief explanation on that matter, next up would be checking the details of the competitions coming up in the sports festival.

In dividing up the events that will be held during the sports festival into categories they can be split up between 'Universal Participation' and 'Recommended Only Participation'. Universal Participation is, literally, an event where all the students of a class participate.

The individual 100 meter sprint is also like that, and group competitions such as tug of war also fall under this category.

On the other hand, Recommended Only Participation means a competition where only the students selected from their respective classes participate. They say 'recommendation' but as long as the class can come to an agreement even a self-recommendation will suffice. It won't matter even if a single individual participates in multiple Recommended Only Participation contests.

The point is, it's an event that's decided through discussion. The contents of this are the scavenger hunt, the mixed gender three-legged race and the 1200 meter relay.

It can be expected that the most eminent and talented individuals will be participating. In this sports festival, since the rise and fall of the points will be determined purely by the results the rules are also overwhelmingly simple.

However, the composite nature of the points for the team competitions and the individual competitions is unusually troublesome. Being cautious of the enemies here, Class B and Class C, is obvious but in addition, it is also necessary to keep an eye on the ally, Class A, too.

In theory we'll be helping each other out but in order to come out on top in the total count of each school year's points, it is necessary to ensure one's own class can occupy the top spots in each competition as much as possible. The uninhabited island and the shipboard cases both, too, were set up so that it would not be possible to complete them simply.

"The events that will be held during the sports festival and their details are all exactly as described on the printouts. There will be no changes at all to them".

"Ugege, this is really hard! It's nothing like middle school!".

- Universal Participation Events

100 meter dash

Hurdle race

Capture-the-flag (Boys Only)

Ball-toss game (Girls Only)

Tug of war divided by gender

Obstacle course race

Three-legged race

Cavalry battle

200 meter dash

- Recommended Only Participation Events

Scavenger hunt

Omnidirectional tug of war

Mixed gender three-legged race

3 school years mixed 1200 meter relay

A grand lineup of 13 competitions. The numbering indicates in which order the competitions will be held. Apparently the dissatisfaction is due to the large number of Universal Participation events being held.

"Normally it should only be 3 or 4 events, that a single person does! More importantly, is it even possible to do them in a single day?".

"I'm grateful for your concern but the school side has also naturally taken it into consideration. There will be no cheerleading or dancing or coordinated group gymnastics amongst the events. At the very most, in the sports festival you will only be competing in terms of stamina and athleticism".

The resistance of the unathletic students also proved fruitless as they were simply dealt with like that.

"And also of utmost importance is the fact that there is something called a participation table here. On the participation table the details of all events are described. You lot will be using this participation table to decide amongst yourselves in which order you will be participating and record it down and an outsider, that is me, will submit it for you. Since I believe no middle school has adopted a system like this, I'd like you to be careful so as to not make a mistake".

"To decide what order on our own, how far can we decide.....?".

A question from Hirata that is an obvious one. Since it was obvious, the response from Chabashira-sensei was also quick.

"Everything. All the competitions that will be held on the day of the sports festival, up to who runs in which group, all of it will be decided by you lot through discussion. After the deadline for decisions, no matter what the reason, any further changes will not be permitted. That is the vital rule of the

sports festival. The submission window will be between 1 week prior to the sports festival and 5 pm of the day before the festival. If you end up exceeding the submission time limit then in that case, you will be randomly allocated so be cautious".

So it means it's a sports festival where we have to think up the strategies ourselves, think and win. It's clear that when it comes to the sports festival, the existence of the participation table might as well be called the lifeline of the class itself.

"I have a question to ask, would be that fine, Chabashira-sensei?".

Having silently listened up until now, Horikita raised her hand.

"Ask away as much as you want. Now is the time, after all".

Looking on at that, Chabashira-sensei lightly laughs. Both Hirata and Horikita, to a certain extent, understand the mechanism behind this school. It's because they understand that asking questions to the utmost of their ability here will be for future's sake. Especially because it's now, while there is still presently no effect on the points, that all existing doubts should be resolved.

It's because there is a possibility that on the day of the sports festival itself, if we ask questions about this and that, she might be unable to answer anymore or it might already be too late.

"There is the fact that once the decided participation table has been accepted, no further changes will be permitted but on that day of the festival, if there is an absentee what should we do? If it happened to be an individual competition then in accordance with the description it will be treated as an absence but for group competitions.....in particular, for the cavalry battle and three-legged race that will be taking place with multiple people, if even only a single person were to be missing then the competition itself won't

work".

"Regarding the Universal Participation contests, in the case that you fall short of the bare minimum amount of people necessary and vacancies appear, you will be marked as unfit to continue and you will be disqualified. In the cavalry battle you mentioned, it would mean you would be unable to form 1 horse. As a result, you will have to have your showdown under the condition of having one horseman missing. The three-legged race is the same too. It would be wise of you to choose a healthy and strong student as your partner".

Shared destiny. It's vital to choose a student who excels in athletics, and in the same vein, it's also precious to ensure you team up with a comrade who's healthy and uninjured.

"However, there are exemptions in place as relief measures. In regards to the main star of the sports festival, the Recommended Only Participation events, it is permitted to utilize a substitute. However, if you go around choosing substitutes freely then the participation table itself will become meaningless and in the most extreme cases, you'll end up using lies to prepare your own substitutes. As a result, we have established special conditions. In exchange for setting up a substitute, it has been decided that you will be paying points as compensation".

So they mean to have us pay a price to prevent acts of cheating.

"Adding onto that I'd like to ask but even if your health breaks down or you sustain a heavy injury, if the person in question themselves wishes for it they could be allowed to continue without being substituted? Or would it mean having to see the doctor?".

"Basically we leave that up to the students to autonomously decide on their own. Because self-management will become indispensable once you enter

society. On the day of a vital conference, just because you have a fever doesn't mean you can simply take a break. It may become necessary to struggle and keep up the appearance of being fine".

Basically the point seems to be that even if we end up sick, in the name of self-responsibility we cannot simply stop participating.

"But even so, if your condition gets to the point you cannot even be a spectator then you would have no choice but to stop though".

"I understand. Then, for that substitute, how many points would be necessary?".

"100,000 private points per competition. You're free to see it as expensive or cheap as you wish".

".....I see. Thank you".

It's not an amount we cannot afford but neither is it a cheap one.

However, depending on the circumstances, we must take into consideration that a substitute may become necessary.

"If there are no more questions forthcoming then I'll be ending this talk".

She looks around the classroom. A number of students looked as though they were feeling doubtful and glancing at each other as well as talking in hushed tones but they did not move to ask Chabashira-sensei.

"The next period will be moved to the first gymnasium and you will be meeting students from different classes and different school years. That is all".

Checking the time, Chabashira-sensei mentioned that there is still time left for the homeroom.

"There is still 20 minutes of study time remaining, you are free to use that remaining time as you wish. You're free to either chat away or have a serious discussion".

Since with the authority of the teacher, permission had been given, the suppressed silence exploded all at once. Individual groups formed up and they began to talk about the sports festival on their own. Gathered under Horikita was Sudou as well as Ike and Yamauchi.

"Horikita. Let's talk about how we'll overcome the sports festival".

"I agree, I agree. Let's think about a way to snatch 1st place~".

Horikita, who was watching the men swarming around her like it was somebody else's business, sighed deeply .

"I wonder why only people like this come to me.....".

"It's a sad reality, isn't it?".

'Absolutely right', even as Horikita said that it seems she's intent on thinking about it seriously as she opened up her notebook.

"Fine. First of all, I'll hear out your opinions".

"Ok, ok!".

The one who enthusiastically raised his hands right away was Ike. Horikita pointed the tip of her pen at him and urged him to speak.

"I'd like to have fun and win!".

"I cannot acknowledge that as an opinion. Do you mind cutting out the low-

level remarks?".

She cuts him off short. Well, it couldn't be helped even if Ike's hopes were cut short.

"There is a way for Class D to win".

The one who confidently opened his mouth was Sudou.

"I'm not expecting anything but I'll hear you out".

"I don't know about Universal Participation but you know, I'll be participating in every recommended only contest. If I do that, we'll win".

Sudou, who had more confidence than anyone else when it comes to athletics, insisted on that.

"The level of the remark itself was on the same level as Ike-kun's but while simple, it's a surefire way. Even within the class, you stand out as someone who excels in athletics after all. It's not a bad idea for you to participate in all recommended only contests. Even if the same individual participates multiple times there's no problem as far as the rules are concerned".

I also agreed, but it seems Ike and Yamauchi were dissatisfied with it as they voiced their criticisms.

"We also want our own chances. I mean, if we place within the first 3 places then we can get points that way".

"Are you saying you'll do that even if it lowers the chances of the class winning?".

"No, I mean that's true but.....we want lots of chances or how should I put

it.....".

"When it comes to recommended only contests usually the athletic people are the ones who participate. It's impossible for you, Kanji".

"You don't know that, right? There's also such a thing as coincidence, you know. It should be fair".

"From now on, discussion regarding the class is unnecessary I suppose.....".

Even if she was able to argue down Ike here, anticipating that there would be more students within the class who think similarly to Ike, Horikita said that. However, this time around, it seems that remark got Sudou all fired up.

"The athletic ones will participate as many times as they want. That's first priority, right? You're being naive, Suzune".

I understand well what Sudou wishes to say. Horikita is also not rejecting it. Even from the perspective of honor students who are simply good at their studies, a student like Sudou taking action in the sports festival would be ideal.

If a student like Sudou who is in constant risk of receiving a failing grade manages to acquire a bonus here there'd be no problem. However, if you ask if the entire class will reach a consensus then it's not that simple of a matter. Because the privilege acquired from winning a prize here would be all the more attractive to students with low academic ability. For those students who are constantly at risk of being expelled, they would want it so badly hands would leap out of their throats.

"I'm intending on supporting your desire to participate in all events. However, that doesn't mean that I will unreservedly back your participation in all contests".

"What do you mean?"

"Stamina is not an unlimited resource. If you consecutively participate then naturally it will be exhausted. Consecutive victories are a difficult thing".

"But even so it's still better than leaving it to unathletic people, right? Even if I'm tired, I can still perform better than those guys".

Looking at the boys, including me, with a glance, Sudou laughs scornfully. Ike and the others seem frustrated but they cannot argue against it.

"Even if we continue this discussion here an answer won't be forthcoming. Let's decide it at the next homeroom".

Horikita, having determined that further progress won't be happening here, said that as she quickly ended the discussion.

Part 3

During our second homeroom period it has been decided that students across all school years would be having a meeting. Over 400 people, including instructors and students, gathered in the gymnasium. The entire student body from the 1st years up to the 3rd years divided up between the Red Team and the White Team. Horikita seemed restless as she looked around at her surroundings. She is probably looking for her brother, Horikita Manabu, who serves as this school's student council president. However, the location is unfavorable. If this many people are present, even if she knows which class he belongs to, it would be difficult to spot him.

And besides, perhaps she's worried about causing her brother trouble, but she seemed to be restraining herself with a reserved gaze and as such her field of vision seemed narrowed.

If she loves her brother that much, I think it would be better for her to act more boldly though. But for Horikita that is probably a task far more difficult and impossible for her to perform than anything else.

Looking back at it now, she's never gone to meet her brother yet even once. All of their contacts have been initiated by him. As the assembled students began causing a ruckus, a few students stepped forward. Everyone's eyes turned towards them.

"I am Fujimaki from Class A of the 3rd years. It has been decided that I will be taking charge of the Red Team for this event".

Apparently it doesn't seem like Horikita's brother is taking charge here. I had thought he would be taking charge of everything since he is the student council president but that doesn't seem to be the case.

But then if so, that makes me curious as to what exactly he does do.

"First of all, I'll be giving the 1st years an advice. This may be unnecessary to a portion of you, but I'd like you to keep in mind how critically important this sports festival is. The experience you will gain from the sports festival will definitely be made use of on a different occasion as well. In future exams as well, there will be times when parts of it feel like games to you. However, each and every last one of them are battles on which you bet your survival in this school".

From the senior students such ambiguous yet appreciated words of advice came.

"Since you don't have a feel for it yet maybe you might not be motivated right now. But since we're doing it anyways we'll be aiming to win, hold strongly onto that feeling. That alone is something everyone should keep in mind".

Having said those weighted words, Fujimaki looked around at the Red Team once before continuing.

"The only event in which all the school years will be participating in is the 1200 meter relay at the end. Other than that, all the other events will have the school years divided up. After this, please assemble according to your school years and discuss your strategy going forward".

Following Fujimaki's words, Class A led by Katsuragi began to assemble in droves.

Class D seems to be wavering slightly. They were feeling nervous towards the gathering of those elites. In the 1st semester too, Class A's grades were overwhelming and no one else could even come close to them.

"It seems we'll be forming a united front in a bizarre manner but let's get along. If possible, I'm thinking we could join forces without any quarrels amongst teammates".

"I feel the same way too, Katsuragi-kun. Let's get along".

Standing at a close distance to one another, Katsuragi and Hirata both declare their intention to cooperate.

Looking at it from Class A's perspective, there are no benefits in teaming up with the lowest class, Class D. However, unless cooperation is established, teammates would end up pulling each other's legs. Rather than trusting each other like siblings, it would be more appropriate to say a pact is made so as to prevent disputes.

"Hey, what's up with that girl.....?".

Beside me, Ike softly whispered that. But it's not like I don't understand his urge to whisper that. I feel the same, and even Horikita probably does too. A single student from Class A felt out of place here.

But no one spoke out. Because it didn't feel like the time to do so.

"I believe each class has their individual strategies but---".

Regardless of whether or not he had noticed such a mysterious gaze and feeling from Class D, Katsuragi indifferently continued to speak as the inside of the gymnasium once again became rowdy.

"So are you saying you have no intention of cooperating?".

From slightly afar, a girl's voice reverberated through the gymnasium. Everyone's eyes turned towards her to see what was happening. That voice belonged to 1st year Class B's Ichinose Honami. Beyond her gaze, a class worth of students were making a move to leave the gymnasium. Among them, a single student who was walking with his hands in his pockets, turned around. It's Class C's leader Ryuuen Kakeru.

"You do know I'm leaving out of goodwill, right? Even if I offered to

cooperate it's not like you guys would believe me anyways. Ultimately it'll end up as a thorough investigation right? If that's the case, it's just a waste of time".

"I see. So you were thinking of saving us time. I see".

"That's precisely right. You'd better be grateful".

Laughing, Ryuuen began walking out with all the students of Class C in tow.

It was a scene that confirmed to us that there are no disruptions to the dictatorship of Class C.

"Hey, Ryuuen-kun. Are you confident you can win this time without cooperating?".

To the bitter end, it seems Ichinose is intent on cooperating with Ryuuen, as she tries pulling him back.

But Ryuuen did not stop walking.

"Kuku. I wonder".

Laughing slightly, the entire student body of Class C began leaving under his command. Class D did nothing but watch that from afar, but just a moment, Karuizawa's expression turned gloomy.

That could not be helped.

During the shipboard exam that took place before the summer vacation, she had fought with the girls from Class C, Manabe and her group. Due to that, her past of 'having been bullied' was revealed. But the only ones who know of that conflict are me and Yukimura. And since said Yukimura's knowledge of it does not extend to her past of having been bullied, it's not anything I'd need to pay special attention to.

For just a brief moment, Manabe turned towards Class D and looked at Karuizawa. But only for the briefest of moments. She immediately averted her eyes and as though nothing had happened, followed Ryuuen.

"They seem to be having problems of their own. To think they'd have to cooperate with Class C".

It's not like Class D could simply be taken charge of either, but it's still better than Class C I suppose.

It was also a scene that once again served as a reminder that Ryuuen held his entire class's right to decide in his hands. Looking at that, Katsuragi gives Horikita an advice.

"Since we're allies with you guys from Class D this time I'll give you a warning. Don't underestimate Ryuuen. He can laugh while sliding up to you and leap to attack without warning. You'll suffer severely if you let your guard down".

"I'm grateful for your warning, but from the way you said it I wonder if it comes from your personal experience".

"...I have warned you".

Not going into depth about it, Katsuragi returns to his initial position.

"I wonder if that means he's made a move this early".

A single student from our camp who was staring out at Class B and Class C, whispered that. It was from the girl who conspicuously stood out here that I was curious about earlier.

It was a girl sitting all alone with downcast eyes. In her hands she was

gripping a slender cane. No matter who looks at her, the fact that she has trouble walking would have clearly been conveyed.

"She is Sakayanagi Arisu. Since she is disabled she'll be utilizing a chair, I'd like you to understand".

The one who offered an explanation was not the person in question herself, but rather, Katsuragi.

"So that is Sakayanagi.....".

It's the other leader of Class A who, according to rumors, split up Class A's forces between herself and Katsuragi.

Her body was slender to the point one could almost be convinced as to why she was absent during the journey to the uninhabited island, and since her legs were not in a good condition she's sitting in a specially prepared chair.

Even as the gazes of her surroundings ended up being focused on that figure of hers, she herself showed no signs of paying any heed to them.

Is her somewhat short hair dyed or not? It's silver. It's become a strong distinguishing feature of hers. Her skin is pale. It seems her name is Arisu, and truly, it almost feels like she came straight from Wonderland.

"She's real cute.....".

It couldn't be helped even if the boys of Class D caused an uproar like that. A cuteness different from Kushida's and Sakura's, a different kind of beauty. That ephemeral figure of hers invokes feelings of wanting to protect her.

But the boys could not muster up the usual air of joking around and do something like call out to her.

Perhaps it was the strength in her eyes that, no matter how faintly, gave off the feeling of a strong will in her. They may have felt that if they drew close to her, something bad would have happened. Having realized she was bathing in their attention, Sakayanagi gently smiled.

"As for me, it is unfortunate, but I will not be of much use to you. I will be losing every competition due to absence".

A faint, yet strong will.

She apologizes for the weakness of her body.

"I will end up inconveniencing my class and Class D both. For that, first of all please allow me to apologize".

"I don't think it's anything to apologize for. No one's going to be hounding you on that after all".

Starting with Hirata down to Sudou, nobody said a word of complaint regarding that to the girl. Nobody attacked her for something that just could not be helped.

"The school is also being harsh. From the start, if her body cannot handle it they should have overlooked it".

"That's right, don't mind it".

"I am most grateful for your kindness".

Contrary to her reputation, Sakayanagi appeared to be overwhelmingly polite and mature. She did not even slightly give off the impression of being the aggressive type as the rumors say. On the other hand, her opposition, Katsuragi, kept on quietly looking at Sakayanagi with a side glance. However, the reason the student known as Sakayanagi had a strong presence was neither because of her cane nor her chair.

From the perspective of Ike and the others who don't know anything, it must have only appeared as though Class A and Class D were sitting separate of each other. However, from my perspective, it was clear from a glance. The students of Class A were clearly sitting as though there was a demarcation line between Katsuragi and Sakayanagi.

It was evidence of the factional conflict within Class A. The Katsuragi faction, at first, appeared equal if not superior to the other faction, but now not even a glimpse of that could be seen.

It was because a few boys and girls, including Yahiko, stood by Katsuragi while almost every other student was in Sakayanagi's faction. It made me think she was deliberately causing this scenario so as to show off her own power.

Sakayanagi herself did not participate in either the uninhabited island exam or the shipboard exam. No such declaration was made but there is plenty of possibility that she received massive penalties for absence during the shipboard special exam. In other words, she was created a situation where her allies continue to grow in number without her having had to produce any results herself. This isn't a matter of whether her appearance is cute or not. In all likelihood, unknown to us, Sakayanagi must have been accumulating accomplishments of her own and building trust in her. Besides, Katsuragi's own failures at the very least had an impact on it too.

It's not like I know the circumstances of other classes but basically, Katsuragi is someone who executes solid strategies. He doesn't seem like the type to continuously make simple mistakes but perhaps this girl is involved in his failures. Either way, Sakayanagi apologized for the shortcomings of her own body and showed no further signs of speaking afterwards.

Almost as though she were observing the actions and behaviors of Katsuragi

and Hirata and the others. Maybe I'm overthinking it? It may just be that she's remaining silent after understanding that she won't be of any use during the sports festival. All I know right now is that even if I think about it, no answer would be forthcoming.

Katsuragi may or may not have noticed it, but he continues his conversation with Hirata to confirm each other's strategies.

"By the way, about our cooperative relationship, I'm thinking a relationship where we don't interfere with each other would be fine. You don't mind, do you?".

"In other words, you mean you won't share the details of the competitions you'll be participating in?".

"That's right. If we announce them clumsily it may lead to unnecessary problems. If information about that were to leak to Class C or Class B it would cause suspicion towards Class D and end up causing disruptions to our cooperation. Besides, having to analyze the capabilities of our ally Class D and taking all that into account would only be adding to the troubles. At best, we'll only be cooperating and fighting together. I've judged that this is optimal".

".....that may be so. I do understand that this is a school where it's difficult to establish a relationship in good faith, Katsuragi-kun. Also, even though we're allies in the sense that we're a group, there's no change to the fact that we'll still be competing against each other after all".

Hirata then confirms with the rest of the class whether they have any objections towards this. There were no objections.

Neither class could suddenly trust each other and reveal all their cards to the other.

If that's going to be the case, keeping an appropriate distance would be the safest. It seems Horikita too, is convinced as she did not say anything.

"Then again, it is a fact that we will need to hold a meeting beforehand in the case of group competitions. Regarding that, in the future I'd like to do something similar, you don't mind do you?".

"No, I think that's fine. I'll have a discussion with everyone too".

"Then I'll leave that to you".

The conversation between those two was straight to the point and without any waste of time. It seems like it'd go smoothly.

"Ayanokouji-kun. What kind of methods do you think are there if we want to win in this special exam?".

On the other hand, Horikita was trying to point out guidelines for the sports festival on her own.

"This time is the sports festival. All the school is trying to see here are the presence or absence of athletic abilities.....don't you think so?".

"In theory of course that's correct. I'm interpreting it as a competition ordered according to ability. If there's a factor other than athleticism affecting the results then wouldn't that just be luck?".

"Luck, huh?".

It sounded like an unbefitting remark to me but certainly that may be an aspect of this.

"Unlike studies, the opponents we will be competing against are chosen

randomly after all. As a factor, it plays a huge role".

As a matter of fact, there is an aspect of this sports festival where the results can be influenced by how lucky you get with your team. Normally, even Horikita who is capable of beating 80% of the opponents here, will end up losing if she happens to draw the remaining 20% composed of formidable opponents. And on the opposite extreme, someone unathletic who can only beat 10% of the opponents here, if they happen to be pitted against someone even more unathletic than them, may just yet win.

"But what I'm seeking isn't something uncertain like that. I want something certain. Using athleticism as a basis, a method that doesn't purely rely on luck. There were infinite possibilities during the uninhabited island and shipboard special exams.....I feel that way now. But this time too, surely---".

Either from the severe mistakes made so far, or from the failures made so far, but right now I could see Horikita becoming even more obsessed with victory.

"Hey, what do you think the big difference is this time compared to the exams on the uninhabited island and the ship?".

".....difference? I think it's the same kind of special exam".

"Indeed I won't deny it's similar. However, the school side absolutely won't acknowledge it as being the same".

"I don't understand what you're saying. Because there's the cooperative relationship this time with Class A? But even on the ship groups were formed with different classes and an inexplicable team battle happened too....".

"That's not it. In the first place, the basic premise is different".

Towards my reserved way of speaking, Horikita showed frustration and I told her what I had realized.

"In regards to this sports festival, the school side has never once said it was a 'special exam'. We 1st years have been onesidedly calling it such but including Chabashira-sensei too, the other teachers have all only referred to it as the sports festival. Fujimaki of the 3rd years too. Even the printouts we were handed, the words 'special exam' weren't written".

Horikita did not realize, or rather, it didn't strike home for her.

"Even so, what's the matter with that? The mechanism behind it as well as the increase and decrease in points are all pretty much identical to a special exam".

"Certainly. There's not much difference in their contents. But their true natures are different. For instance, on a regular written exam, leaving aside the buying and selling of points in secret, in principle the majority of it tests your skills. Similarly, this sports festival too, should basically be seen as looking for your physical abilities and sense. Just by executing a clumsy trick there would be no impact on it. No, it's been structured so that can't happen. I think the class that genuinely challenges this will be able to exhibit their true worth".

Of course, it doesn't mean that tricks are impossible or meaningless though.

But if the sports festival has started then changing the general situation would essentially be impossible. Like how there are things you can do before and after a written exam but in the middle of the exam the things you can do are limited.

"The essence of this sports festival is to properly make preparations before the actual event. And, to leave behind results during the actual event, that is all there is to it. Simple is best".

"What I want to say is that preparation before the event. I want Class D to definitively win".

"Wrong. What you're trying to do isn't preparation. You're trying to conquer it and looking for loopholes".

"The difference between those.....I don't understand it".

"Preparation is, for instance, who will be participating in the contests in which order, or which ones in the other classes are athletic or unathletic, figuring that out. Discerning which order they will be going in. And, to make sure information about us doesn't leak. That sort of thing. To try and conquer it and looking for loopholes is to force someone into being absent prior to the competition or forcing them to retire halfway through it, that sort of thing. In other words, you're just saying you want a strong hand to play, right?".

It's natural that Horikita, who has always tried to attack from the front up until now and has lost up until now, would think that way. It's natural to want to do something to ensure you won't be overtaken by your opponents in this sports festival.

But even so, if it's that easy to do something about it no one would be having a difficult time.

"At best, you're saying that it's necessary to fight openly and win?".

Regardless of which answer Horikita chooses from now, I have no intention of affirming or denying it. Why? Because the strategy to win isn't singular but always consists of two sides.

Whether it's the uninhabited island or shipboard or this sports festival. It is possible to 'win upfront' or to 'win through a loophole' both. The point is, the important thing is to choose a fighting style that befits the person.

Right now, she's neither heads nor tails. She's at the point where she's about

to become one of those.

If we say Katsuragi and Ichinose are heads, while Ryuuen and I are tails, I wonder which one will she choose. I do understand her feeling of wanting to resort to 'tails' after having used that all the way up until now. But still, it's precisely because using 'tails' is extremely difficult in this sports festival that I'm warning her.

"What you think of it is up to you. Horikita, what do you think is the advantage Class D holds right now?".

".....it seems like the quarrel between Class B and Class C will carry some advantages for us, perhaps".

For a brief moment, I thought of ignoring it but I changed my mind.

Because Horikita Suzune has lived in solitude, her outlook is also overwhemingly narrow.

"You're trying to broaden your insight in order to win but isn't your outlook still narrow?".

"Are you talking about me having ignored Ryuuen-kun who refused cooperation with Class B? Since he rejected such a connection I think that's unmistakably something positive though".

"Do you really think that?".

".....after this Ryuuen-kun and Ichinose-san will reconcile and cooperate, that is also a possibility. It's not like Ichinose-san particularly likes Ryuuen-kun either but if it's for the sake of victory, she may throw aside her own feelings and cooperate. But, is it wrong to celebrate at this stage? Just judging it to be a positive is not such a bad thing, right?".

"That's what I mean by narrow outlook though".

"That's an annoying way to put it. Then, what do you see?".

"Up until now, what you have seen of Ryuuen? He won't stop thinking about winning. Even as he speaks casually, he'll always be taking action in order to build strategies to win. But why did he suddenly reject cooperation with Class B at this point? Do you think he truly abandoned cooperation without any thought?".

"Reason for rejection.....? Are you saying Class B and Class C are already connected behind the scenes, perhaps?".

It's necessary to think that way too but the truly important thing is on another vector.

"What we should be thinking of right now is not about his relationship with Class B. It's the fact that there is a high chance he's already thought of a strategy to win. If not, there are no advantages in throwing away dialogue. The possibility that he lied here to have a discussion with Class B should have more yield".

"That---I think the possibility of that is low".

"If the possibility of an earthquake or a fire breaking out is low, are you saying there's no need to prepare just in case? It seems like you don't understand the essential importance of preparing for an emergency".

"That...".

If such a thing does not come to pass, then there's nothing better than that but if you discard that from the very start then in the case that it does end up happening, our reaction would be delayed.

"At the very least, I think currently Ryuuen has more than one strategy to win".

"But.....if that's the case then it's abnormal. We've just learned about the sports festival. To win or anything.....".

"That is why it's necessary to understand that abnormality. What does a frontal attack mean, what does a loophole mean, can we think about those? And also, are there any way we can take 'precautions' against it? Why don't we desperately try to squeeze one out? To rise up to Class A, such things are necessary right?".

If we think about whether or not he has a winning strategy in hand at this stage, we would naturally narrow it down.

Of course, that is something I've started to see after reading Ryuuen's strategies and thoughts from Sudou's violence incident up to the shipboard exam. Right now, Horikita cannot see it yet, huh?

"Well, it'll be fine if we try various things. Let's prepare so that at the very least we'll be able to avoid failure".

"Do you mind not onesidedly making the premise that we'll be failing?".

I'm slightly looking forward now to seeing just how far Horikita is capable of thinking.

Part 4

Even after class was done for the day, I remained behind alone in the classroom. From the window I could hear the voices of the students engaged in their club activities. Even though the sports festival was drawing close, each and every one of them were in high spirits and did not spare any effort in their daily training. Connecting the earphones to my phone, I opened up the file I received earlier and checked the situation.

"I see.....".

Now with this I've more or less grasped the situation.

If necessary, I had thought I would have needed to lay 2 or 3 traps from now on but it seems that will be unnecessary.

Satisfied with the superb course of events I decided to return to the dormitory.

"You've stayed behind unusually late, Ayanokouji".

On my way to the main entrance, I encountered Chabashira-sensei who was sprinkling water with a hose.

"That may be the case. Are you on duty?".

"Something like that. To be precise, the region around here has become something like my post, that's all".

Saying that, and looking like she was used to it, she continued sprinkling water.

"Unlike children, people in society are busy in various ways. In particular

now that the sports festival is imminent. But still, what happened today? This is the first time I've seen you skulking around after school!".

"Isn't that a bit of an exaggeration?".

"Have you completed your preparations for the sports festival?".

"I feel like I've more or less grasped it during the recent homeroom though. Is that not the case?".

Hirata, Horikita and Sudou included, all their strategies and tactics have been heard by Chabashira-sensei as well.

"If it's you, I had thought you'd be thinking of some eccentric idea or strategy though?".

"No such thing at all".

"Nothing at all? I'm sure you understand but---".

Saying that, Chabashira-sensei tried to bring the topic over to me but upon meeting my eyes, she stopped. Even if we talk about such unnecessary things in a place like this, no one stands to gain anything.

"I haven't forgotten what you told me earlier, sensei. But as to what to do is something I'm free to decide on my own".

"Certainly that's the case. I should not be butting in unnecessarily. However, if you continue to go this leisurely, it's also a fact that this would no longer be the case. If I should lose my reason for protecting you, I will abandon you. Because an ordinary teacher standing up to such pressure isn't a simple task after all. It'll be troublesome if you don't produce results worth protecting".

I don't care about such selfish expectations. Feeling irritation at being encroached upon daily, I decided to leave this spot. If only this instructor

hadn't brought forth an unnecessary topic like that, I could have gone by without getting tangled up in this troublesome situation.

No.....it may be that this problem is only a matter of time, sooner or later.

"I'll be excusing myself".

"Sure, be careful on your way back".

While she worried over the few hundred meters of the way back, I returned to the dormitory.

Chapter 2: The Strategy Planning of Class D

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Part 1

Full-scale preparations have begun in anticipation of the sports festival that will be commencing in a month's time. The 2 hour long homeroom provided to us once a week has been declared a free period where we may utilize it as we wish, the manner in which we spend that time is left up to the judgment of the class. There are two things which we must decide on in preparation for the actual event.

How to decide the order of participation for the Universal Participation events? And also, who will be participating in which Recommended Only Participation events? It is clear that these two decisions will have a massive influence on the outcome. Here, above everyone else, the leader-like existence of this class, Hirata, took the initiative.

Chabashira-sensei, who moved towards the back of the classroom as though she were vacating the stage, did not say a single word. She likely intends to watch over the situation.

"In preparation for the sports festival we will begin to take action, but before we start our practice there are several things we need to decide on I believe. The important things are the order of participation for events and the Recommended Only Participation events. I think it's important to decide how to approach those".

"Even if you say decide, how are we going to do that?".

From Sudou's perspective, a rather uninteresting discussion is starting.

"Yeah. For instance, in the case of Universal Participation---".

Perhaps it's to make it easier to understand than an explanation here, Hirata gripped the chalk and began writing on the blackboard.

He appears to be a man who handles this sort of thing capably. 'Raising Hands' and 'Ability'. Those two were written down.

As he explains, Hirata adds a postscript.

"It's still a rough sketch but basically I think it boils down to these two. This is the 'Raising Hands' system where we'll listen to your desired order of participation. And this is the 'Ability' system where we'll ascertain your abilities to raise efficiency. It has to be one of these two, right? They have their own pros and cons. The 'Raising Hands' system's pros are, of course, that everyone would get their desired orders of participation and be able to have fun that way. The cons are that in the case that the desired orders overlap, not everyone can have it their way and the outcomes will become uneven".

If we adopt the system where we let everyone have it their way in regards to the order, inevitably that would be the result.

However, it can smoothly lower the emotional hurdles.

"Next is the 'Ability' system. This is extremely simple and it's the optimal arrangement to ensure that the ones with the highest abilities win. The pros are that it could raise the chances of winning beyond that of the 'Raising Hands' system but since it relies only on the strong individuals it could decrease the chances of winning for the others and it worries me that it'll end up ignoring what each one of you want. In theory, I think we can say the same for the Recommended Only Participation events as well. I've thought about it roughly but if you have any ideas other than these two please feel free to speak your opinion".

Hirata finishes his brief explanation. Even the students who could not understand the verbal explanation, from the details written on the blackboard, could slowly comprehend the pros and cons of each system.

The thoughts of the most of the students must have fallen under one of the plans Hirata had proposed. Especially since no other plans were forthcoming.

"No matter how you look at it, we should decide based on ability, right? You know yourself best, after all".

It seems Sudou has no intention of choosing anything other than that as he said those words.

"If I win then the chances of the class winning will also rise. That's a cause for celebration".

The way he put it was a mess, but it is true. Sudou putting his high physical ability to maximum use is an indispensable element in this sports festival.

"Well.....it pisses me off but that may be so".

Towards Sudou's words which were by no means illogical, the girls whispered in approval.

Following that, from the boys too, words of support towards Sudou started to come.

"I'm not very good at sports. Leaving aside Universal Participation, if Sudou is willing to take over the Recommended Only Participation events then I don't mind consenting".

For students like Yukimura who specialize in academics, athletics is a field

they're weak in.

"Then it's decided, right? I'll be participating in all Recommended Only Participation events".

Sudou who fiercely declared that and the students who supported him. It covered for students who were unathletic and prioritized the class's victory both.

"If everyone's fine with that strategy then as for the Recommended Only Participation events we could do it this way---".

"Wait".

It was just before the proposal was approved.

"I have a supplementary proposal to make".

The usually taciturn Horikita, said that and joined the conversation.

Many students, surprised by the unexpected speaker, focused their attention on her.

"If we have to choose between these two strategies we should go with the 'Ability' system like Sudou-kun said. I have no objections this far. But with just that, there is no guarantee that we can win against the other classes".

"Of course that's true".

"If so, then it's obvious that we should prioritize letting the most athletic ones participate in the Recommended Only Participation events of their choosing and similarly in the Universal Participation events we should have them form the best possible combinations for victory and compete as such. This will

allow us to unlock their maximum potential. If I have to put it simply, the fast ones should team up with the slow ones".

Basically it means that for Hirata and Sudou who are both fast, to avoid a clash between them, adjustments would be needed. Of course, if it's to win that's also one option.

But simultaneously, it is also an option that cruelly cuts off the weak.

"Hold on a minute. That strategy also means our chances of winning will fall, right?".

The first one to object like that was the schoolgirl named Shinohara. In order to secure the higher rankings no matter what, it's necessary to force a collision between the weaker and stronger individuals. Inevitably since the opposite of that is also established, the possibility of the weaker students winning becomes extremely low.

"I can't accept it. Just because you're unathletic, if you're forced to compete against someone stronger there's absolutely no winning. Privileges are given down to 3rd place so I don't want to throw aside that possibility though".

"It can't be helped. Because it's for the sake of the class".

"I know it's for the class.....but I don't want to lose my private points".

"If the class wins, there will be a proportionate compensation. Are you dissatisfied with that?".

"You can get a large amount of test scores if you win a prize, isn't giving up unfair?".

"I understand your desire to think that way. However, that is also strange.

From the start, even without relying on the privilege of those scores, it would be just fine if you studied as usual. Besides, if the possibility remains even down to 3rd place then there'd be no problem even if you don't win the prize, right? In the first place, the contests aren't so simple that you can win a prize with your level of athleticism, right?".

Both of them were insistent and showed no signs of yielding. In particular, Horikita capitalized on her advantage and stubbornly attacked.

"Not everyone is as smart as Horikita-san. Don't lump everyone in the same boat".

"Study up daily then. I don't want you to bring up any excuses here".

'That's right, that's right', opinions like that supporting Horikita resounded through the class in no small quantity.

Horikita's opinion which focused on efficiency was favored by athletic students starting with Sudou, as well as students aiming for Class A and students who have trouble with sports. Shinohara, while still looking frustrated, seems to have lost her will to fight. In all likelihood, there are students like Shinohara who think they might still be able to slide up to 3rd place at least.

Being put together with strong students like Sudou, or being paired up with unathletic students in the cavalry battle and three-legged race, it's a fact that the victory stand would become distant.

"Let it be already, Shinohara. If we lost because of you, are you going to take responsibility for it? Huh?".

"That's....".

In this sports festival, the ones with high athletic ability dominate. Sudou, who is seen as being beneath everyone else as far as academics is concerned,

is emitting a powerful glow here and holds authority. The ability prioritized plan that Horikita and Sudou proposed is a solid plan and is not one that is easily broken apart. Shinohara no longer has the ability to object. A conclusion is rapidly drawing close.

"Honestly how troublesome, to have to talk with dumb people.....you yourself don't seem to hold any interest in this situation though. If you're carefree enough to be playing around with your phone then why don't you think of ways we can win?".

"It'll be fine if I leave it up to you and Hirata, right?".

I closed the screen on my phone and placed it inside my pocket. The discussion is over---it was just when I had thought that.

"Ahh---can I have a moment? I object. Like Shinohara said, what's up with getting the rest of the students in trouble? Are you saying that by doing that, you can bring the class together as one?".

The one who said that was Karuizawa. As though shielding Shinohara, she glares at Horikita.

"To bring together as one, means exactly that. Do you understand?".

"Not all. I don't understand. Hey, what do you think, Kushida-san?".

Karuizawa calls out to Kushida, who was being 'uncharacteristically' quiet and watching over the situation. Kushida seemed slightly surprised but immediately after appearing to think about it she makes her declaration.

"It's a difficult problem. I was thinking I understand the feelings of both sides. Like Horikita-san, I'd like to win as a class. Like Shinohara-san said, I also want to leave behind the possibility of everyone winning too, I guess" .

Saying that, she continued to speak.

"If there is an alternative plan, then combining both their opinions would be the ideal form. A way that both the person who takes 1st place and the one who places bottom could be convinced of".

As she answered like that, I could hear a lot of consenting voices from within the class. That flow, perhaps she had already assumed a similar statement would be made in advance but Horikita immediately cut in.

"Of course I've thought of it. A way that both sides could accept. That is, for the students who feel like they have no need of the test scores to rank highly and use the private points they've gained from that to offset the points lost by the students who rank at the bottom. The entire class will share the rise and fall. If it's like this, there are no complaints right?".

A plan which, in exchange for lowering the possibility of victory, offsets the risk in case of defeat. If it's like this, a bit of acceptance would rise in the opposition. Of course, that still leaves the bottom 10 across all school years in trouble though.

"Oh, that'll do fine right? There'll be no loss no matter how much we cut corners this way".

Sudou said that and scornfully laughed as if to say 'what a pathetic bunch'.

"But that's only for points, right? The possibility of winning the prize goes down. What does everyone think?".

Even in that situation, Karuizawa still voiced her disagreement. Then calls out to the girls belonging to the Karuizawa faction.

".....if Karuizawa-san objects, then I guess I also object".

One after another, the girls following Karuizawa's lead began to show their opposition.

"Are you all idiots? Objecting just because she objects? Completely illogical. This is an exam so it's obvious that we should build up a strategy based around winning efficiently. The other classes absolutely don't have any imbeciles like you".

"That's something Horikita-san doesn't understand, right? Currently I'm against it. There are also others who are against it so think about those people too. I won't accept it unless the competitions are decided impartially".

The influence of Karuizawa, who has united the girls, was strong and support for the plan that prioritized the class's victory that Horikita advocated ceased to exist.

"Calm down, both of you. If we cannot agree on our opinions then we have no choice but to take a majority vote".

It was inevitable it'd end up like this. To ameliorate the stalemate situation, Hirata cut in like that.

"I think we should impartially resolve this by taking a vote here".

"If Yousuke-kun says so, I agree---".

"...that's right. I also think it's not the time to be quarrelling with each other. In any case, I've protested. I hope you all will make the right judgement".

Horikita sat down in frustration and glared at me.

"Ayanokouji-kun, can you shut her up?".

"There's no way I can shut her up, right?".

"Recently, you've been in touch with Karuizawa-san right? Isn't that what's causing her to act spoiled?".

"No, Karuizawa is that type of person from the start right?".

Perhaps Horikita was convinced by that point but she quietly uttered 'certainly'.

However, she could not hide her irritation towards Karuizawa who could not provide a basis and the girls who changed their opinions based on their feelings.

"Now then, the thorough ability focused plan that Horikita-san wove and the plan that emphasizes the individual that includes Karuizawa-san's opinion. Which one is better, shall we decide it by a show of hands? If there are people who find it difficult to choose I'm thinking of accepting a non-vote as well".

Horikita's plan that gives preferential treatment to the capable ones.
Karuizawa's plan that respects the individual and cares for the whole.

It appears the class's future and the impact on the exam will depend on which one of those the class leans towards. Of course it's not like I have any interest in that though.....

"Then first, those in favor of Horikita-san's plan".

"Yeah. I, of course, agree with Horikita's plan. The reason for it is simple, to win. The more athletic people participate, the more we win. Isn't that just fine?".

Sudou took the initiative and raised his hand. And following him were students like Yukimura and Sakura, the students who had no confidence in their athleticism gave their approval. On the other hand, the students who cannot win against the talented but are still capable to an extent, or Karuizawa's group, did not raise their hands.

"16 votes. Thank you, you can lower your hands now".

Whether this number is large or small, is something that will be decided based on how many non-votes there are.

"Hold on, Ayanokouji-kun. Could it be, you agree with Karuizawa-san's plan?".

Horikita, who naturally realized that I did not raise my hand, hit me.

"Relax, it's my policy to be a non-voter".

".....if that's the case then wouldn't it have been fine to go along with my plan?".

"It's not like your plan is necessarily a just one, right?".

"I don't understand. Choosing the option that gives the class the best possibility of winning, ultimately results in the acquisition of large amounts of private points. The points won from winning matches here and there are insignificant. If you say that's wrong, then I'd like you to give me a clear reason why".

"I didn't say you were wrong. I'm just saying that's not the only answer".

The 'expendable pawns' sent to collide into and crush the formidable enemies will end the sports festival without having gained any points. Well, Horikita understands that much at least. It's just that she's taken that as a necessary sacrifice in order to rise up.

"It's just that the other students aren't all looking ahead like you are".

"Then, next up is the composite plan from Karuizawa-san. Win where we have to, and have fun where we can. People in favor of this plan please raise your hands".

Other than the Karuizawa group, while scattered hands began to rise. There were several votes. However, just by Karuizawa having raised her hand, one after another girls followed her example.

However---

"...the result of the majority vote is.....16 votes for Horikita-san's plan and 13 votes for Karuizawa-san's plan. Can I assume the rest are non-voters?".

The total count was completed without any objections. It can be said that the votes Karuizawa had gathered weren't due to the contents of her plan but rather because they were instructed to do so.

It's not that this is because confidence in Karuizawa is low but rather simply because Horikita's plan is realistic for a victory and efficient, is what everyone must have realized. Class D's strategy will be to act to win not as individuals, but as a class, is what has been decided.

".....".

Since it was approved by a majority vote, Karuizawa won't let any dissatisfaction leak here.

"This concludes it then, Karuizawa-san. Now then, Hirata-kun, I'll leave the

rest up to you".

Changing her mind, Karuizawa too needs to choose this draft presently in order to win. Of course, I don't think a bad option's been chosen either. In the first place, the unathletic people won't be taking the initiative to say they'd like to participate in this and that now.

Inevitably, the role of the recommended will fall to athletic guys like Sudou and Hirata.

"Then, regarding the number of participants for the Recommended Only Participation events---".

"I'll be competing in all the contests. If there's anyone objecting to that then I'll have a direct confrontation with them".

Strongly declaring that, Sudou talked about the strategy that has not changed from the start. Moreover, he seems intent on forcing anyone who complains into surrender. It's an overly bullish declaration but its effect is preeminent as there were no discontent or grumbling from anyone. Since talented students will be assembled from now on, Sudou being the first candidate on the list is something of a confirmed matter.

"I'll also be participating in as many competitions as possible".

As expected, the one who recommended herself was Horikita. Karuizawa slightly hardened her expression. The girls around them whispered into each other's ears. I wonder if they're trash-talking.

Then, self-declarations and recommendations happened side by side and one after another the recommended participants were decided. But not all the

competitions were filled up that easily and only about 1/3rd of the Universal Participation events were filled. As he declared, Sudou will be participating in all competitions and other than him, in most of the competitions, Horikita and Hirata and most definitely Kushida and Onodera and the other athletic students will be competing. And the rest are still blank.

"Oi, Kouenji. Aren't you going to be cooperating?".

Sudou said that while glaring at the man who has not said a word since the discussion began. It's because Sudou himself acknowledges that this man possesses a potential equal to his, if not greater.

If Kouenji participates seriously, at the very least in individual competitions the top spot is already promised to him.

"Earlier, you didn't raise your hand either".

"I am not interested. You people can do as you wish".

"Don't fuck around, you bastard".

"I am not fucking around. There's no reason why I'd be forced to by you. In the first place, even if you had the authority to force me I have no intention of listening to you".

In other words, it means no matter what happens Kouenji has no intention of changing himself.

"I don't think there's any need to decide everything here, Sudou-kun. Kouenji-kun too must have his own strengths and weaknesses, and unreasonably inviting him is not always the right thing to do".

Following up for Kouenji and urging Sudou to calm down was Hirata.

"At the very least, what's been decided from today's discussion is the class's strategy and the wills of those who wish to participate in the individual competitions. I think we can afford to decide the rest carefully".

And with that remark, the discussion has reached its end.

However, a portion of the students may have felt discontent towards this discussion.

Why Karuizawa continued to oppose Horikita's plan? In regards to her athletic ability, she's neither passes nor fails. For her, Horikita's plan which involved sharing both joys and pain with each other, should not have been a bad thing by any means.

I'm not sure how many people felt that though.

Part 2

After school, having some free time I decided to send a mail I had written up addressed to a certain individual and right after, as I finished it up I made eye contact with Karuizawa.

No, eye contact isn't such a good thing.

It's just, I searched for an opening and snuck a glance towards her but coincidentally, she noticed my gaze. However, it obviously must have been that my intentions weren't conveyed to her, as Karuizawa left the classroom with two of her female friends in tow.

As I thought, unless I contact her directly there's no way she'd understand.

Taking my bag in hand, I moved to go back to my room, leaving the classroom a minute after Karuizawa.

"Hey".

Descending the stairs, as I headed towards the main entrance, I was stopped by Karuizawa who was alone for some reason.

"Didn't you go back?".

"I did think about going back, but I thought you wanted to say something to me so I waited. Was I wrong?".

I could not help but be surprised by her statement.

"Somewhat".

"Well, I also have something to tell you anyways. Do you mind hearing me

out briefly?".

'Go ahead', I urged Karuizawa to talk.

"The mail you sent me. I'd like to hear about your true intentions".

Saying that, she opened her phone and showed me the mail. There, this was written.

"No matter what it may be, object to Horikita's opinion. Then right afterwards, ask Kushida for her opinion".

That was what I had instructed Karuizawa to do in the middle of class.

"As far as improvisation goes, you have a way of spinning a good story. In that situation, you did well objecting".

"Really. If I had to say, I agreed with Horikita-san's opinion. I don't quite understand calling out to Kushida-san either. So, what's the meaning behind that order?".

"There'll be no end to it if you worry over the meaning behind each and every one of my actions. And even if you wish for it, there's no guarantee that I'd answer. Do you understand what I mean by this?".

"You're telling me to just obey your orders without asking the reason behind them. I get it".

"That is what I mean".

The obedient Karuizawa did not inquire any further.

"Then, other than that, tell me something. You didn't raise your hand but which one did you think was the right one?".

"I'd have to say both were right. Where to place the emphasis is up to the individual themselves after all".

"That's not an answer. Ultimately, you didn't answer what you're really thinking".

"Unfortunately, I have a policy of basically not thinking in terms of 'which' one".

".....what's with that? I don't understand. What do you want to do? Are you aiming to throw the other classes into chaos? Or are you seriously thinking about raising up Class D to Class A?".

"At the very least, Horikita believes that".

'That's not what I mean', as though saying that Karuizawa sighed and glared at me.

"What I'm asking about isn't what Horikita-san thinks. I'd like you to tell me already what you're seeing and what you're aiming for".

"Let's see. If I had to say, I have no interest in rising up to Class A. It's just, I'm starting to feel like preparing this class to be able to rise to Class A isn't such a bad thing".

"What's that mean? I don't quite understand what the difference may be, just how condescending do you intend to be?"

It's better to keep Chabashira-sensei from coming to the front here.

"Even if I put it into words now, you won't believe me and I have no way to prove it. That's why I'll affix a protective line so that you'll believe me many times over. In this sports festival, a traitor will appear from within Class D. Then, that person will leak internal information from Class D, all of it, to the outside".

"Wait, huh? Are you seriously saying that!?".

"If that time comes, you'll believe me too. What I'm seeing, what I have seen, that is".

"What do you mean, tell me the details".

"Right now, I can't. But, when the time comes I will tell you everything. Right now go, we're standing out too much here".

"I was going to do it even if you didn't tell me to. If I'm seen together with someone gloomy like you, my value will decrease. But.....by any chance even if a traitor appears, it'll be fine right?".

"Yeah. I've already prepared for that occasion".

Saying that, I showed her my phone. Of course, Karuizawa might not know exactly what this is though. Either way, even as she made a dissatisfied face, Karuizawa descended down the stairs.

I saw her off and breathed a sigh. Class D's strategy has more or less solidified. As well as the strategy I've drawn up.

Now then, I wonder what kind of battle our ally Class A has envisioned? Considering Katsuragi's personality, they'll probably be executing a solid plan but.....Sakayanagi's existence, naturally for the White Team, and for Class D too a positive.

For instance, let's say there was an escape device that could only save one person, and the ones in a predicament are a healthy individual and a disabled person. In that situation, what I mean is that the healthy individual has no obligation to hand the device over to the disabled person on account of their physical disability. Since the person is a cripple who cannot resist, it's fine to just steal the escape device from them even if physically hitting them is required. Born as an individual, you naturally have the right to live as an individual as well.

In an emergency scenario, the illegality of it will be thrown aside. There's nothing fair nor unfair about that. Just because Sakayanagi cannot engage in sports doesn't mean there's any need to go easy on her.

"But even so.....".

Just by having a deep past, Karuizawa is better at reading people and emotions than I had imagined. More than anything, the fact that she managed to make her surroundings 'not' see her like that gives her high points.

Once again, having finished up this unexpected business, I felt satisfied and decided to return.

Part 3

Until the sports festival, other than deciding the participants of the contests, there are a mountain load of other things that need to be done. Preparations that need to be done to ensure the sports festival goes smoothly account for the majority of them. Marches as well as practicing from the moment of admission into the competitions to its end. The majority of physical education classes were declared as free periods and students were each given permission to tackle any sort of practice they desire.

"I've borrowed it".

For the physical education period the next day, Hirata submitted an application to the school and obtained the grip strength measuring instrument. Horikita's plan which was adopted, based on priority of athletic superiority, was a plan that would simply bring together those confident in their strength. It's simple but it'll function well enough as a yardstick.

In particular, there are more than a few competitions in which the boys will be competing that purely require strength.

"Let's do it in order. Let's measure the grip strength of our dominant arms shall we? If you tell me the results then I'll record them. I've borrowed two so we can measure more efficiently and save time".

Saying that, he distributed one each to Hondou and Yukimura who were beside him. It's probably him deciding to measure in both a clockwise and anticlockwise direction. But Sudou, who did not feel like it, instead forcibly grabbed the instrument and stole it away.

"Let's start from me, Hirata. Because by starting with me, it'll be possible to set high standards".

It wasn't a logic I understood well but I did understand that he wanted to boast about his own strength.

"Umm.....then let's have the other one start with Sotomura-kun besides Sudou-kun".

Having had the order be forcibly changed, the starting point had to once again be adjusted.

"Keep looking, Ayanokouji. This is the strength of the man who will be carrying this class".

Sudou confidently laughs and shows off his ability as the one who forcibly became the first one up.

"Uraaa!".

Filled with fighting spirit, Sudou's shoulder shook as he gripped the instrument in his right hand.

The digital numerical values rapidly rise. In an instant it rose above 50 and hit 60 and continued to climb up to 70. Then, the value digitally displayed in the end was 82.4 kg. The surroundings briefly went into an uproar.

"You're way too freakishly strong!".

"Heh. It's because I've always been training. This is natural. Hey, you do it too, Kouenji".

Almost as though it were a provocation, he showed off the value to Kouenji while handing over the instrument.

"I am not interested. You may ignore me".

Polishing his fingernails, Kouenji then blew on his fingertips.

"Are you scared of losing to me? Well, after seeing a value like this it's understandable".

He made such a cheap provocation, but it appears Kouenji has no intention of responding to him as he did not turn to look at him.

"Tch...hey, Ayanokouji".

Since I was beside Sudou, I was forcibly handed the grip strength measuring instrument.

"No, I can do it later".

"Huh? You too? Don't fuck around. Do it in order".

I'd rather not be told that by Sudou who forcibly stole the turn for himself but certainly if we're going in this order then next up would be me. However, to think the second person to be measured would be me.....I know Sudou's 82.4 kg is a considerably high value but I wonder what the average would be for a 1st year high school student?

I've gripped hundreds of thousands of such measuring instruments in the past, but I've never before heard what the average is for those of my generation. Because nothing except my personal records were kept.

"Hey, Sudou. About how much would be the average for a high school student?".

"Huh? I don't know. Shouldn't it be around 60?".

"60, huh....?".

I gripped the grip strength measuring instrument I received such that the monitor was visible to me. Your grip strength isn't something that's simply proportional to the thickness of your arm.

Of course it's not like they are unrelated but what's important is the brachioradialis muscle located in the forearm and the bundle of muscles known as the flexor carpi radialis muscle. The mechanism is that as the muscles of the forearm contract, it pulls on the tendons and causes the fingers to bend. As such, one can improve their grip strength by training this particular bundle of muscles. In other words, as long as you possess a certain amount of muscle mass, then depending on how you train it's possible to exceed 100 kg.

Naturally, to achieve this, nothing but long periods of training involving gripping are necessary.

Slowly adding force to the lever, I gripped it. Then, once I had passed 44 I began to fine tune it. Once I had passed 55 I performed further minute adjustments and once it had reached slightly over 60 I stopped adding to it.

".....I can't, I can't move it any further".

Saying that, I released my grip on the measuring instrument and handed it over to Ike beside me. Then, I headed over to report to Hirata.

"I got 60.6".

I uninterestedly reported it like that.

"Heh...you're pretty strong, Ayanokouji-kun".

As though impressed, Hirata turned towards me and gave me a smile.

"Ehh? No, that's about average right? Was it such a remarkable value?".

"I think the average is lower than that though? I'd say about 45 or around 50?".

"Hirata---. I got 42.6. Give me a little bonus and make it 50".

Ike comes over to report. It was a request for a not-so-little bonus. Even as he smiles bitterly, Hirata writes down 42.6 on the notebook.

Sotomura got 41, and Miyamoto who came afterwards got 48 and certainly, there were a lot of results under 50.

"I see.....so 60 was high....".

Apparently I was wrong for having asked someone like Sudou about the national average. There's no possible way he would know all that. I had thought to avoid participating in the contests by firmly staying in the middle but it was a huge miscalculation. At this rate it may become necessary for me to participate in some Recommended Only Participation events.

As a result, leaving aside Kouenji, I ended up as 2nd place in the class. I've made a blunder.

Next up, 3rd place is Hirata with 57.9.

As I thought, an omnipotent man like him could produce unwavering results even here.

On the other hand, Sudou who intends on carrying the entire class in the sports festival, did not hide his disappointment at the results of his classmates.

"How unreliable, my class that is.....except for me everyone else is like trash. Currently it might as well be over after Ayanokouji".

Even if it's a fact, that he's able to say that with the people in question right beside him is one of the amazing things about Sudou.

After the boys all finished measuring, this time they handed over the measuring instrument to the girls. I suppose it's obvious since there are mixed competitions where strength will be required of them just as it is of the boys.

Currently, Hirata was filling in the total measured results into the Recommended Only Participation events frame and putting them together on the notebook.

"Tug of war and omnidirectional tug of war can simply be in the order of grip strength then. Sudou-kun, Ayanokouji-kun, Miyake-kun and me".

"Hey, I'm curious about something but I've never heard about that omnidirectional tug of war. I've never heard of it you know".

"I haven't heard of it either so I researched it. Exactly as it sounds like, it seems like a contest where you pull a rope in all four directions. From 4 classes, their chosen 4 each with 16 in total pulling on the rope all at once, it appears to be that sort of contest".

Unlike the normal tug of war where it can be left up to strength, it seems like tactics will be important here.

Hirata writes out the participants for the omnidirectional tug of war.

"Hey, Hirata, aren't we getting any chances?".

"It's not like that. For instance, in scavenger hunt, rather than athleticism I

think luck is what's being tested".

"Luck, huh? Then how will we decide it?".

"Simple is best. How about we go with rock-paper-scissors?".

I had thought it was unlike the serious Hirata, but surprisingly it may be a reasonable proposal.

In an individual's life, luck is unexpectedly a huge factor. It's uncertain, but through fluctuations in luck it's possible for an individual's life to make a 180 degree change. There are people who, while talented, remains employees of a firm while there are also those who, while incompetent, manage to climb up to the position of president.

That is indeed proof that the element of luck is involved as well.

Of course, generally factors other than that are the cause most of the time though. The scavenger hunt of the sports festival, if we're only going to be deciding the participants for that then rock-paper-scissors should be sufficient.

Dividing them up into groups of several people, we narrowed down the ones who will be competing. Of course, I have no intention of participating. Praying only for a loss, I took on the first round and that in itself is a victory. Then, praying with even greater fervor to lose I took on the second round (as a matter of fact the final round). However, I brilliantly ended up winning.

Three boys and two girls. The participation of the five who win in rock-paper-scissors was decided.

"Ayanokouji-kun, Yukimura-kun, Sotomura-kun, Mori-san and Maezono-san. The five of you, then".

Then adding Sudou too, the six of us will be participating in the scavenger hunt.

"Kopou! I-I have been chosen for the scavenger hunt! Kopou!".

The Professor despairs with a bubbling vigor.

"Why did I choose rock? Kopou".

"Well we're in agreement there...".

At times like this, I wonder whether it could be called fortune or misfortune.
It's absolutely misfortune.....

"I'm jealous---".

Ike expresses his envy of the winners.

It's interesting that depending on the person, the viewpoint of luck also changes. No, really...

I'd like to say I'll hand over my position but that one sentence alone could spark a discussion so I chose not to. I could also see dissatisfaction from students like the Professor who did not want to participate.

Then, even as various expectations turned complicated, the frame of the contests were all properly filled out.

"Done".

Hirata turned over the notebook after having finished deciding on the participation of each individual student in all contests.

Seeing that the class has regained its calm, Hirata sighs in relief. However, this is only a provisional matter, and depending on future practice and information gained from the other classes, there will likely be portions that will undergo huge changes.

"The information we've just decided on is of extreme importance and is something we don't want the other classes to know about so for your own turn and partner I'd like you to write it down. To make sure no photographic records are left behind".

Hirata who takes everything into account. That forethought is appropriate. If a phone were to be used to simply record the list on the notebook then there's no telling where it'll be spread around.

The notebook is passed around from person to person. Horikita said this towards me as I was watching over the situation of the class.

"What's wrong, Ayanokouji-kun? You have a rather meek look on your face".

"Several unwilling participations have been decided on after all. I'd feel melancholy".

"I can't be helped. In this class, there's an overwhelming gap between students who are athletic and those who are unathletic".

"Certainly that's true".

The ratio of participation in the Recommended Only Participation events that was fought over is now decided. As expected, the one with an overwhelming amount of participations is Sudou. He'd be in all the contests to the point you'd worry about his stamina. As for girls, starting with Horikita, a lot of students will be participating in 3 events. On the other hand, misfortune accumulated for me and I'll have to participate in 2 events. Of course, it's still not like it's the final decision but merely a provisional placeholder and if,

prior to the actual event, a suitable individual were to appear I'd probably be able to switch with them. At such a time I intend on manfully handing it over. No, by all means I'd like to hand it over.

Chapter 3: Everyone's Thoughts

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Part 1

Starting from the next homeroom, in preparation for the event, it has been decided that we'll be practicing independently. During our free period, each and every student changed into their gym uniforms, that is to say, their jerseys, and headed out towards the school grounds.

"Uwa, hey look at that".

Ike, with a blatantly uncomfortable look on his face, stares at the school building. And there, from the classrooms, there were students peeking out at us. And not just one but several students could be seen.

"That there's Class B, right? They're conducting reconnaissance right away---".

To figure out the physical abilities of the other classes prior to the sports festival is something that would be on anyone's checklist.

"Class A beside them is also looking at us".

Regardless of whether we're enemies or allies, to grasp our capabilities is not a bad thing for them. If we do this somewhere as conspicuous as the school grounds, being watched is also natural.

However, even if we hold back here so as to not have our abilities be discerned, ultimately it will only mean that the opportunities for us to practice for the actual event will decrease.

"It's started right off the bat".

Horikita, who finished changing, also seems to have immediately realized the curious stares. But what worries me is Class C. Even though there were signs of people being inside their classroom, not a single person looked towards us.

It's almost as if they're saying who from Class D participates in what contest is of no concern to them.

"Are you worried about Ryuuen-kun?".

"Well, a bit".

"I really doubt that he didn't think about conducting reconnaissance on us but he's the one who rejected cooperation with Class B after all. He doesn't have any intention of seriously building up a strategy".

Right after she said that, almost as though saying 'I understand', looked at me and continued.

"Is what I would have thought if I hadn't been warned by you. Surely the other students must be thinking that way".

Horikita further looked towards the students of Class D who were endeavoring to practice.

"The thing you mentioned earlier, about Ryuuen-kun already having thought of a strategy to win. So this means that has now been realized, right? After all, it means reconnaissance is no longer necessary for him, doesn't it?".

The optimistic expression Horikita had in the gymnasium can already no longer be seen. On the contrary, I could see her being pronouncedly bewildered.

"Anyone would want information on the other classes. Whose physical abilities are high or who's going to be participating in which contests, they'd be dying to know those. But he's not showing any sign of that".

That's right, that in itself is proof that Ryuuen already has a strategy he's keeping to himself.

"The important point here is to not be satisfied after only knowing that 'Ryuuen has thought of a strategy'".

"...what do you mean?".

"Normally, when a person comes up with a strategy or a secret measure, they would do their utmost to ensure their enemies don't wise up to it. However, that man isn't even trying to hide that and is boldly not conducting any reconnaissance".

"He's acting boldly, almost like he's showing off".

Then, if you think about what that would mean, you would be able to simultaneously see his thought patterns as well.

I wonder how much of that Horikita can see right now.

"You, that insight or observation of yours, I can't help but ask where you picked it up. But you've forbidden that so I dare not ask though".

What a disagreeable and Horikita-like way of putting it. Of course, no matter how she prods me I won't be saying anything though.

"Suzune, do you have a moment?".

Sudou, who came late, called out to Horikita, who was deep in thought.

Horikita, who cut off her own thoughts, said to Sudou in a slightly irritated manner. It appears there's something else she's bothered by.

"I've been warning you repeatedly but would you mind not calling me by my first name?".

"What's that mean? Do you have a problem with being called like that?".

"A huge one, yes. I don't want a person I'm not close with to call me by my first name".

She took decisive action like that without paying heed to Sudou's feelings.

"If you insist on continuing to call me like this even after I've directly told you I'm uncomfortable with it, I'll be taking action".

Truly a terrifying expression. If possible, I'd rather not hear the details of what she has to say.

He must truly want to call her by her first name but he'd lose everything if she comes to hate him. However, I don't know what Sudou thought of it, as he said this.

"Then, in this sports festival, if I can produce the best results out of Class D.....at that time, please give me permission to officially call you by your first name".

Ohh? For Sudou, that's a rather modest wish he's put into words.

It's just even so, I don't know whether or not Horikita will honestly acknowledge it.

"You working hard is a desirable thing but why do I have to respond to

that?".

It seems Horikita hadn't thought that she had curried goodwill with Sudou. In response to that, I wonder how Sudou will answer her.

"....not too long after enrollment, you saved me, right? That's why I want to be proper love...no, first I want to be friends with you. This is a step towards that".

"I don't understand. It's not something you'd go out of your way to declare and put into action. But alright. If you produce the best results, then at that time, I will permit you to call me by my first name. However, don't be satisfied with just the class. Show me the best results across the entire school year".

Saying that, Horikita struck Sudou with the highest hurdle. But, in a sense, it may be good material to act as a booster for Sudou. There was no sign of fear on him.

"Alright. It's a promise, if I become the 1st across the school year then I'll be calling you by your first name".

"However, until you produce results you can't. Also, if you cannot take 1st place amongst the school year then you are forever forbidden from calling me by my first name. You'll do well to prepare yourself for that".

"S-Sure".

Although he had an overwhelmingly difficult task pressed upon him, Sudou vigorously nodded and answered.

It's just, well, the possibility of it is by no means low. As far as I've seen from students of the other classes, Sudou's potential is unmistakably top class. I

can see he'll have no problem with the individual contests.

The only one who could stand against him, Kouenji, seems to have no motivation so there should be no problem there. All that's left is to see just how many records he can break in contests that require cooperation.

Part 2

After a brief check inside the room, genuine practice for the purpose of determining aptitude began. Hirata's policy was also in effect with compulsory participations not being demanded of the students but with the goal of bringing the class together as one the participation rate was about 90% and ended with only those like Kouenji and the Professor declining.

"Hau, auu, fuu....".

Right now, a girl came in at last place and looking as though she were about to collapse, she placed her hands on both her knees.

"Good work out there, Sakura. You were eagerly running out there".

"A-Ayanokouji-kun. Huu".

Sakura, who's always been unathletic, did not proactively participate in things like this. However, recently she's been serious in taking the initiative and is working hard to become a member of the class.

It's just regrettably, since she's not very athletic, results don't follow her.

"Ora! Let's go!".

On the other hand, as for the usually unserious Sudou, his existence right now would be noticed by just about anyone. After having mouthed off in class, he could not afford to let it end with disappointing results.

However, that was a needless concern. Bathing in attention, perhaps he's utilizing more power than usual but Sudou scored without permitting anyone to catch up to him. There are probably no students in our class that could stand up to him as an equal.

"As expected of Sudou-kun. Whatever you do, you end up in 1st place among the class. That's amazing".

Kushida expressed her respect towards Sudou, who ran the 100 meter dash, while she jumps up and down.

"Heh, well I guess. But even so, I don't know what'll happen if he runs though".

The one Sudou glared and looked back at was Kouenji, who did not show any interest in the class.

"Speaking of which, I've never seen Kouenji run seriously before".

Before, when he faced Sudou as an opponent during swimming lessons, when he swam seriously just that once, he transcended Sudou's time. From that, I was able to confirm that Kouenji has high potential.

But Kouenji is the type of man who won't make a move at all unless he himself decides he'll be doing it. In regards to this sports festival, since his policy is to basically let us think and act freely on our own, Kouenji truly won't do anything at all.

"Yeah, but it's really amazing. In this sports festival, Sudou-kun's the leader".

"Leader? Me....?".

As he was once again told that, Sudou seemed slightly dumbfounded as he pointed at himself.

"I agree with that too. The sports festival is truly the place for the athletic

students, after all. I believe Sudou-kun is more than qualified for that. If you're fine with it, can you accept it too for everyone's sake?".

As if agreeing with Kushida, Hirata said that while recording. The sports festival demands a strong leader. Hirata also has those qualities in abundance but perhaps he's judged that Sudou who excels at it would fit the bill better.

"But even so, I'm not cut out to be a leader.....".

Sudou, who pretty much acts alone or with a small few, seemed slightly bewildered. Then he looked at Horikita who was near him and asked her for her opinion.

"You're not the type of person who can theoretically explain things to someone. For a leader, Hirata-kun would be the superior choice. However, by looking at your sprint earlier as well as your other records I can understand. You're the type of person to shine while bathing in the attention of many. To tug the class along, it's probable that brute force will be necessary. I have no intention of objecting to you being named the leader".

She did not affirm it, but neither did she reject it. In other words, it means she's acknowledged Sudou.

It seems Horikita is not just vaguely participating in this practice but had been properly ascertaining talent.

"....I get it. I'll guide Class D to victory in this sports festival then".

Perhaps it could be called the weakness of having fallen in love but Sudou took on such an attitude so as to live up to Horikita's expectations.

"Don't get clumsily overconfident. You'll get it later if you do".

She warned Sudou to listen to her and after that Horikita left to continue the practice.

While blushing, Sudou looked at her back and clenched his fist.

Part 3

Sudou, who had started acting in his capacity as leader, had the students assemble on the next day and began coaching them. It appears Sudou's job on his first day as leader is to teach them to get the hang of tug of war. I watched from a slight distance.

"You're pointlessly straining too much. There's no strength at all behind your tug. At this rate you won't win what can be won".

Saying that, perhaps he intends on giving a practical demonstration, Sudou gripped in his hands a short rope. Facing him were two people, Ike and Yamauchi. It appears he intends on taking them on alone.

The two of them must surely have expected to win but when the match began, Sudou pulled on the rope with overwhelming strength. Not too long after, the two of them fell before Sudou and sat down on the ground.

"See? You're not putting any strength into it".

"I don't get it.....hey Sudou. Is there a trick or something behind this?".

"Power is also vital but in cases like this it's not just your arm but rather you use your hips, you know, hips".

Even as he spoke roughly, Sudou was giving each and every student complete and thorough instructions.

"Hey, Sudou-kun. Can you have a look here later? The horseman isn't going too well".

"Wait a minute. I'll be right there".

There were more than a few students who aren't especially good at sports and so there were quite a lot of voices calling out to ask for Sudou's opinion. Surprisingly enough, I honestly didn't expect that even the girls would ask him for his opinion.

"He surprisingly appears to be doing it seriously".

"It's the first time his surroundings have relied on him after all. The role of leader may yet surprisingly befit him, don't you think?".

In theory, having people rely on you would make just about anyone feel good. It's especially true for students like Sudou who have lived in solitude.

"As for me, if it weren't for 'that', I wouldn't mind praising him though.....".

'That'? As I was about to ask her about that, an angry voice rang out.

"I'm telling you that's not it!".

Kicking the dirt on the ground, he blew up a dust cloud towards Ike and the others.

"Dowa! Peh, peh! Please stop!".

Seeing that, Horikita sighed. Certainly, him being quick to get physical is a problem. A leader must have proper awareness that the people they interact with are fundamentally different from them. On the other hand, the leader who always employs kind teaching methods is Hirata. Underneath the girl waiting for Sudou's instructions, he was checking their positions in order to ensure a comfortable posture and to establish a foundation in preparation for the cavalry battle.

"Yeah, I think this is fine. But don't you feel a bit cramped?".

"That's right....my shoulders hurt a bit, I guess".

"Let's try changing positions a bit, shall we? I think just by moving a few centimeters it'll be different".

"Ohh---you're right, it feels rather comfortable now. Thank you, Hirata-kun".

"Please help out here a bit too, Hirata".

Yet another cavalry group asked for help and Hirata responded with a smile.

"How about you teach the girls too?".

Horikita too, within her class, is top class as far as athleticism goes. She has quite a lot of potential as a leader.

"I have no intention of teaching them. In the first place, I doubt there's anyone who wants to be taught by me".

Boldly saying something that she shouldn't be proud of, she begins warming up on her own.

"I have my hands full with making sure I can produce results. Can you afford to be laid-back? If you're confident you can win no matter who you fight against, then that's fine though".

"I have no such confidence".

"Sounds about right. Your results are always mediocre after all. You're neither fast nor are you slow, inconspicuous results".

"You knew?".

"For the record, I intend on ascertaining the abilities of my classmates".

It appears even in physical education classes, she's been closely observing me.

"I'll ask you this once but.....by any chance would you happen to be holding back like you did with your test scores?".

"Do you think I'd do something that pointless?".

"I'd say it's 50/50. So, what about it?".

"I apologize for partly betraying your expectations but my usual results are my ability".

"In other words, you're neither good nor bad. Meaning I shouldn't expect good results from you, then?".

"That's how it is".

"Then you'd better endeavor to practice right away".

"It wouldn't be a problem if I could improve by practicing in this short period of time. Unlike studies, last-minute cramming is impossible for this".

One's physical ability will only improve through daily accumulation of experience.

"I think it'll be a different story if you focus on contests that can be supplemented with technique though? The way you grip the rope or the way you form the horseman. Just by learning those you should be able to add to our manpower".

"...perhaps".

I had tried to slack off but she's done a good job besieging me. It can't be helped then, I think I'll practice for the Recommended Only Participation events I ended up becoming a participant in.

"...hey".

Having been urged to do so, I was about to move when Horikita once again called out to me.

"Hmm?".

"What's going to decide victory or defeat in the sports festival is the physical ability of each class. That is correct, is it not?".

"It is a sports festival. You do realize that physical ability is the key here, don't you?".

"That's right.....but that way of thinking is limited to times when I fight alone. If I focus on my own results, then I'm confident I can leave behind a good outcome. But recently I no longer quite understand. That just by elevating one's own abilities, perhaps you might not be able to reach Class A".

It was an uncharacteristically timid remark. It's likely proof that all her mistakes in the exams leading up to now are causing her to respond like this to this extent.

"Then let me ask this. What needs to be done in order to produce results in this sports festival? To climb up to Class A?".

As I replied with a question, Horikita closed her mouth right away. She only sends me a gaze that seems to be telling me she's asking me that precisely because she doesn't know.

"Isn't it that you'll win if you enjoyed it? This is the long-awaited sports festival, you know. Forgetting that this is an exam and amusing ourselves is also an option".

I said that as though avoiding the topic.

"You promised me you'd cooperate, right? That you'd help me climb up to Class A".

"I'm doing it now, aren't I?".

I spread out my hands lightly as if to show my body.

"I will participate in the sports festival. That is cooperation".

"...are you serious?".

"You said so yourself, right? That what will decide victory or defeat in the sports festival is physical ability. That is correct".

"But.....what I wanted to say is about elements other than that".

In other words, something other than physical ability capable of influencing the outcome.

"If so, on the day of the sports festival, shall we give the guys from Class C and Class B stomach aches and have them be absent? If we do that then we'll be completely victorious. It'll be our victory by an overwhelmingly wide margin".

"Don't joke around".

"The answer you're hoping for from me is something like that right? This sports festival is a task that should be challenged up front. Clumsy tricks will backfire, each and every person should elevate their abilities and triumph in the contests".

What the school side is looking for also undoubtedly leans strongly towards that aspect.

"It's just if I have to strongly add onto your way of thinking then even if your physical ability is high, it would mean it's still impossible".

"...in other words? Is something else necessary?".

"It would seem you'll understand the answer soon".

I turned my gaze towards the person walking towards us.

"Horikita-san, for the three-legged race practice, the next one up is you, Horikita-san".

"I understand".

Having been called, Horikita heads over. Apparently the one who will be pairing up with Horikita is Onodera. Onodera is a girl who belongs to the swimming club but according to rumors, she's also quite a sprinter.

For the sports festival, the important things are: your individual ability and cooperation with your classmate.

I wonder if Horikita will be able to make it go well. Horikita and Onodera mutually tie the string and the girls start in their battle formation. If we're only talking about coordination then the Horikita/Onodera pair would be number one. However, the result is something yet unknown. It was by no means slow but neither can the result be called fast, they came in at 3rd place.

By the way, the slowest ones were the unathletic Sakura/Inogashira pair. Decisively slow.

The Horikita/Onodera pair who shouldered the expectations of the class, in response to their dissatisfactory results, challenged it again and again but their time did not improve.

"They're rather slow, those two".

From the high levels of attention they were receiving, Sudou unexpectedly uttered that from an outsider's perspective.

"That's true".

Having returned after their sprint, the two of them immediately untied the string and faced each other.

"Hey, Horikita-san, would you mind keeping pace with me a bit more?".

Onodera, slightly annoyed, said that.

"Indeed our rhythms are mismatched. But it's not my fault. Rather it's because you're slow".

"What.....".

"Isn't it natural to keep pace with the rhythm of the faster one? To bother slowing down just to compromise would be strange after all".

The development I had feared will soon be at hand it seems. It's no easy matter to keep pace with Horikita, who's running at her maximum pace selfishly.

"Then shall we have a go at it too, Ayanokouji-kun?".

"Roger".

I have no time to either help out or laugh at the quarreling Horikita. Three-legged racing is a first for me too.

"For now let's try running and then fix our shortcomings, shall we?".

Nodding and following Hirata's instructions I tied our legs together.

It was far tighter than I had imagined or rather, it felt like I was deprived of my freedom. Besides, even though we're both males, if we're this close to each other it's slightly embarrassing. More so if it's Hirata, who garners attention from the girls.

"Then, let's go. Let's try using our tied feet for the first step".

I nodded and waited for Hirata's foot to move and then stepped forth to match it. And with the same rhythm, this time, I moved my free foot on the outside.

"...feels terribly uncomfortable".

"Right? But as you run you'll get used to it, I guess. I'm going to start running a bit then".

Hirata said that as he picked up the pace and I too, started running to match him.

Well, I say run but it was only at the speed of a trot though.

"Yep, that's it, you're doing great".

It was probably a speed almost anyone can keep up with but being praised like that made it easier. And then as I got used to it, I realized it was something surprisingly simple to do.

To properly understand your partner's pace. Then if your partner, too, grasps your pace, the next step will come smoothly.

"As expected of Hirata-kun! So fast!".

Shrill cheers came flying from the girls. We ran a small lap and then returned, untying the string.

"It's extremely easy to do if Ayanokouji-kun's my partner. Let's practice countless times then work hard at the actual event, shall we?".

Yes, he sure is invigorating. Furthermore, even after finishing practice, without resting, he headed over to advise the other students. This is probably the daily life of Hirata, a man capable of doing this.

Part 4

Mid September. Two weeks closer to the sports festival. Horikita, Sudou and the others were putting effort into their daily training in preparation for the actual event. Sudou, who utterly fails at studies, was steadily, laboriously and repeatedly practicing when it came to sports. Having trained his spirit habitually as part of the basketball club, he proved to be tenacious. There were students among them who held back but Sudou, without being prideful about it, devoted himself to his ability and thoroughly did what he could do.

This is probably the bare minimum requirement demanded by the sports festival. Especially for contests like the cavalry battle and tug of war, it's a direct showdown with your opponents. The outcome can be greatly influenced with just a strategy or a formation alone. Of course, it's not like Hirata had forgotten about our cooperative relationship with Class A either.

He periodically holds meetings with Katsuragi, discussing how to best fight in the actual event. For Class D that's been in hot water many times until now, this is a situation that's far too good. Seeing that fact as part of the bigger picture, I could also see the remaining two issues similarly.

One is the existence known as Horikita Suzune, who will become an indispensable existence to this class in the future. Ever since the first day, Horikita has changed her partner many times over and challenged the three-legged race but each and every time she ends up quarreling with her partners and ending their partnership.

Eventually in the end, she decided to challenge the actual event with the girl who she had gotten the best time with but even that time is still a worrisome one.

But now she's no longer practicing and instead silently spent her time alone.

"Do you have a moment?".

"What's the matter?".

Perhaps it's the fault of the stress she accumulated from the three-legged race but she's slightly thornier than usual.

"I think it'll do you good if you remember to compromise a bit".

I've been keeping an eye on her recent practice but I couldn't see any signs of improvement at all. It was clearly obvious that Horikita's overwhelming personality was getting in her way.

".....I've been told that by many people".

Maybe a great many came to mind as she said that while holding her forehead.

"I'm simply not allowing any compromise for the sake of getting the best time. Is that not a good thing? A three-legged race is different from running normally. Even a person who's slow to a certain extent should be able to keep up theoretically".

"In other words, you mean to say you have no intention of yielding?".

"Yes. I have no intention of matching with slow people".

"But as a result, it has become that no one is willing to practice with you anymore, right?".

During practice for the three-legged race, Horikita was left out of the class circle.

She can hardly hope to improve her time if she approaches the actual event in this state.

"I don't understand. Even if I were to yield, it'll have to be after my partner puts in effort. I cannot match up with someone who's abandoned effort from the start".

Well, I do understand what Horikita wants to say. Indeed the girls she partnered up with all suggested dissolving their partnership as soon as their times didn't end up matching.

However, that is only because there is a fundamental reason behind it.

"Step up a bit".

".....what do you mean?".

"Please partner up with me once for a three-legged race".

"Why with you?".

"There's also the mixed gender three-legged race. Isn't it fine to check our compatibility as partners?".

"Do you intend on matching me with your speed? It's a hindrance".

"According to your theory, one's slowness has nothing to do with it, right?".

"....very well. I'll tie it".

As though saying 'don't touch me', Horikita crouches down and ties the string between her own leg and mine.

Since our surroundings were engrossed in practice mood, even if we run a three-legged race we won't attract attention. Sudou, who seems like he'd be the one to get angry, also happens to be busy in the middle of a simulated match with another group too.

"Well then, let's go---".

For the first one or two steps, I sensed and matched Horikita as I stepped forth. However, as we picked up speed, rather than go at Horikita's pace, I started going at my own pace.

"H-Hey?".

In response to the panicking Horikita, I mercilessly sped up my pace. Horikita earnestly tries to come to grips with it but as her base stamina and physical strength is far below that of a boy's, she could not keep the initiative.

"According to you, keeping pace with your partner isn't all too difficult right?".

"That's....I know that....!".

She's stubborn after all. Horikita, without yielding, desperately tried to keep up. If so, I'll shift up a gear. I understand now after I've tried it, but as far as the three-legged race is concerned, just being fast alone won't cut it. The important thing is the tempo that both runners feel is best and from there the search for the best pace begins.

If you only demand speed here then inevitably it'll end up as a backassward run.

"!?".

Eventually, no longer able to keep up with my pace, Horikita almost collapses.

I grabbed her shoulders and stopped her fall, then I came to a stop too. Horikita took a slightly sharp breath.

"Before you consider things like fast or slow, it ended up like this because you're not looking at your partner".

I crouched down and without saying anything, I untied the string around Horikita's leg.

"The important thing is to look at your partner, to let them take the lead, is it not?".

It's precisely because she's athletic that she must discern her partner's ability and control herself.

"All that's left now is for you to think about it yourself".

"I---".

I don't know whether Horikita will realize this and mature but I've shown her one possibility. The rest is up to her. And the other issue is the existence of Kushida Kikyo.

Perhaps I should call her a power lurking out of sight, as she's hidden behind the existence of Hirata and Karuizawa yet as far as closeness with a lot of classmates go, she far surpasses even those two. Even now, surrounded by boys and girls, she's happily working on practicing.

In addition to that phenomenal communication skill of hers, she also possesses high academic and athletic abilities as well as a blessed figure.

Truly, she can be said to be a faultless student.

In a sense, she's a student whose assignment to Class D in the first place is a mystery. However, I know a little of the darkness of sorts she possesses. That is to say, not too long after enrollment, I saw her ranting on an isolated rooftop and her face when she threatened me. And I don't know of the reason but it is a fact that Kushida hates Horikita considerably.

But it's clear that Horikita and Kushida are both issues vital in the improvement of Class D. And also, in order to resolve these issues, there's probably no other way for them to confront one another.

Chapter 4: How Their Relationship Came to Be

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Part 1

In the midst of the other classes moving onto reconnaissance, there were small movements in Class D too. So-and-so are good at what or who is athletic or not. That sort of information is present everywhere. The majority have already begun to realize this but there is very little meaning to direct reconnaissance. Just by ascertaining the degree of someone else's athleticism to one's heart's content, ultimately the key to victory lies in the combination of partners for the contests. Information alone is not worth much.

Unless you know the contents of their participation table, which is the essence of it all, it won't lead to victory over the other classes. However, vice versa if we can acquire information on their participation table, it would be a great help towards defeating them. And if we can acquire both the 'participation table' and 'information', then our chances will rise drastically.

But as a rule of thumb, the participation table is not shared with the other classes. And since it would be equivalent to strangling themselves should it leak, thorough control of the information is likely.

The one exception.....would be Class D that's carrying a bomb internally though. One week before the sports festival. I made my move as soon as classes were over. I called out to Horikita, who was packing up her things beside me.

"Please accompany me for a bit after this".

"If I said no?".

"Of course you're free to say that but I won't be taking responsibility then if Class D faces a predicament".

I got straight to the point, and by suddenly saying something that sounds like

a threat, Horikita was at a loss for words for a moment.

"...this is something I can't quite ignore. Fine, what do you want?".

"You'll understand if you come along".

Saying that, I passed in front of Horikita, who had been demanding an answer. I then called out to one other target.

"Kushida, do you have a moment?".

I headed over in front of Kushida, who was chatting away with the girls in the class and called out to her like that.

"Hmm? What's wrong, Ayanokouji-kun?".

Kushida also turned to look for a moment at Horikita, who was keeping quiet even as she gave off an aura of dislike.

"Do you have anything planned for tomorrow?".

On Saturday, which should be a day off for Kushida, I tried inviting her out for something.

"I don't have anything planned so far. I guess only as far as thinking I'd clean my room".

"If you're fine with it, can I borrow some of your time for the morning only?".

I cut in with that. If Kushida shows any sign of discontent with it, I had every intention of withdrawing immediately.

"Sure thing".

However, as if to dispel such anxieties, Kushida accepted with a smile.

"But how unusual, for Ayanokouji-kun to invite me out".

"That may be so. By the way, Horikita will also be coming along".

"Hey".

I reined in Horikita with my hand as she voiced her complaints.

"Sure, I don't mind that at all.....but what do you mean by the morning only?".

"Including Kushida, who's familiar with information on the other classes, I want to once again conduct reconnaissance on the enemy is what I thought. I was invited to do so by Horikita but there are many things I don't know".

I honestly informed Kushida of what I was thinking. However, the part about Horikita alone was an improvisation.

As long as I intend to ask her to accompany me, it won't succeed unless I tell her the truth and Kushida also needs to understand her role.

After finishing with the conversation, as though she were convinced, Kushida repeatedly nods.

"I might be the most suitable one for that. Yeah, roger. What time would be good? The earlier it is, the better, right?".

"That's right. If possible, something like around 10 o'clock? Is that fine?".

"Completely fine. Then tomorrow we'll meet up in the dorm's lobby?".

"Yeah, thank you".

It appears Kushida had promised to go back with her friends as she left while waving her hand towards the girls waiting in the corridor. As I moved to do the same and go back, Horikita grabs hold of my back.

"What are you on about? I never heard about this".

"Of course, because I never told you about it. But reconnaissance isn't such a bad thing, right?".

"I don't understand the reasoning behind inviting me. If it's reconnaissance, then you and Kushida-san should have been more than enough?".

"...are you seriously saying that?".

"What? I wouldn't say something like that as a joke".

Apparently, I can't afford to send Horikita back just yet.

"We're standing out too much here. Let's talk on our way back".

I stepped out into the corridor with a vigor as though leaving Horikita behind. Horikita, in pursuit, lined up beside me.

"During the shipboard exam, you haven't forgotten the outcome of your team, have you?".

"Of course not, the identity of the 'target' in Class D was unanimously seen through. A humiliating result".

"That's right. It became a result that normally could not have been. There is definitely a reason for that".

"I too understand that. But I don't know why, and no matter how much I think about it I cannot find an answer. I can guess at least that Ryuuken-kun was involved in it though...".

I understand well that she's ended up colliding with a difficult question that seems like a dead end. In all likelihood, inside Horikita numerous questions are forming then fading then forming again before fading repeatedly.

"It's not like I have any certainty either but I have already reached a single, complete hypothesis regarding that".

As I said that, Horikita looked at me as though she were genuinely shocked.

"Are you saying you've figured out Ryuuken-kun's strategy?".

"Yeah, but to be precise it's not just Ryuuken. There is one other person greatly involved in the outcome of that exam".

We reached the main entrance and retrieved our shoes from the shoe rack. Then we went outdoors and resumed our conversation.

"If we think about it normally there's no way the identity of the 'target' can be found out. You, and Hirata too, never revealed to anyone the fact that Kushida is the 'target', right?".

"Naturally".

"But what about Kushida herself? If she intentionally revealed herself?".

Horikita probably could not comprehend what I was saying for a moment there. Normally this isn't something that anyone would even think of so it's natural. There isn't a single imbecile who would reveal the fact that they are the 'target' themselves.

"Impossible, right? Something like that...there are no benefits in it for Kushida-san".

"You can't say with certainty that there are no benefits, right? For instance, how about something like making a backroom deal to reveal that she's the 'target' in exchange for private points from another class. Something like that".

"Even if that's true.....it's an act that disadvantages Class D. In the first place, if someone turns traitor then it's all over, it's a gamble far too dangerous".

"That depends on the timing, right? There are many ways to build trust".

"Are you saying she'd betray her allies to gain points temporarily?".

"That may be so and that may not be so. The reason is something only Kushida knows".

That is why in order to ascertain the truth of it, I invited Kushida.

"So you brought me and Kushida-san together....to ascertain the truth?".

Having come this far, finally Horikita too has reason to think Kushida has turned traitor.

"It's because you and Kushida seem to share something extraordinary like fate after all. If there's something worth more than private points to turn traitor over, it would no longer be strange".

As I looked at her to check, Horikita awkwardly averted her eyes.

"There's nothing like fate between me and Kushida-san".

"If so, can you say with 100% certainty that she won't betray the class over you?".

"That is---".

"If there's something you're thinking about, we should confirm it. No, if we don't confirm it it'll be over you know? You can imagine it too, right? No matter what kind of exam it may be, as soon as a traitor appears from within your allies then the class no longer has any chance of winning".

The previous exam, and the exam before the previous one as well, and in this sports festival too, I understand well how simple it is for the class to collapse from just a single traitor alone.

In no time at all, we had returned in front of the dormitory and we got onto the elevator standing by on the 1st floor.

"You're free to choose whether you'll come tomorrow or not but if you intend on leading the class, think carefully about it".

I got off on the 4th floor where my room is and with that, I bid farewell to Horikita.

Part 2

Saturday morning.

I was, along with the 3 Idiots gathered in my room, having fun talking about something stupid. Of course, for the most part I only listened to the conversation with the occasional interjection here and there. Since the basketball club was unable to make use of the gymnasium, today Sudou happened to be enjoying his day off. Basically leaving me aside, the three of them were living it up.

They had each brought a cup they had bought in advance and pouring hot water into them, they waited for 3 minutes.

"Ayanokouji, what flavor is yours?".

"Spicy tom yum goong. I don't know much about it so I tried buying it".

"It looks delicious. Please swap with my salty ramen".

He extends a cup with the illustration of a salted squid on it truly making it seem mismatched.

"...no thank you".

Why would he even go out of his way to buy such an undelicious looking ramen?

"Hey Ken. Do you have any plans of telling Horikita?".

"Huh? What is it all of a sudden?".

"No, it's just I feel curious about it. Right, Haruki?".

"Y-Yeah".

After looking at me awkwardly, Yamauchi formed a fake smile. Over the summer vacation, after honorably confessing to Sakura determinedly, he had brilliantly suffered an honorable defeat after all.....

"It depends on the outcome of the sports festival. If I get official recognition maybe I'll do it then".

"Ohh---it's about that declaration of calling her by her first name right?".

Sudou, who is obstinately determined to take 1st place across the school year, as if to show off his motivation, showed off his well-developed biceps.

"Honestly, there's no one who's better at sports than me after all, amongst the 1st years".

"The only opposition, Kouenji, probably won't be doing it seriously either".

For Sudou, Kouenji's lack of motivation is both rejoiceful and unfortunate.

"Well, as for me, if I can participate seriously to a certain degree I've got no complaints".

Speaking of which, I decided to cut in and ask Ike and the others something I had been curious about.

"There's a student named Sakayanagi in Class A, right? The one whose legs are crippled. Do you remember her?".

"That beautiful girl, right? Of course I'd remember her".

Rubbing the bottom of his nose, Ike answered with that.

"Have you not heard the rumors about that girl?".

"Rumors? You mean with men? How should I put it, that girl doesn't have much of a presence. Like she won't be the topic of a conversation at all".

Having heard that, and as though agreeing, Yamauchi answered as if adding onto Ike's answer.

"From a few I've heard that she's the class's leader but she's quite mature isn't she?".

Since the two of them seemed to be of the same opinion, and it appears as though there won't be any valuable information on Sakayanagi to be gained here. As I was talking, the sound of a mail received came from my phone.

Then as I checked its contents, I could feel suspicious gazes from Ike and Yamauchi.

"You've.....been receiving quite a lot of mails recently haven't you?".

"Ehh? No, I wonder. Isn't it usual?".

I answered that way, but since they have been increasing as a matter of fact, the suspicious eyes only became more pronounced.

"It can't be that you've found yourself a girlfriend or something like that, right?".

"That's absolutely not the case so relax. There's no way I could find a girlfriend before you guys. Right?".

"Well, that is true I guess.....".

Just by putting it in a way that would slightly stir them up, the two of them returned to a milder attitude.

"I don't care about Ayanokouji not being popular. More importantly, let's talk about me and Suzune's future".

"Speaking of which, Ken, you're partnering up with Horikita for the mixed gender three-legged race right?".

"Yeah, along with giving her victory as a present I'm going to getting more intimate---".

Sudou had been trying to cultivate such an uninteresting discussion but my phone rang yet again.

But this time it's not a mail but an alarm.

"Sorry but I've got something planned from now".

"What do you mean by that? Things were just getting good. Well fine, I'll have Kanji and Haruki listen up well".

"Geh---!".

No, more importantly I'd like you to leave my room though....but rather than hear out that request, I had to leave the three of them behind in my room as I left.

Part 3

Before 10 o'clock on the promised morning with Kushida. The person in question had already arrived in the lobby.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun".

"G-Good morning, Kushida".

Summer is already over so it'll only be for a while longer that I'll be able to see Kushida in her summer clothes. I met up with Kushida while feeling flustered about her plain clothes.

"Sorry about suddenly making a weird request like that yesterday".

"No such thing. I didn't have anything planned for today either. Besides, I'm happy because it feels a little nostalgic".

"Nostalgic?".

"You know, during the exam in the 1st semester, Ayanokouji-kun went and asked a senior student for the past exam questions right? Somehow I felt this is similar to that".

"Is that...so?".

"Yep, yep".

I didn't think it was anything special but since Kushida happily nodded I decided to leave it be. Honestly I feel more comfortable taking along Karuizawa or Sakura for a walk but one should go to specialists for the best results.

I've ascertained that requesting this of Kushida is best considering she's the right person for the job. And, more importantly, is Horikita. It's almost 10 o'clock yet she hasn't shown up.

Could it be that she's running away from having to meet Kushida? Just as I had begun thinking that, she arrived.

"...I've kept you waiting".

"Good morning, Horikita-san".

Kushida welcomes Horikita with an unfaltering smile.

On the other hand, Horikita seems somewhat sullen. She's desperately trying to hide that though but from my point of view it couldn't have been more obvious.

Kushida too, probably realized it. But what makes Kushida so amazing is that in spite of it, she is able to keep her usual attitude, without a bit of change. The three of us left the dormitory and headed in the direction of the school grounds.

The grounds past 10 o'clock was already packed full of students.

"Woah, they're going at it".

From the boys, the sound of a ball being kicked resounded with a 'bon'. The ball followed a curve towards the goal post. It was a beautiful orbit yet perhaps it was easy to read precisely because of that as the keeper, with sharp reflexes, repelled the ball with a punch. Hirata's figure could also be seen in the midst of the match. Perhaps it's because the team consists of a mixture of 1st years up to 3rd years, but there were also students who I did not know.

"Scouting out clubs to grasp information on the students of other classes. Somehow it makes me feel like I'm a spy. It's thrilling".

"It's nothing that splendid though. The information we can acquire here is limited".

"But Horikita-san doesn't think so. Right?".

"There's nothing better than acquiring it. There's no telling may be the key".

"That may be so---. But it was kind of you, Ayanokouji-kun. To cooperate for Horikita-san's sake".

"It can't be helped since she'd be annoying afterwards if I don't".

"You've got guts saying that with me right in front of you".

Ignoring that one frightening word from said person in question, I focused my attention on the grounds.

Since it has come down to a corner kick, the folks in the soccer club, while calmly walking, were vying for their positions. It won't be long before the match resumes and an intense development occurs. And we too could almost physically feel the resumption of the match drawing near.

As Kushida smiles, I had an uncomfortable feeling about the state of the three of us. Surprisingly enough, the one who initiated it was Kushida.

"The one who decided to invite me out here today was Ayanokouji-kun, right?".

"Why do you think so?".

"I mean, I can't imagine Horikita-san would invite me".

Still smiling, and after briefly looking at Horikita, Kushida turned back to me.

"You think Horikita wouldn't invite you, why is that?".

"Ahaha, that's terrible of you Ayanokouji-kun. You know things aren't going too well between me and Horikita-san right?".

Since I am already in the know regarding that, Kushida said so without attempting to cover it up. Horikita too, was listening quietly without denying it.

"Honestly I still can't believe that, or rather, I'm still half in doubt".

The ball kicked from the corner flies towards a teammate waiting near the goal post. The one who skillfully matched it was Hirata. However, since aiming the shot right now proved to be too exacting, he instead passed the ball to his teammate.

That person was a familiar Class B student. The ball that was kicked with perfect timing brilliantly flew into the goal in one stroke.

"So Shibata's from the soccer club".

"Yeah. Hirata-kun praises him often, that he's better than him. It seems they're close".

As expected, the well-informed Kushida appears to have heard of such things too. Once the match started up again, the ball again went to Shibata as he runs around the enemy team with agile movements.

"His speed is also considerable".

He's equal to Hirata.....no, if it's just speed alone then he seems to be faster. It doesn't seem like Hirata was just being humble.

"Ohh, they're going at it. They're lively today as well, this is amazing!".

The figure of a tall man wearing the club's uniform walked past the spectators, namely us. I had assumed he practiced some form of sports, so it was soccer after all.

"Good morning, Nagumo-senpai".

Perhaps she was acquainted with him, but from beside me, Kushida called out to him. On the other hand, towards the name Nagumo, Horikita gave an almost imperceptible response.

It's because he's a candidate for the next student council president and someone whose abilities equal that of Horikita's brother after all.

"Hmm? If I recall, you're Kikyo-chan right? You're on a date with a boy on your day off. Not too shabby".

"Ahaha, it's not like that though...I got curious and came here to watch".

"Take it easy. My club doesn't know how to hold back so I think you're right on the mark if you've come to measure their skills".

Nagumo winked, then headed down to the ground field for a meetup.

Apparently he's seen through our intent.

The mood of the soccer club changed dramatically, starting with Hirata, when Nagumo joined them.

"Hey, is our school ok with letting someone hold positions in both the student council and a club?".

"It doesn't seem to be expressly forbidden but he appears to have left the club now. But even though he's quit, he's still the best so he shows up to practice from time to time and coaches them".

"Can you go like that, Nagumo?".

"Yep. I overslept but then after running a few laps my body's getting all warmed up".

As a student swapped with Nagumo and the match resumed, in an instant, both the ball and the players all gathered around Nagumo. He's probably just that reliable as a teammate and just that dangerous as an enemy.

He seems to be on the team opposing Hirata and Shibata's. As the situation changed, Nagumo's play shone.

Hirata challenged Nagumo to steal the ball away. His movements should have been just as sharp as before but almost as though dandling a baby, he ended up being splendidly passed by.

Right afterwards, Shibata also charged at Nagumo but Nagumo interwove several feints together and dazzled him before passing him too.

I believe both of them to be considerably talented but Nagumo was a level above them.

Passing one more person, he let loose a powerful shot from mid-distance. The ball which flew in a terrifying curve exceeded the keeper's prediction and quickly enough, he scored a goal.

"So the title of succeeding student council president isn't just for show".

".....it's just athleticism though".

It appears Horikita has no intention of honestly acknowledging Nagumo since she couldn't see the full picture regarding him. Even as I exchanged words with her, I snuck a glance at Kushida who was watching the match to peek at her expression.

She was smiling as usual and not a single trace of her true nature could be seen.

"Even if you stare at me with those eyes, it'll only embarrass me".

As though seeing through my thoughts, Kushida met my gaze and laughed.

"I promise not to ask any further so can you please tell me this one thing?".

In the presence of the parties concerned, I had dared to step into an area that should have been inviolable.

"What's the cause of your strained relationship with Horikita?".

And I added one more thing.

"This is an unfair way of putting it. To ask you to tell me by promising not to ask any further".

It was psychological manipulation but Kushida, on top of understanding that, understood my question too.

"That's really all, ok?".

"Yeah, I promise".

As long as she despises the other party, it's natural to blame them instead.
However---

"It's me".

Even as she turned her eyes back towards the soccer match, Kushida lightly answered like that. It was an answer that betrayed my expectations. Even as she admits she's the one at fault she still despises Horikita. That is a contradiction.

I'd say I'm relatively good at reading people but as I thought, I can't quite read Kushida. Besides, I've also started to no longer quite understand Horikita either. Horikita had deduced from the start that she was hated by Kushida yet she did not speak to me on this. That has not changed even now. However, judging from Kushida's way of putting it, Horikita may know the cause of Kushida's hatred towards her.

But even if I ask Horikita, she wouldn't breathe a word about Kushida. Why is that?

The fact that neither of them are willing to talk about the details would unmistakably have to mean they don't want the other to know basically.

"I quit. I'm starting to feel like just thinking about it is a waste of time".

"Ahaha, that's right. Right now our priority is to conduct reconnaissance and gather information right?".

"I suppose.....".

"Ahh, by the way, the one who possesses the ball now is Sonoda-kun from Class C. He's quite fast".

As expected, the students in the soccer club are all agile. The only ones in our class who could compete would be Hirata and Sudou and in a pure contest they'd still be at a disadvantage.

"But Horikita-san is also properly keeping our class in mind....that makes me happy".

"I intend to do what's necessary to rise up to Class A, so it can't be helped".

"I have to work harder so I can contribute to everyone else too".

I couldn't sense even a bit of modesty.

As I watched the practice go on for a while, the players who had finished with their match started their break. As if to do the same thing, Nagumo calls Hirata over and talks to him.

Then perhaps he realized that we had been watching the match, Hirata approached us.

"Good morning, both of you. How unusual for you to be in a place like this".

Seeing us talk from a distance, Shibata also came running over and an unusual 5-person group was formed.

"Good morning, Kikyo-chan. And also---Ayanokouji and Horikita-chan, was it? Are you on a date surrounded by two beautiful girls?".

"No, that's not it".

I was acquainted with Shibata but I had not expected him to remember my name properly. That made my slightly happy and I desperately suppressed my face that was about to burst into a grin.

"What's up today? This is an unusual combination".

While feeling appreciative towards Hirata, who did not suspect anything strange, I decided to boldly speak the truth.

"It's reconnaissance. We've come to mark the students from the other classes that we ought to keep an eye on".

"Ohh. So that means right away Shibata man's been perfectly marked?".

Shibata swiftly stepped forward to show off his speed. That cheerfulness of his that made no effort to conceal his abilities. I wonder if that's because he's part of Class B under Ichinose's leadership or because it's simply his nature.

"Shibata-kun is as fast as the rumors say. Both Ayanokouji-kun and I were shocked".

Praised by a beautiful girl, Shibata happily rubbed the bottom of his nose with his index finger.

"Shibata-kun's someone we need to pay special caution to. In Class B, he's the fastest. As for me, I'd rather not run in the same group as him".

"Even if you say such things, I won't let my guard down, Yousuke. Because you're fast too. How about Ayanokouji?".

"Since I'm part of the go-home club please take the hint".

That's right too, as though saying that, Shibata crossed his arms together and laughed.

Having observed the soccer club's practice in general, we left that spot. And we decided to go around and watch the other clubs conduct their activities.

But even so at the very most this is only the official story.

What I really want to know, what I really ought to know, that's different. I've set the table. As for what the two of them will think of on top of it is something I've decided to leave to them.

"Kushida-san. I have no interest in you".

"Woah, that's a harsh word all of a sudden.....".

"But right now there is something I must ask you. I wonder if you could answer me?".

"Today seems to be interrogation day along with Ayanokouji-kun. What is it?".

"During the shipboard exam over the summer vacation. Did you tell Ryuuen-kun or Katsuragi-kun about you being the 'target'?".

I had expected to her to ask straightforwardly to a certain degree but she really got straight to the point.

Towards Kushida, who was still surprised and puzzled, Horikita continued on like this.

"It's fine if you don't answer. Because it's meaningless to dig up the past. That's why I'll just ask one thing. Is it fine if I trust you as a comrade from the same class from now on?".

"Of course. I want to aim for Class A along with everyone from Class D. I want you to include me as one of your comrades, it's exactly what I've been saying from the start".

That feeling has not changed one bit, is what Kushida said.

"I don't know why you said something like that to me but I want you to trust me".

Kushida smiles at Horikita even as she made her appeal with a serious expression.

"Then, I'll be heading back. I'll leave the remaining reconnaissance to the two of you".

"Huh? Hey, what are you talking about, Ayanokouji-kun?".

"The one who thought of this strategy in the first place was Horikita. It'll be enough if you have Kushida's connections right?".

Saying that, I moved to leave this place.

Part 4

Various kinds of practice piled up day after day and at last, there was only one week left to go until the sports festival. Today we must submit our participation table and decide on the participants of each event. As Hirata stood on the platform, Kushida faces the blackboard and holding the chalk she puts all the preparations into order.

"Then from now, I'd like to decide on the final pairings for all events and contests".

He spoke based on the notes containing the daily records of the class, the best pairings as discussed by the class and the order incorporating the winning strategy. Then everyone memorized their own roles in the contests and the order.

There wasn't a single student who objected to this outcome that was based on their feats up until now. They all proceeded without bickering.

"---for the 1200 meter relay at the end, the anchor will be Sudou-kun then".

"Sounds reasonable".

I could respect that as a combination that took into account the individual's skill as well as respecting their wishes. In the last prominent event, the relay, it's the fast students like Horikita that comprise the lineup.

In all likelihood, a more ideal combination could not be thought up by the other students. However, the dweller in the seat next to mine was for some reason continuing to stare at the blackboard with an unconvinced expression.

Right after the discussion ended smoothly, Horikita stood up from her seat. As I wondered where exactly she was headed off to, it turned out to be in

front of Sudou's seat.

I became curious and eavesdropped.

"What's the matter?".

"There's something I want to talk about. Can you come with me?".

"S-Sure".

Sudou, having been called out like that, hurriedly stands up.

"Also Hirata-kun, may I have some of your time as well?".

Horikita, who started walking off right afterwards, for some reason also called out to Hirata and called him towards the rear of the classroom. Sudou, who must have been surprised for a moment there, quickly became disappointed.

"I have one thing to discuss regarding the participation table we decided on earlier. It's about the 1200 meter relay that will take place at the end of the sports festival. I'd like you to hand over the anchor position to me".

Sudou showed momentary confusion in response to that unexpected assertion.

"No, but...The anchor is usually handled by the fastest one right? Or are you uneasy with having me as the anchor?".

Between boys and girls, there is a fundamental difference in regards to physical abilities. Horikita is indeed fast amongst the girls but if she were to be mixed with the boys group, then she wouldn't be able to beat even Hirata.

It's natural that Sudou, who's equal to or faster than Hirata, should be the anchor. Sudou had also obviously thought he would be doing it and probably couldn't accept it right away.

"No, that's not it. From practice, I understand well your abilities".

"Then it's fine if it's me right? If it's the 5th runner then.....".

"It's not like I don't have a reason. You're good with the starting dash too, Sudou-kun. In that case, I thought having you be the 1st runner and cast aside our opponents would be a viable strategy.

By having you take the vanguard we can keep the lead and carry the match advantageously. If it's an individual race, by creating a starting handicap it's possible to protect your lane but when it comes to a relay that won't fly.

Starting from the 2nd runner it'll be on a first-come-first-served basis and it's permitted to take a course of your choosing right? And in the case that we get overtaken, it's specified in the rules that starting from the 2nd runner onwards, we are permitted to use the outer lanes to overtake them".

In other words, Horikita would like to set Sudou as the 1st runner for an outrun strategy.

"But.....".

But it doesn't seem Sudou's been convinced. In regards to this I'm of the same opinion too. Certainly if one can pull off the starting dash well then starting from the 2nd runner onwards, their sprint would become easier. I understand this. However, just because he'll be taking the vanguard doesn't mean him being able to shake off the opponents is guaranteed. On the contrary, by using up Sudou here, the situation where the opponents close the gap bit by bit later would also pressure the subsequent runners.

On the other hand, by keeping Sudou as the anchor, there's the possibility that he'll be able to bring out more power than usual in the final leg. If there are targets in front of him to chase after, that just means he'll have that much more fighting spirit in him.

"The anchor is usually left to the guy who's fastest in the team right?".

"This is a meritocratic school. It's no good to decide based on assumptions and preconceptions. The other classes should also be thinking of various strategies".

I can understand where both of them are coming from but in this case, I felt Horikita is being slightly overbearing. There are many mental problems but basically there's not much difference when it comes to orders.

Being clumsy in the starting dash and not being able to properly pass on the baton, such things won't have much influence on anything other than the technical side.

However, be it Horikita or Sudou, I get the impression they'll be able to perform well in that regard.

If so, then it means there's another reason why Horikita wishes to be the anchor. If it's Ike or Yamauchi, it could simply be that they want to stand out, but that's hard to imagine here. Then in that case---

"I will definitely produce better results than in practice".

Ultimately, Horikita brought forth a gut feeling without any basis and made her request.

"I can't agree. It's not like you, Horikita".

This proposal was a mysterious one, to the extent it made Sudou cut in like that.

"Umm...can I say something?".

Perhaps she got curious about the discussion, Kushida reservedly joined in.

"Ahh, sorry. I overheard a bit. And that's why I thought maybe there's some other reason why Horikita-san wants to be the anchor".

"That is---".

"If that's the case then would you mind telling us? I don't think neither I nor Sudou-kun are rejecting it meaninglessly. But if we're going to be changing the order decided on by everyone in the class then I'd like to hear a proper reason".

"I agree with Hirata. Please give us a proper reason".

Horikita made a complicated face. But perhaps she thought the only way to obtain the anchor position was to speak the truth, she began to speak of her reason.

"Because I think my brother.....is the anchor.....".

"Your brother, that's.....the student council president.....".

"Yes. He's my brother".

It's the student council president whose existence everyone is aware of but not everyone made the connection from the surname Horikita.

It's by no means an uncommon surname, and even as we vaguely imagined it

to be so the reason why we did not pursue it was because Horikita herself did not say anything and also because in outer appearance alone they were not that alike.

All three of them showed surprised expressions at that fact.

"You want to become the anchor alongside your brother, is that it?".

Kushida heard her reason but just by that alone, it doesn't seem like she understood. However, Horikita did not speak any further of her personal affairs. I decided to extend a bit of a helping hand to her.

"A lot of things happened and they're currently estranged. She probably wants an opportunity to reconcile with him".

It was easy to understand, and I must praise myself for being able to add a line like that which was neither the truth nor a lie.

For a moment, Horikita glared at the eavesdropping me but immediately turned back towards Sudou and the others.

"I was wondering what's the matter all of a sudden but that's how it is then.....as for me, I still want to be the anchor even now but if that's the case then I don't mind handing it over to you".

"I think it's also fine. If Sudou-kun's satisfied, I'm sure everyone in the class will be fine with it too, won't they?".

"That's right. Got it, then I'll submit it after swapping Horikita-san and Sudou-kun. Will that be fine?".

"Thank you.....".

Certainly if not for an opportunity like this, it wouldn't be possible for Horikita and her brother to come into close contact like this.

Even if she lacks the courage to make contact with him herself, if it's a contest, then they'll be forcibly brought close together anyways. However, this decision of Horikita's won't necessarily be rewarded. Just by approaching that stubborn brother, I couldn't imagine something would happen after all.

Chapter 5: Raising the Curtains

At last this day is finally here. The dawn of the sports festival which is shaping up to be a long day. Wearing jerseys, the entire student body marched in as one just as rehearsed.

But even if it's called a march, most of the students were just walking normally. They only showed enough seriousness to not disrupt discipline.

"I'll show off my good side to Kikyo-chan!".

Ike, who was walking behind me, excitedly voiced his expectations. I wonder how he's intending on showing off when he's one of those people who are not especially good at sports. I could see that it was almost unmistakably a fruitless effort without any secret strategy behind it.

In the opening ceremony, 3rd year Class A's Fujimaki was the one who gave the opening declaration. By the way, on the outskirts of the school grounds, there weren't many but I could see the figures of spectators scattered here and there. They are probably adults who work on-campus. In regards to them, it doesn't seem like the school has set any restrictions. Occasionally, I could see smiles and hands waving.

On the other hand, the teachers were watching over the students with nary a smile on their faces while adults who appear to be medical staff could also be seen.

Furthermore, a cottage that could fit roughly 20 people was built and installed

inside was a cooler, a water dispenser and the such. Just like the uninhabited island, the preparations were flawless. By the way, the competing Red Team and White Team were provided with tents installed on opposite sides of the track as though sandwiching it between them.

As such, it has been made so that there could be no possible contact other than during the contests.

"But even so they're very thoroughly prepared. Ultimately, even cameras meant to help with judgement calls have been set up".

For the 100 meter dash that'll be coming up first, a camera was pointed towards a point that appears to be the goal.

"So that means misjudgements and ambiguous results will definitely be avoided".

It appears even if it's by an hairbreadth, they intend on deciding victory and defeat like it's a horserace. That is precisely why contests that are difficult to score like cheerleading and the such are not included in this sports festival.

"The 100 meter dash, which group were you in again?".

"The seventh group".

I answered while looking at the simplistic programme table (the paper on which the order and time of the contests are written).

"It'll be for the better if a formidable opponent does not show up. For the sake

of the class, I'll slightly be cheering you on".

"I'll try my best to not place bottom".

After voicing my unambitious goal, we 1st year boys headed out to the grounds for the contest.

Contests such as the 100 meter dash are all held in order starting from the 1st years. Starting from the 1st year boys and ending with the 3rd year girls is the entirety of the event. Then with the break sandwiched in between, it'll switch over and start again with the 1st year girls and end with the 3rd year boys. The contest was about to begin using the printouts each class had submitted beforehand as a basis to decide the pairings.

Since the actual day of the event began, it became clear who would be running in which order from the other classes.

From each class, the selected two making up a total of eight people lined up as one. My turn, as I had told Horikita earlier, was seventh. In total, the 1st year boys formed up into 10 groups.

It was now Sudou's turn, as he would be running in the first group. All the students of Class D watched while holding our breath. The outcome of the sports festival will depend greatly on Sudou. First of all this first event, we'll use Sudou's debut in the race to crush the opponents. The plan is to get everyone pumped up with that same vigor. If Sudou finishes with disappointing results here, there is the possibility that it will have lasting effects.

"From what I can see it doesn't seem like there's anyone worth their salt here. There are many fatties and garish guys here. It's guaranteed Sudou'll place 1st".

I couldn't see any notable students in our school year from the other classes. Like Ike said, it's probably guaranteed already.

"On the contrary, depending on how you look at it, it could also be seen as a loss".

Ideally speaking, for someone with physical abilities like Sudou's, it would have been better if someone fast had been competing.

"But this alone is something that can't be helped, it's up to luck after all".

There was something about the figure of Sudou, in a crouching stance at the starting line, that inspires absolute confidence. Even if he happened to tumble mid-race he could still turn it all around, he gave off the feeling of having such a composure to his surroundings.

Then, as the signal rang out, Sudou rose up perfectly simultaneously and shot forth. Sudou, who had passed a person from the very start, outraced all the other boys as though shaking them off and left them in the dust.

He reached the goal with an overwhelming gap with no one being able to keep up with him. There's nothing more to say about that. As the entire student body watched, as the first runner in the first contest, Sudou seized 1st place as expected.

At the same time, the Professor who had been selected too, properly managed to secure last place as expected but.....

Not even giving us time to bask in the afterglow, the signal for the next group to start came. The signals came at 20 second intervals. Approximately 4 minutes would be required for all the 1st year boys to finish running. Since this will be repeated by boys and girls for all the school years, the 100 meter dash would be completed in about 30 minutes according to calculations.

"As expected of Sudou-kun I guess".

Hirata, who's paired up with me, praised him as though he were impressed.

"Yeah. It feels like the other classes have been taken aback too".

He didn't simply take 1st place but also unmistakably left a strong impact. We, the seventh group up, like Sudou and the Professor, also have our roles properly cut out for us.

Hirata, who belongs to the soccer club and is a fast runner, will have a high rank. And as for me, I'd take a rank that's higher even if it's just by one, in other words, it can't be helped even if I lose. Then also there's the matter of standing out and remaining inconspicuous. There are several students from other classes we should be keeping an eye on but amongst the ones I know, those who give off a strong presence like Ryuuken and Katsuragi and the athletic ones like Kanzaki and Shibata, I wonder what group they're in.

The third group shuffled up to the starting point.

"Ohh, baldie....no, I mean Katsuragi is on the first course".

Ike points at his head. The skinhead bathing in the rays of the sun glowed blindingly. Beside Katsuragi, a man I'm familiar with was staring at the goal point with a calm expression.

He's Kanzaki of Class B. So Katsuragi and Kanzaki will be competing against each other, huh?

Meanwhile, the man who's first on the list of those to watch out for, Kouenji of Class D, is also part of the third group but.....

There's no sign of Kouenji on the fifth course he had been assigned to. However, the school did not bother searching for the missing Kouenji and instead treating it as absence, they ended up starting the match right away.

The third group was a free-for-all but it appears as far as speed goes, Kanzaki surpassed them all.

Katsuragi too was by no means slow but it was simply beyond him, and without much fuss, the race ended. Kanzaki took 1st place and Katsuragi took 3rd place. As the race steadily progressed, Hirata realized something.

"Ayanokouji-kun, look there".

What Hirata had noticed was in the direction of the cottage. As I strained my eyes to look, inside it I could see Kouenji who was arranging his hair. He's already finished running, surely that's not the case. But even so, he's way too quick to withdraw.

"He's not participating, it seems".

Up until the opening ceremony he had been honestly obedient or so it seemed but ultimately, it appears he won't be participating in the contests.

Kouenji will probably make the excuse that his feet hurt or that he's not feeling well to wriggle his way out of it.

Since the thought that he would place bottom if he skipped out on all the contests did not even enter his mind, the liability he'd be lies heavy on the class as well as the Red Team.

Class A too, despite having a legitimate reason, also similarly has someone who will be skipping out on all events in the form of Sakayanagi. Assuming Class C and Class B has no absentees then the Red Team will simply have to fill in the hole left by those two people. Quite a handicap.

The contest progresses smoothly.

One after another the groups get finished up and in no time, our turn as the seventh group came. I entered the fourth course and beside me, Hirata entered the fifth course.

Other than us, the other members included Class A's Yahiko but the rest are boys I'm not familiar with. The first ever sports festival of my life. I started off with a starting dash that was neither fast nor slow. Hirata, who ran beside me, slowly but surely passed me by and joined up with the top runners. On the other hand, in front of me were the backs of four people, hence I took 5th place.

Perhaps it's because there wasn't that overwhelming of a gap between speeds, we all ran in a crowded state. Then, without changing up the order, I finished in 5th place. As for Hirata, by a narrow margin, he shone in 1st place.

"Fuu. Good job".

Hirata, who had reached the goal before anyone else, lightly sighed and gave me such words of appreciation.

"Sorry, for being a burden".

"No such thing. It was a good match, everyone was fast too".

Hirata did not blame me, even after my disappointing results, and greeted me with a smile. I hurriedly got off the track and returned to the tent. Because the next group up will be starting one after another and I'll only be getting in the way.

The 1st year boys, after having finished with their 100 meter dash, returned to their seats and focused on the girls' race as though devouring them.

There's also the outcome of the matches, but they probably just wanted to see the running figures of the girls and couldn't help it.

"Where's Sudou?".

I couldn't see Sudou, who should have returned to his seat.

"I don't know. Toilet probably, right? More importantly, let's see those swaying breasts, you know, the breasts".

Ike was upbeat, but I immediately had a bad feeling about Sudou's absence. He seems like the type to cheer Horikita on here, but that I cannot see him is strange.

"...it can't be".

I looked towards the cottage.

As though my premonition had been realized, I saw Sudou drawing closer to Kouenji.

"This isn't looking good. I'd better stop them".

"Right".

Hirata, who noticed that too almost simultaneously, panicked too and headed towards the cottage. It appears things have already heated up there and Sudou, gripping his fist tight, confronted Kouenji.

"You bastard, being absent and all, don't fuck around with me!".

As I opened the door, I could hear Sudou's intimidating voice from inside.

Sudou had closed the distance to the point where even now, it seemed as though he was about to take a swing, but it almost seems as though Kouenji has not even noticed his existence yet.

He's looking bold as he admired his reflection in the glass of the window. But that attitude of his only ended up adding fuel to the fire and stoking Sudou's anger.

"Looks like you won't understand unless I beat you up, Kouenji".

"That's no good, Sudou-kun. If the teachers found out---".

Hirata, of course, stops him but he's not the kind of man to be deterred by something like this.

"Shut up. This problem is our class's internal affair, right? Doesn't matter even if I beat him up. It's only if this guy doesn't go crying to the teachers about it though".

"As usual, you are an unsavory man. I came here because I wanted to quietly spend time alone though. As you can see, today I'm feeling ill. I declined so I wouldn't be a bother".

"Don't lie to me! Leaving aside practice, you're skipping out even on the actual event!".

It's understandable to want to shout out like that. No matter how you look at it, Kouenji's the picture of health itself.

"No, Sudou-kun!".

Before Hirata, who was at a distance, could panickedly draw near, Sudou could no longer stand it and raised his fist. He probably intended on punching Kouenji once to open his eyes. However, the man who was beyond expectations and normal standards, Kouenji, caught the powerful punch in

the palm of his hand.

'Pan'. And a dry sound like that reverberated within the cottage. Kouenji starts talking without looking at Sudou's face.

"Stop it. Someone like you cannot beat me".

It didn't seem as though Sudou had been holding back on a fellow classmate. It was a fist swung with all his might.

And it had been blocked all too easily. Sudou probably felt Kouenji's high potential anew. But rather than be frightened by it, Sudou appears to have gotten serious.

"Then bring it on. I'll break that pride of yours".

"Good grief. Both you and her, it sounds like you both want to tell me I'm unreliable".

"Her? Who're you talking about?".

"That Cool Girl that you're so passionate about. She's been emphasizing it quite a bit until today, to make sure I participate seriously in the sports festival".

"Horikita, you mean.....?".

Apparently, Horikita had foreseen the possibility of Kouenji being a no-show from the start. Well, I suppose it's natural to have misgivings about him seeing how he retired straight away back on the uninhabited island.

Even so, I didn't know she had been working on Kouenji behind my back.

"In any case, leave. I am not feeling well".

"You bastard---!".

To prevent it from happening again, Hirata got in between Sudou and Kouenji and tried to arbitrate.

"I think it's better to calm down a bit. Kouenji-kun's attitude is also a problem but since he's saying he's not feeling well, he should have the right to rest. Besides, no matter who it may be against, violence is bad".

"That's definitely a lie. He said the same thing back on the uninhabited island, didn't he?".

"A baseless accusation. It's just that my bad health doesn't show up well in my attitude".

"You planning on skipping the rest of the contests? Huh?".

"Of course, I will participate if I make a recovery. If I make a recovery, that is".

Sudou could no longer hold in his anger but it's also a fact that he cannot afford to be hung up on Kouenji forever.

"The next contest is going to be starting soon, Sudou-kun. If you're absent as our leader, it'll affect our morale too".

Hirata switched over to a different approach to convince Sudou.

".....I get it. I just have to go back right? Go back".

As if accompanying him, Hirata left the cottage together with Sudou. I also followed soon afterwards. Grumpily returning to Class D's tent, Sudou sat down on a pipe chair.

"Shit! Next time I'll seriously send that bastard flying! Shit!".

His anger, rather than abate, only welled up and scattered out". A wise man keeps away from danger, and people back away from Sudou one after another. Sudou unleashed his wrath on anyone approaching him by snapping at them.

But Ike, who was engrossed in the girls' race, did not notice Sudou's anger and cheerfully approached him. When I realized it, it seems the girls' 100 meter dash has also reached its climax, as the last group had just entered the course.

"What have you been doing, Ken? You just came back? Your favorite girl's match is about to start".

He slapped Sudou on his back. In that instant, his hand was grabbed and he himself was caught in a forceful headlock.

"Gyaa! What the hell!".

"Stress relief".

"It hurts, it hurts, it hurts! I give up, I give up!".

I have nothing to say about this except that it's misfortunate and pitiful. Anyways, after having attacked Ike in anger and as Horikita's race approached, it seems Sudou's regained a bit of calm.

Horikita enters the course as the last round of the 1st year girls was at hand.

"At least there's healing in watching Suzune I guess.....".

If he can be healed by watching that, then by all means I'll have him heal up.

As I watched Sudou in turn, Sakura breathlessly came back to my side.

"Haa, haa.....p-painful.....".

She must have been running at her best as she's repeatedly breathing in and out seemingly in extreme pain.

"W-Were you watching me, Ayanokouji-kun?".

She looked up at me with sparkling eyes from behind her glasses. Unfortunately, Sakura's contest had ended while I had been chasing Sudou into the cottage and so I don't know how it went. But if I tell her I hadn't been watching then Sakura will probably become severely depressed.

"You did well".

I said so briefly yet I put my feelings into those words. One thing certain from the facts I understand right now is that Sakura gave it her all in the race.

"T-Thank you! This is the first time I wasn't in last place".

She said so with a smile. Sakura had decisively been the slowest one in both classes and in practice but apparently it seems like she's beaten someone. Furthermore, judging from the looks of it, it doesn't seem like her opponent simply fell or something either.

"Be careful not to push yourself. If you get in over your head, you might fall and hurt yourself".

"O-Ok!".

Smiling again while breathing heavily, Sakura looked out at the next girls race from beside me. I also focused on the other girls who would be running against Horikita.

On the third course was Ibuki Mio, a student from Class C.

For Horikita to be in the same group as Ibuki, who views her as a rival. What a strange coincidence. Horikita did not even look at her but it seems a spark's already been lit in Ibuki.

Even from afar, I could see her resolve to not lose against Horikita no matter what.

"I wonder if Ibuki-chan's good at sports?".

"Hell if I know. There's no mistaking though that Horikita's going to be the winner".

There's no way the other boys could have known but Ibuki is highly athletic. I only have the bare minimum knowledge but I cannot say with certainty who's going to win between them.

At the same time as the starting signal, seven girls shot forth. Between the two I had been paying attention to, the one who had the better start was Ibuki. There had been a slight delay in Horikita's reaction and she lagged behind.

But she immediately accelerates, and with a beautiful form she catches up to Ibuki. On the other hand, Ibuki had succeeded in gaining a headstart but perhaps she got curious about Horikita, who ran beside her, as she became distracted looking back. Due to that, their distance lessened and perfectly seizing the middle position and without being shaken off or leaving, she kept that position and continued.

Then, nearing endgame, I could see Ibuki's expression stiffening. As they lined up side-by-side, almost indistinctly Horikita took the lead. It was by a narrow margin, but giving off a feeling of self-confidence, Horikita ended up taking 1st place.

"Is this bad.....?".

That whispered premonition of Sudou's turned out to have hit the mark. It was truly bit by bit, but the distance between Horikita, who had the lead, and Ibuki, slowly decreased.

In response to Horikita, who tried to shake her off, Ibuki drew ever closer.

The one who cut through the goal tape first was Horikita.

After the big match that no one would've considered strange even if it required a video to make the call, the audience went into a slight uproar.

Beside Horikita, who was catching her breath, Ibuki kicked the ground in frustration. But I feel like if she hadn't been so worried about Horikita, then then ranking may have been different.

A slight gap in her awareness was the cause of victory.

"But even so, it was a match the two of them dominated".

Sudou, who was watching Horikita after she had finished running, also felt the same way. Leaving aside her evenly matched race against Ibuki, the other 4 girls excluding Class D honestly were of a pretty low level.

After the completion of the 100 meter dash for the 1st years, we report our results to each other.

The ones who boasted high athletic abilities like Sudou or Horikita as well as Hirata, managed to secure 1st place. However, on the other hand, I could see that the main body of the class that were expected to win had ranked badly and had an unsatisfying start.

"Keep it together, you lot. Especially you, the only pride of yours is your speed right?".

"E-Even if you say that, that Shibata guy's really good".

"It can't be helped. Because Shibata-kun's faster than me".

As a matter of fact, during club practice, there were several instances in which he seemed faster than even Hirata after all.

Despite our good start, from now on the calculations will become more and more complicated. There are no notebooks nor phones here. Even if we verbally convey the results of the contests to a certain extent, it'll be difficult to grasp all of it. We don't know the circumstances of the other classes in detail either.

I approached Horikita, who had returned, and called out to her.

"That was close".

"...that's right. I was surprised. Ibuki-san was faster than I had expected".

Perhaps she noticed Ibuki approaching, Horikita breathed a sigh of relief.

"I understand you've been reaching out to Kouenji".

"Who told you.....? It seems to have been meaningless from the start though".

For just a brief moment, Horikita looked at Kouenji, who's elegantly spending time inside the cottage.

"I had misgivings about him skipping out but ultimately it ended up that way".

"In a certain sense, more than anyone else, he's the one most disinterested in Class A".

As long as he isn't expelled, he will enjoy the rest of his time here. As long as he's decided on that, there's no moving him to action.

But it seems a feeling of being unconvinced had started to sprout inside of Horikita.

"If I were like Kushida-san, a person well liked by the class, I wonder if I could've moved him into action?".

"I wonder. I don't think he's the type to comply with Kushida or Hirata's persuasion though".

Then again, the two of them wouldn't try to forcibly persuade Kouenji in the first place. As for why, even if it's only self-proclaimed, they wouldn't call someone who claims to be sick a liar.

"To think you'd say something like 'if I were like Kushida'".

"I never hated her or anything in the first place".

After a natural conversation like that, Horikita realized she had made a verbal slip and sealed her lips tight.

"Pretend you didn't hear that just now".

Saying that, she ended the conversation. Then she turned to look at the 3rd year contests that will be starting soon.

For her, Class D is something to worry about but in the same vein, the existence of her brother is also probably a similar worry. Of course, it's not like her brother, who's the student council president, is affected in any way by his sister's feelings.

Horikita's brother, who started as part of the second group, naturally took 1st place.

"He's as fast as I imagined him to be".

"It's because nii-san is perfect. No matter what he does, he's always number one".

Rather than a boast, it sounded more like it was a matter of fact. As all the school years finished with their 100 meter dashes, the total count began.

Before the next contest begins, the first points for the Red Team and the White Team will be announced.

Red Team: 2011 points. White Team: 1891 points.

The contests have just begun but the Red Team was slightly dominant.

2

The second contest up is a hurdle. It's basically an event that's the same as the 100 meter dash in the sense that it rests purely on one's speed. But then again, that's not all there is to it. It's because it'll be a severe mistake if we don't overcome it with certainty yet without rushing it. In regards to this contest, there are two rules attached.

'Knock down the hurdle'. 'Touch the hurdle'. These two time penalties are added onto it as well.

It's 0.5 seconds if the hurdle is knocked down. It's 0.3 seconds if the hurdle is touched. That time will be added for us.

Due to this, just quickly skipping over everything isn't enough to win. One must leap over them with certainty.

But since it also means you obviously won't be able to win if you take too long either, the important thing here is just how much you've grasped the hang of it during the practice period. There are 10 hurdles in total placed at intervals of 10 meters. In the case that you're able to knock them all down then that means a total of 5 seconds would be added to your time. It's pretty much a despairing order.

In this event, it's been decided that Sudou will be participating as part of the last group.

"If you guys are dead last then I'll slap you".

The unathletic students trembled at the intense pressure coming from Sudou, who was watching them with arms crossed.

"What kind of tyranny is this!?".

"Ehh, is Sotomura-kun present? In case of absence, he'll be disqualified".

I could hear those words coming from the referee at the starting line.

"I-I have a stomach ache.....would it be fine if I were to be absent?".

The Professor, who could only barely overcome the hurdles back during practice, tried to escape as though frightened.

"Huh? It's fine if you knock down all the hurdles so show some backbone and

stay your course".

"Kopu!? I-I-I have it!".

At a distance where their faces were almost touching, he glared at the Professor who then went onto the course. There's a great difference between coming in dead last and being disqualified. Since in the case of disqualification you won't even be able to acquire a point, participation is essential.

"Damn, he's useless. He does whatever he wants as a habit that's why he's fat".

But as expected, the Professor could not overcome the hurdles and ultimately, he ended up knocking them over by hand and came in at last place.

"Even so, that Shibata guy's pretty good".

In ascertaining the abilities of the other classes, Sudou said that as though advising caution. It's still only the second event but even in the hurdle race he still took 1st place without difficulty.

Right now, he'd be Sudou's rival. Furthermore, like Ichinose, he appears to possess leadership qualities that let him rally his surroundings.

"If we meet directly face-to-face, I'll win".

If this keeps up, then Sudou's goal of being 1st across the entire school year will only grow ever distant. Especially since there's no telling what the outcome will be for the team competitions.

It's cause for anxiety.

"Next up is the fourth group, please prepare yourselves".

Having been called out by the referee, I entered the same course from before. On the second course I could see the figure of Kanzaki.

"We're up against each other right away it seems".

".....go easy on me".

"I've heard that you're quite fast from Ichinose".

I don't know where Ichinose got that idea from.....but looking back I can think of one instance. I suppose she saw me running back when Sakura got caught up in that incident. It's not like I was running at my top speed but from my form and such, it's very likely that she guessed my physical ability as well. Besides that, back when I entertained myself by playing with Ichinose at the pool she had been observing me. It can't be helped that she'd mark me during all the exams and incidents up until now.

"That's misinformation. Didn't you see my rank in the 100 meter dash earlier? It's 5th place, you know".

"That is indeed the result, but it didn't seem to me like you were taking it seriously".

"There's no advantage in holding back one's ability at this sports festival, right? You'd only lose out that way".

"The probability of it is low but it's not like doing so is completely meaningless from a strategic point of view".

It looks like Ichinose and Class B have conducted reconnaissance, observed and then made their guess. For an existence like mine, even if I took first place it's not only my rank but the process leading up to it that they'd take into account.

"Besides, even amongst the same school year, you're a pretty calm man. That type of person is scary after all".

"Well, please think of it as you wish".

We were still in the middle of our conversation but since a boy from Class C got between us, our conversation was cut short. Except for Kanzaki, it doesn't seem like there are any prominent faces in the fourth group.

It'll be an error if my rank rises by even a bit.

At the same time as the starting signal, I started running at about the same pace as before.

As expected, Kanzaki overtook a person but since there's only that one student running in front of me, I ultimately ended up with a good result of 3rd place.

There are combinations to consider too but for better or for worse, it seems like I can maintain this inconspicuous position.

"...haa, good grief.....I can't keep up".

As I returned to our camp after having finished with the race, Yukimura was whispering to himself with a downcast expression. From the looks of it, after having finished with the second contest, he wasn't able to get good results.

"Was it bad?".

"Ayanokouji, huh?.....I want to curse this combination. Seventh group and 7th place....".

So this is what they call a booby prize. He's been driven into considerably

bitter circumstances.

"It depends on your mindset. If it's Yukimura, even if you fall to the lower ranks, there won't be any trouble for you on the tests right?".

"I won't get a failing grade. But there's still no change to the fact that my scores will plummet. Besides, this result will be a liability for the class and the team too....".

It seems the man aiming for Class A more than anyone else, also bears responsibility more than anyone else too. It's probably because he disparages students of low academic ability like Sudou and the others with a strong tone usually that he doesn't want to show any weakness now.

It'll be uncouth for me to say anything more and so I slightly took my distance from him.

I focused on the girls' competition. The opening is with Horikita and Sakura, two people I know well. Horikita, who was expecting to win, felt no pressure as she stood at the starting line.

On the other hand, although it sounds bad when I put it into words, Sakura, whose expectation is zero, appeared nervous.

"Horikita-san, it seems like this pairing isn't too good".

"Is that so?".

Hirata, who knew the other classes well, said so after seeing the pairing. The contest will begin soon after.

"In Class C, the ones said to be the fastest are Yajima-san and Kinoshita-san from the track and field club and they're here".

"I see...".

Horikita, in the first 100 meter dash, had been able to dominate the fierce battle against Ibuki but her trials continue on.

"Certainly, it looks like winning's going to be tough".

Horikita snapped forth and sprinted and leaped but the two of Class C went ahead of her.

Then, left without any chances, Horikita finished the contest in 3rd place as a result.

Hirata received that result and turned to face me. It's not an eye contact made in response to Horikita's defeat. It's because he felt a strange sense of unease with the pairings in this race.

3

The next contest up is 'capture-the-flag'. It's a simple yet rough and slightly dangerous team competition.

"We're definitely winning, you guys. Since that idiot Kouenji isn't here, we've got to be that much more fired up!" Sudou shouts.

He encourages all the boys from both Class D and Class A assembled in front of him.

On the other hand, the ones that Sudou's group will be facing are the boys of Class B led by Kanzaki and Shibata as well as the boys of Class C led by Ryuuuen. In particular, there are students in Class C that, while unknown, appear to be strong.

There's Sakazaki and Komiya, who were both involved in the quarrel with Sudou a while back, and there's also the brawny half-Japanese half-black student named Yamada. I've seen him around occasionally at school but I wonder how strong he is. Whether there are plenty of or not enough students in each class, right now there's nothing to do but fight after taking our current forces into account.

The rules of the match dictate that the group that makes two captures wins. During their discussion earlier, Katsuragi and Hirata have decided that their classes will be alternating between offense and defense.

They must have determined that splitting up into offense and defense here is a highly risky move. This way it's easier to understand as well as to cooperate. Class D will go on the offense first while Class A have the role of protecting the flag. If this formation allows us to successfully get a headstart then the plan is to not change roles.

"Well, don't worry about it. Even if I'm alone, I'll beat down our enemies".

"Not the people, we're after the flag though.....?".

I said that to him as I've gotten slightly worried after all.

"I can't guarantee that. I'm pissed off because of Kouenji. Grr".

Perhaps he intends on attacking them as he was frank with his hostility. Sudou gave the middle finger to our opponents.

"I'd better keep my distance.....".

Scared of getting involved, Ike and the others slowly backed away from Sudou. That's wise of them.

The attacking team (mainly Sudou) waited impatiently at the front for the whistle that signalled the start of the match. On the other hand, the defending team consisting of Katsuragi and the others are repeatedly checking their formation and building solid defenses.

Naturally, blatant acts of violence like punching and kicking are prohibited but a certain degree of entanglement would probably be overlooked by the school.

A lot of grabbing and pushing is anticipated.

"Uuu---somehow I'm starting to get nervous. Capture-the-flag is a first for me.....".

"Haven't you played it before at your middle school's sports festival?".

"I wasn't told that it'd be a dangerous competition. Have you played it before, Ayanokouji?".

"No....this is a first for me too".

"What the hell? So it's a first for you too".

In the middle of this stale conversation, the signal that marks the match's start rang. And Sudou charged in ahead of everyone else.

The more proactive members followed after him.

"This is bad, let's go Ayanokouji! I'd rather not get killed by Sudou for lazing off after!".

Ike, Yamauchi and I, the ones not suited for conflict, followed slowly behind the more proactive group. Much like us, the BC coalition has also divided its classes up cleanly between offense and defense.

It may be an obvious thing to do given that cooperation between them is more difficult than it is for the DA coalition. In the first round, it seems like it's going to be Class B defending the flag on their side.

The folks from Class B wait up ahead.

By the way, it's forbidden for an attacking team to interact with another attacking team.

At the very most, the rule is that the attacking team must necessarily attack the defending team.

"Anyone who wants to die, bring it on!".

Saying something outrageously dangerous like that, Sudou tore into the opponent's defending team. Then, with a height and power that makes it hard to believe he's a 1st year high school student, he tears away at the students around the flag one by one.

"Stop---! Stop Sudou---!".

A portion of the defending team surrounds Sudou, accompanied by those screams from Class B.

"Hey you guys, follow quickly! I'll clear the way for you!".

Sudou shouts out to the advancing group following from behind him without looking back. However, things aren't that simple. The situation gradually became chaotic, almost like a battlefield, and clouds of dust rose up.

I relied on the Class B students to overcome that situation without being useful nor a hindrance.

"Shit, just how many's going to charge at me!".

Three or four male students pushed back at Sudou with their bodies and even his strength was surpassed.

On the other hand, the advancing group too, on the brink of being able to break through, was suddenly cut off. The problem with Class D is that despite having the penetrative offensive power of Sudou, there is almost no one else with that kind of strength. In contrast, Class B had many students who possessed above average strength. Especially the unaggressive ones like me and the Professor, without contributing to the offense, inevitably end up becoming a liability to it instead.

"This is bad, Ken! It's Class A! That half, Yamada or what's his name, is going on a rampage!".

"Huh!?".

As he turned back towards that voice, the Red Team's flag that Class A had been protecting was now slightly slanted. Since Class C is full of violent people like Sudou...no, students who are almost like fighters, it was an easy task for them to penetrate through our defenses.

If we have a scuffle against each other, it's clear who has the advantage and who's at a disadvantage.

Besides, if Ryuuen had ordered them to attack us, it would probably become a desperate struggle. We need to do something but Sudou, who's the vital one, is also being obstructed by four of five people and can't do a thing. We were completely locked down. Of course, it's already rather impressive that we're facing off against that many people though. Sudou desperately tries to make a move towards the flag, but cruelly enough, the whistle rang.

Ultimately the White Team easily ended up completing one capture.

"Ahh, shit! What the hell are you guys doing!? Put your backs into it!".

Glaring at the cruelly toppled flag, Sudou turns his wrath towards the Class D that could not mount an offense.

"Even if you say that....those guys are pretty strong you know? Oww....I've got a graze".

"It's just a flesh wound, right? Bear with it, you've been snapping at them and kneeing them, you're useless!".

I understand the feeling but both of those are a step away from being foul play and disqualification.

"It can't be helped that they won one round. Next time let's protect it properly ourselves".

Gently patting Sudou's shoulder and once he had calmed down, Hirata sets the fallen flag back up.

"Tch...we're definitely going to protect it, you guys get it!?".

"W-We get it---. We'll do what we can---".

"Not just what you can, we're definitely protecting it. No matter if it's for an hour or two hours!".

If there's something else Class D is lacking in, it would have to be unity and motivation. Those two. This includes me too, but aside from a few students, the rest don't have any kind of ambition.

In regards to that, Class B from earlier who were on the defense had both high unity and motivation and as such, were formidable enemies.

"Ayanokouji, don't let that flag fall even if you die! Because you're still 2nd in the class after all!".

For the record, since I'm next up in strength after Sudou, I'll have to protect the flag alongside him.

I can't carelessly slack off now that I'm being watched by Sudou, who himself was stoutly defending the flag.

"Don't mess with me, I won't let them have an easy consecutive win. I'm going to beat that bastard Ryuuen down".

Speaking of which, during the first round earlier, Ryuuen who had been part of the attacking team, only played the role of an observer. It's because they were already dominating without even needing him to join in. Sudou probably couldn't stand that fact.

"Come out, C. Come out, C".

Sudou continuously whispers that but honestly, it'll prove difficult if the power centric Class C were to assemble and come after us. I think it'll be easier on us if it's Class B attacking us.

As both sides complete their preparations, the start of the second round is at hand. Now then---

"They're here, they're here. They've come!".

Apparently things didn't go the way I had hoped and it ended up going Sudou's way. Building up to an attack, strong students from Class C glared at us. Then the leader who brought that class together as one, Ryuuen, also laughed boldly from the rear.

Almost like he's a tactician commanding the battlefield and along with the signal to start the match, he gave them the order to charge.

It was most likely a simple instruction.

Beneath the words 'topple it' were the soldiers frightened by his tyranny into taking offensive action. Students with huge bodies similar to Sudou's, looking like they're the sports club type, came charging in.

They attacked us like an advancing wall without rushing it.

Screams rose up from the Class D students all over the place. The defending students making up the outer wall are slowly diminishing in numbers.

"Stand up! Grab their legs and pull them down!".

Sudou's unreasonable words of encouragement were drowned out by the angry bellows of our opponents.

Class C repeatedly used elbow strikes that almost wandered into foul play territory and in no time, they broke through to the inner wall. Katsuragi and the others from Class A have also advanced to the point that they could almost touch the flag but I wonder if they'll make it in time.

"Guah!?".

I could hear a voice of agony from Sudou, who was supporting the flag just in front of me. The half named Yamada had made his way up close to Sudou. His physique far surpasses Sudou's.

The flag we were protecting is now slightly slanted.

"Who the hell punched me in my stomach!?".

Apparently, during the chaos, someone had attacked Sudou directly. Furthermore, it wasn't just once or twice as voices of pain and anger become mixed. But for Sudou, who has to hold the flag with both his hands, he was left unable to do anything about it. All he could do was to turtle up and bear with it.

"It hurts, I said it hurts you bastard!".

Just by fighting with his voice alone, Class C showed no signs of ceasing their actions. Sudou kneels down in pain. But even so, I'd like to praise that fighting spirit of his that still tried to protect the flag.

Someone then stepped barefoot onto Sudou's back. Then, as though asserting his dominance, he crushed Sudou's back underfoot with all his strength.

"Gah!?".

Even in the midst of all this jostling during the match, it was a fiendish blow that capitalized on his blind spot. It goes without saying that the one responsible for it was Ryuuuen.

"You. Bastard! Guh!".

He was once again stepped on without any hesitation to the point I had thought his spine had been broken.

As Sudou collapsed from that blow, now having lost its support, the flag collapsed after kicking up a cloud of sand.

In the blink of an eye, the outcome was decided.

While collapsed on the ground, Sudou glared up at the man who had stepped on him, Ryuu'en.

"Hah, hah. You bastard...that was foul play!".

"Hmm? So you were there? I didn't notice".

Saying that without a trace of fear, he pulled the flag up. Sudou tried to chase after him but it seems his back is still hurting quite a bit as he wasn't able to stand back up.

The DA coalition suffered a great defeat.

"Is your back ok?".

"Kuh...somehow....shit, shit!".

Greater than his pain was the anger at having been the victim of an unreasonable foul play attack that he could not hold back.

"That pompous bastard, if I run into him again I'll punch his lights out.....!".

"You'll end up causing another uproar. Do you want to go through that again?".

By that, I mean the incident where Sudou got into a fight with Class C and almost got disposed of. Furthermore, if it's Sudou who initiates it then this time he will receive punishment for it.

"So it's fine when he does it and it's not when I do!? Look at the marks on my back!".

"I get what you're trying to say but it'll just be seen as an action that naturally happened over the course of the match".

Ryuuuen and Sudou, they're both trying to do the same thing but there is an overwhelming difference in their technique.

This time, it was an action that took place while students were all mixed up during the contest and clouds of sand were being kicked up everywhere. Either way, he picked a good time and method to attack.

"Ahh this is pissing me off! To think I was planning on winning every contest!".

From the irritation he felt towards Ryuuuen, he turned towards the disappointing Class D and Class A and blatantly voiced his displeasure.

Since Class A also heard it, a few of them returned the glare.

Some of them tried to retort but Katsuragi reined them in and things didn't come to that.

"Sorry for being useless.....".

"Me too. It's also because we couldn't protect it properly. Let's try hard next time".

Only Katsuragi and Hirata calmly accepted the outcome and for now we decided to disband and return to our own camps.

war. Meanwhile, the ball-toss game for the 1st year girls was also steadily ongoing. The exhausting team competitions continued. I didn't pay much attention to it at first but this is quite an arduous order of doing things.

"Just now, how big of a gap do you think formed.....?".

"I don't know. It's just begun, there's no use in thinking about it".

"That's true but.....a loss is a loss, they're a step ahead of us right?".

Perhaps he couldn't stand the fact that he lost since Sudou was fidgeting while he watched the girls' match.

"It'll be good if the girls can win at least.....".

It's unclear since looking at it from a distance, the outcome of the ball-toss game is difficult to discern. I think it's just that contested since it seems to be quite a close match.

Soon after, as the match ended, the teacher in charge counted up the points one after another while throwing the balls.

"54 in total, the Red Team wins".

Thanks to the girls, the disappointing results of the boys' capture-the-flag match was cancelled out.

The relief we felt at that announcement was transient, as the referee called out to us and began explaining tug-of-war to us.

"Alright, let's go.....!".

"Is your back alright, Ken?".

"My body's tougher than others after all. Besides, there's nothing I can do

even if it hurts anyways".

Even as we were worried about him, Sudou stood up with vigor. The rules for tug-of-war are extremely simple and about the same as capture-the-flag.

"If we can make a comeback in tug-of-war, then we can overturn the team competitions. Besides, if it's tug-of-war then there'll be no contact during the match so the other side will also be forced to compete using their strength alone. It shouldn't turn into an absurd fight".

Hirata, who always fretted over Sudou and his surroundings, called out to him like that. Sudou nodded in response.

"I guess so.....that's why we can't lose".

It's purely strength vs. strength. Wits vs. wits. Now then, which side will prove superior? As the four classes gathered in the middle of the ground split up into two, they were divided between the left and the right camps. As Katsuragi came over to Hirata, he quietly whispered to him.

"Just like we discussed, we'll use our strategy to beat them in a single stroke. Got it?".

"Yeah. I understand. Everyone get in position".

Under the leadership of those two, the DA coalition has been thinking up a strategy like it did during capture-the-flag. As Hirata gave the instruction, Class D simultaneously scattered and took up our positions.

The strategy itself is extremely simple and consists of just 'lining up based on our heights'. By doing so it allows us to uniformly and orderly apply our strength properly to the rope.

Of course this will be noted by the opposing team as well but even if the BC coalition attempts to imitate us, they wouldn't be able to line up in order of

height in such a short time.

However, a problem emerged for the DA coalition before any of that. Contrary to Class D, who were attempting to line up as such, almost half of the boys in Class A made no move at all.

"Hey, Katsuragi-kun. I'd rather you not arrogantly take charge forever---".

Such a voice could be heard and without even having to look.

".....what do you mean, Hashimoto".

The student named Hashimoto took a step forward. He's a tall, aloof man with his long hair swept behind the back of his head. He had a meek expression on his face but his eyes were those of someone mocking his opponent.

"It's exactly what it sounds like. Isn't it your fault that Class A is currently stalling? Can you say with certainty that this strategy will allow us to win?".

A student has appeared to directly oppose the leader, Katsuragi.

From Katsuragi's heightened state of alert, I doubt this student named Hashimoto is acting alone. But---the timing is strange. While our allies focused on Katsuragi and Hashimoto, I looked back towards our camp and searched for Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi, who had been there observing us from the start as a visitor, had a small smile of enjoyment on her face. Even from a distance, she should be able to see that the boys were quarrelling.

But the fact that she's still smiling despite that could only mean one thing.

It's that the one who created this situation is not Hashimoto, it's Sakayanagi. I had wondered what kind of trap she would be setting but to think it wasn't for

the other classes, but rather, for Class A.

I wonder if it means she's only intending on crushing Katsuragi, her opposition. But this is far too inefficient. This is eerie in a different sense from Ryuuen.

"So what's it going to be, Katsuragi-kun? Can we really win with this strategy?".

Despite the betrayal of his comrades, without being thrown into disarray from it, Katsuragi answered that.

"We're agitating even the students from Class D. We should proceed with the contest calmly".

"That's not an answer---".

Katsuragi tried to calm them down but about half of the students following Hashimoto's lead did not obey.

"Katsuragi-san's telling you lot to do it, so hurry it up! Don't give us this shameful act!".

In the midst of that, Yahiko from the Katsuragi faction raised his voice towards the Sakayanagi faction and forcibly handed the rope to one of the boys.

"I have no intention of refuting the doubts you feel towards my leadership. But if we lose here due to our meaningless squabbling, before things like cooperation and skill come up, the blame will fall on Sakayanagi, you don't mind that then?".

"You don't see anything, do you, Katsuragi-kun?".

Hashimoto sniggers. As the teacher acting the role of the referee approached us, as though to warn us for our lateness, Hashimoto gripped the rope as though he had arrived at the designated position.

"Then, shall we? It'd peeve me if we make them think we're lacking in unity as you said".

For now, Class A's civil war seems to have simmered down and so we also get into position.

"They're a savage bunch, those Class A guys".

"I'm really worried. They may be just a bunch of nerds".

Even to Sudou, who had just been watching, the abnormality of Class A's conflict had been highlighted. Either way, our two classes intermingled and lined up in order of our heights.

Then finally, Sudou, who had absolute confidence in his strength, was placed furthest back.

On the other hand, since the BC coalition are not cooperating, they ended up dividing their forces up cleanly on basis of their class. Class B is taking charge of the rope up front but compared to the DA coalition that's lined up in order of height in descending order from the front, they've adopted the complete opposite strategy. But since Class C is lining up randomly, starting from their center, it fell apart. At the end of the line, for what it's worth, well-built students were holding the rope but...I can't shake the feeling that it's backasswards.

"Heh, for Class B to put the big ones in the front, they just don't get it".

"No, that's not always the case. When pulling the rope, it's advantageous if it's from an elevated position".

Since cooperation between the two classes is impossible, Class B is instead aiming to secure their advantage when it comes to holding the rope.

"Even so, it doesn't change the fact that we still have the high ground. Let's go, you guys!".

Sudou shouts that out and along with the signal that heralds the match's start, we each pulled on the rope.

"Heave-ho! Heave-ho!".

Then, with a shout that seemed like routine, the DA coalition that has achieved basic cooperation with one another pulled on the rope with vigor. At first it seemed as though we had reached an equilibrium but after a few seconds, the flow changed to favor us in one go.

"Oraoraoraora! Easy, easy!".

Before long, along with the signal, the DA coalition's victory was conveyed.

"Alright! Did you see that!? Serves them right!".

Sudou repeatedly roars. As a result of the outcome, Class B confronts Class C with blatant discontent.

"Hey---it'll be real bad if we don't cooperate you know? Those guys are really strong".

Representing his class, Shibata calls out to Ryuuen but Ryuuen didn't even bother with him.

"Alright you lot, it's time to rearrange. Line up starting with the smallest one in front".

Ryuuuen gave orders to the chaotic Class C and had them line up with the shortest student at the front and gradually adjusted it so that the heights increased. Precisely in the shape of a bow.

It appears they have no intention of taking Class B's opinion into account, only doing as they please.

After Shibata shook his head in exasperation, he encouraged his comrades in Class B and grasped the rope.

"This one's in the bag. With an arrangement like that, they can't possibly win".

"We can't say that for sure. Everyone, don't let your guard down. The next round won't go the way it did before".

Katsuragi advises the other students, including Sudou.

"Why though? It was easy. It's not like they're lining up in order of decreasing height like we are".

Ike grips the rope even as he frivolously makes light of the situation. Katsuragi tried to continue speaking, but the interval ended and preparations were underway to resume the match.

And so, the second round began.

"Heave-ho! Heave-ho!".

The DA coalition tugs on the rope just as they did in the first round. However, facing a resistance that was clearly different from before, they start to lose their bearings bit by bit.

Even as they pulled and pulled, their position didn't change and feelings of anxiety began to close in.

"Hey, you lot better persevere. If we simply lose then I'll have you lynched".

Along with that carefree warning from Ryuuen, an intense force was applied to the rope and our side was dragged in.

It can't possibly be that their strength surged from just that one command alone.

It means that there's something about the bow-like shape that Ryuuen arranged them in that affects the transfer of force.

"Guuh! It hurts, it hurts!".

Screams rose up from Ike and the others who were holding the rope from the rear.

I also happen to be pulling without letting up but just as expected, the resistance is completely different from before. It was pretty much an evenly matched bout of tug-of-war.

I wonder if it was a difference in cognition that brought about the conclusion of the match.

The DA coalition, pulled in bit by bit, ended up being defeated.

Just because they dominated the first round, there were harsh words coming from students who believed that the cause of their defeat in the second round came from within.

"Why the hell is it different from before!? Is someone holding back?".

They tried to look for the offender among each other. Seeing the situation,

Katsuragi immediately followed up.

"Calm down. The cause of our defeat is likely just because the other side took up the right formation. Of course, it's also a fact that there are students among us who took the second round for granted as well. They should get it now. That even if the opponent's teamwork is in tatters, they are still capable of putting up a fight. Focus, recover and along with that, please check your positions once again. Then also, when pulling on the rope, remember to do it at an angle".

Katsuragi realigns everyone again after handing out accurate advice as well as reprimands. He's doing the best he can in what little time he has. On the other hand, as for the opposing team, although they weren't able to achieve cooperation between the two classes, each class is individually united. There's Class B that's surely focusing on the tug-of-war and Class C, that's on standby behind them. But if Ryuuken gives his order, then those students will also certainly be roused.

"Al~right, you guys did pretty well yourselves. We just have to do the same thing again one more time. Let's teach those pieces of trash who think they're going to win who's the boss".

I suppose I should say it's impressive that without having any specific tug-of-war techniques conveyed to us, as a class we're still able to properly produce results.

When both sides were ready, the third and final match commenced.

The shouting resumed for the third time.

"Heave-ho! Heave-ho! Pull!".

Just like the second round, the result wasn't decided right away. The white

flag swayed at the center line without moving.

"Keep at it, you guys. We're definitely winning this tug-of-war!".

As though acting in unison from Sudou's shout from the rear, everyone worked together to pull on the rope.

"Heave-ho! Heave-ho!".

No matter how strong the other side is, victory or defeat isn't decided purely by strength alone when it comes to tug-of-war. The white flag began to lean slightly towards the DA coalition's side.

"Don't let up! One more pull! Puuuullll!".

It was Sudou's all out last ditch effort. That put an end to it in an unexpected manner. It should have been a close fight but the resistance we faced up until now loosened up to an unbelievable extent and everyone's bodies fell backwards. The match ended with us being unable to stop our own momentum and falling one after another.

Not quite understanding what had happened, starting with Sudou, most of the students began to show their anger while still collapsed. Judging from the results, it's clear that the situation was caused by our opponents letting go of the rope.

"What the hell are you doing? Are you fucking around?".

Perhaps this situation was also unexpected for Class B, as a few of their students had also fallen.

Eventually, attention was directed at the class where no one had fallen.....attention was directed towards Ryuuen and his group.

"I decided to give it a rest since I thought we couldn't win".

It appears near the end, Ryuuuen and the rest of Class C all let go of the rope at once.

"Good for you, picking up such a trashy win. It was quite fun seeing you all groveling".

Even as he lost the match, Ryuuuen laughed while looking like he enjoyed the match more than anyone else.

"You bastard!".

If you look at this situation alone, you wouldn't be able to tell which one's the winner here.

As Sudou, who had been at the line's rear end, stood up, he tried to charge at them since he had already been angered by the capture-the-flag incident. However Katsuragi, who had been in front of him, panickedly grabbed his arms to stop him.

"Stop it, Sudou. This is also part of Ryuuuen's strategy, his aim is to provoke us and make us waste our stamina. Besides, by instigating violence, he may be aiming to win via foul play".

"But!".

"Certainly, what they did was unsportsmanlike but it's not in violation of the rules".

Katsuragi is skillfully controlling the out-of-control Sudou.

So he's not in Class A for nothing. Perhaps he had judged that further

provocation wouldn't yield him any results, since Ryuuken turned his back on us.

"Alright get up, you lot".

Class C got back up right away. Class B also probably wanted to complain.

"It appears we were lucky. Because we don't have to work together with Class C".

Katsuragi said so as though he were relieved and patted Sudou on his shoulder.

"We won, but I don't feel refreshed at all, shit".

I can understand the grumbling Sudou's feelings. We finally won in the team competition but due to Ryuuken's cunning trick, it put a damper on that.

Despite wanting to celebrate, a gloomy feeling hangs above us. Even though they lost, it's not like they didn't gain anything from their fall. The tug-of-war ended and we returned to our own tents.

On the way back, Katsuragi came over to Hirata and quietly whispered an apology to him.

"Sorry about earlier. It's my fault for being unable to control my class".

"You don't have to worry about it. I think we too, let our guard down during the second round. Right?".

Hirata sought the same opinion from me and so I nodded.

"Class A also surprisingly has it tough, huh?".

".....yeah".

It seems he doesn't want to go into detail about it, since Katsuragi didn't deny it but also did not speak further on it. The only thing certain is that he appears to be in quite a difficult spot.

Meanwhile, Sudou and the others shifted their mind to the next contest.

"Next up is the obstacle course race. I'll knock out anyone who gets disappointing results".

"Ugeh. Why do we have to be hit~?".

"It's because I'm the leader. That means I need to kick the common people's asses. It's really difficult".

I don't think anyone wants such a leader but you just can't strongly repel Sudou like that.

"I'll be asking this just in case for reference but....up to what place would you consider disappointing?".

"Isn't it obvious? I won't accept anything other than victory".

"Harsh---!".

"Hah, hah....I did my best and I'm still only 6th place! I-Is Ken done with his match? Fuu".

Ike breathes heavily as he fell on his knees. He probably dreads the prospect of Sudou coming back.

"I don't reckon he'll get something like 4th place will he.....?".

It's not like I don't understand the desire to wish for something like that. If Sudou doesn't win, then surely he wouldn't punish the rest too. Sudou, whose results they're curious about, will have his turn in the final obstacle course race.

"What place did you get, Ayanokouji? Is it the death penalty for you?".

"I barely scraped 3rd place".

"Geh. Seriously? Saved by the lineup---".

Going along with Sudou's farce all the time.....in the first place getting punished seems like it'd be troublesome. I tried putting in just a little effort.

"It looks like Sudou-kun'll be going up against Shibata-kun".

"Ahh, looks like it".

Near Sudou, Shibata was waiting around while performing warm-up exercises. A formidable opponent has come forth.

"Haaaaah!? That Ken, he's up against Nomura and Suzuki again. That's unfair!".

However, at the same time, Ike was vexed after seeing Sudou's opponents in the contest other than Shibata and that lucky lineup.

Certainly, it's lucky to consecutively encounter those two from Class C who are said to be unathletic. Other than those guys, the students from Class A are neither good nor bad and with this, Sudou's victory is all but assured.

I understand why he'd lament it but Shibata is something else entirely.

If it's Shibata, who's said to be the fastest runner in Class B, he's sure to put up a fight for 1st place. In the two contests leading up to this, he's taken 1st place in both.

"Which one do you think's going to win?".

I asked for Hirata's opinion, since he knew Shibata well.

"I'm not sure. I know quite well that Shibata-kun's fast so I don't think he'll be going down easily. If it's a purely straightforward match then I have a feeling it might be Shibata-kun but...Sudou-kun was able to overcome the obstacles without much difficulty during practice after all. It's shaping up to be a really good match".

From Hirata's perspective, he's unable to tell which one of them would win since he knew both of them well.

Sudou himself believes there's no way he could possibly lose. It'd be good if his pride doesn't affect his run. But leaving aside my worries, the person himself awaited the start signal.

Once the runners in front finished with their race, the curtains rose on the final race.

Both Sudou and Shibata had a near simultaneous good start and they headed in the direction of the first obstacle: the balance beam. Sudou, though tall and possessing a large physique, was nevertheless able to cross over the narrow balance beam faster than anyone else could. His movement showed off his incredible sense of balance. Shibata came in at second place.

Despite his slight lateness, he also safely crossed the balance beam.

Sprinting a short distance immediately after, they crawled through the net that

had been placed on the ground. Sudou, who advanced like a wild beast, only looking ahead of him. And Shibata, who seemed to be having fun chasing after him. The last obstacle was a sack, or to put it in a trendier way, it's to place both your legs in the sack and hop. Here, Sudou overcomes it once again with a nimbleness unbefitting of his physique but Shibata, hot on his tail, closes the distance between them.

"This is today's closest match".

Both seem to be evenly matched and both were trying to up their tactics. Shibata's followed him this far without either catching up or being shaken off. Sudou, who realized that existence, started to rush for the first time.

He probably heard hopping sounds behind him.

However, the lead he had created at the start still remained and with a difference of about a meter, he cut the tape and took 1st place. I suppose going all out had its effect on him, since even from a distance, I could tell that Sudou was breathing hard.

Sudou and Shibata were both evenly matched when it comes to speed. No, just like Hirata said, if it comes down to speed alone then Shibata may have been the superior one. Depending on the contest and the timing, I guess Sudou isn't invincible either.

In any case, Sudou has impressively secured 1st place three times consecutively. He's unmistakably one of our school year's best.

Sudou, who dazzlingly returned, began to act bullishly towards Ike, who shrank back.

"I was watching, Kanji, you were 6th place weren't you!?".

"Y-You almost didn't get 1st place too just now, did you? We're in the same boat!".

They were definitely not in the same boat at all. By saying unnecessary things like that, Ike got pinioned.

"I took 1st place. Well, that Shibata guy was pretty fast too though. I beat him".

Dropping Shibata down to 2nd place after he had secured 1st place twice in a row was a good sign for Sudou, who's aiming to be the best amongst our school year.

6

We didn't even have time to rest as we had to prepare for the three-legged race. On the other hand, the obstacle course race for the girls had turned stormy from the very first round.

Horikita had endeavored earlier to compensate for the results as she separated herself from the Class C duo right away from the start.

"I've seen this earlier before".

"Looks like she's in the same group as Yajima-san and Kinoshita-san again".

Horikita possesses high potential for not just sports but also in her studies and various assorted things. However, it's no easy task to beat someone who specializes in something.

As the match started, Kinoshita darted forward. She made it to the balance

beam before anyone else and forcibly created distance between herself and those following behind.

Yajima's in second place. And Horikita following them is how the match started out. Unlike the 100 meter dash or the hurdle race which purely tests only one's speed and stamina, there are various unknowns involved in the form of obstacles and so the gap did not widen as much as you'd think.

After passing the balance beam, the gap had shrunk to the point they were almost lined up beside one another.

"Looks like there's a chance for her, this time".

Nearby, Sudou's also cheering Horikita on and he grips his hands tight as he watches over her. By the time they had crossed through the net, Horikita had taken the lead at last.

However, Kinoshita is also a fast runner. Taking advantage of the distance between obstacles she closes in and shortens the gap. Then she takes second place back for herself.

Yajima's position as first place probably won't be threatened. Horikita sprints at her best to try and steal second place away. Horikita closes in on Kinoshita the moment she lost her balance slightly upon reaching the sacks.

Then, the moment she passed her, she began sprinting with all her might and shook her off.

The difference between them was 1 or 2 seconds it seems. Horikita runs at full speed for the remaining 50 meters. By the way, perhaps she was worried about Kinoshita closing in on her from behind, as she flickers her gaze back and forth repeatedly.

That might have caused her to stall as once again, Horikita and Kinoshita lined up beside one another. In the very next moment, both Horikita, who had been attempting to outrun Kinoshita, and Kinoshita who was in pursuit, ran into each other and mutually collapsed.

"Woah!? Hey, something big's happened!".

I couldn't tell from afar which one ran into the other but it looks as though it happened as a result of their struggle.

While the two of them were getting back up, the others passed them by one after another and in one stroke, they fell to the bottom. Perhaps they weren't able to stand back up immediately, since they were both desperately tried to get back on their feet amidst the clouds of dust. Although they were somehow able to continue with the contest, that incident had a resounding effect to the very end and Horikita came in at a surprising 7th place. The other one who fell, Kinoshita, ended up placing bottom due to the pain in her leg preventing her from continuing with the contest.

She must have her regrets since she ended up like this after going in expecting to place 1st.

And with this it's 1st place, 3rd place and 7th place huh? As far as this match is concerned, there's no other choice but to write it off as an unfortunate incident but.....

".....".

"What's wrong, Ayanokouji-kun?".

"If this 'coincidence' were to occur again, then I may no longer be able to write it off as a mere 'coincidence'".

I brought up the subject I didn't broach earlier on with Hirata.

"As I thought, you think so too? I think the other students are also beginning to gradually realize it too. But for this to happen means---that things are moving in a bad direction, right?".

Unfortunately, his assessment is spot on.

"If there are any students that have caught onto this, can I leave you to care for them?".

"Of course. That's my role after all. But isn't there something we can do.....?".

"It'd be great if there is".

I felt relief seeing Hirata accept the task without a hint of discontent and so I headed over to the girl who seemed dissatisfied.

Horikita had a gloomy expression on her face coming back after her obstacle course race. The situation was clear as day if you look at her walk and posture that conveyed a sense of unease.

"Does it hurt?".

".....just a bit. But not to the extent of affecting the contests. If I rest up a bit I'll be fine".

She put on a tough act like that but from just her sitting down, it looked as though she's having a difficult time. Steeling myself against incurring her wrath, I tried touching the part where I believe the injury lies.

"!?".

"This isn't going to have any effect, you say?".

"Don't touch me. And also, don't mind me. I'll just have to bear with it".

To be in a position where winning is a duty can be painful at times like this. More so for people like Horikita, who pride themselves on being able to produce results.

"Well I guess if you retire then you won't even be getting any points so I do understand your desire to hang in there".

I had thought she would have glared at me for causing her pain but Horikita began to talk about something entirely different.

"More importantly, what concerns me is that girl. It's almost like that contact was done out of malice".

".....and this means?".

"While she was running behind me, that girl called out my name many times over".

So that's why she turned back to look occasionally during the match.

"Of course I thought it was strange. But soon after I turned back to look, we collided with each other and rest went exactly as you saw it. I would have objected but if this were an ordinary collision then she shouldn't have been calling out my name".

Certainly, there's a high likelihood that this was a surprise attack.

"Honestly, I can't keep up with it.....to think we're still in the middle of all this.....".

Taking the entire school into account, Horikita would be the third person to be injured.

There was a 2nd year who fell during their race and had to withdraw due to their leg injury but in their case, there's nothing in particular to worry about since it was an isolated incident.

"Rather than worry about me, you should be more worried about yourself. Your results are worse than mine right?".

Horikita, who took 1st place, 3rd place and then 7th place now due to the collision, currently stands at 30 points. I'm standing at 27 points. Close as it may be, there's no changing the fact that I'm still losing out.

"I'll do my best. But, don't push yourself too, ok?".

"I intend on participating in the contests even if I have to crawl to do it".

Leaving behind Horikita, who said such words, I made a move to prepare for the next contest: the three-legged race.

"How's Horikita-san doing?".

Hirata, having ascertained the situation from a distance, worriedly called out to me.

"It's pretty serious. It looks like it'll affect the subsequent contests".

"That's a severe turn of events".

While we tied the string, we exchanged such little interactions.

Not too long after, the three-legged race began for the 1st year boys. They started one after another. This sports festival is thoroughly being regulated by the school and the contests progressed without any waste. It was a brilliant performance almost on par with scheduled broadcasts.

Since a three-legged race inevitably means that two people end up forming one team, the number of teams that can run at once are a measly four. Sudou, who's in the group starting ahead of us, bottled up his anger and started.

Sudou's partner is Ike.

Normally, that would be considered backassward and highly risky but through a certain method, that combination makes a turn towards victory.

"Dowaaa!".

Screams came pouring out of Ike in the middle of the match. Apparently from the very first step, Sudou's technique burst forth explosively. In a sense, this is the ultimate three-legged race, a surefire way of winning. Sudou, stuck halfway with having to raise Ike up, roared with all his might. In a way, it's close to foul play but just from a glance, it still passes as a three-legged race. He succeeded in securing 1st place while forcibly supporting Ike so as to not let him collapse.

"For how difficult the situation is, Sudou-kun sure is very reliable".

I feel sorry for him that Ike was chosen as his partner but he should be satisfied from having taken 1st place.

"Certainly he's reliable. But if we're talking about winning, then Sudou alone is insufficient".

If I cannot control him, he might as well be a double-edged blade that could end up hurting us.

"Let's follow Sudou-kun".

Along with those words, Hirata started. Fortunately, there were no notable

people running in the same group as us.

Since we were compatible as partners as well, similarly to Sudou, we ended up with the ultimate result of 1st place. Now no one should be complaining.

"Kya---! Hirata-kun's so cool---!".

However, the cheers from the girls directed at Hirata are painful to listen to.....

Then the girls' three-legged race began and in the second round up, the Horikita/Kushida pair began preparing. The pair consisting of Horikita, who's learned to compromise a bit and Kushida, who's all too willing to compromise. The relationship between them is abysmal but since their interests are aligned towards winning there should be no problem.

Now's the time to demonstrate the results of their practice.

They appeared to be making preparations without so much as initiating conversation with each other. From my perspective, knowing their internal affairs, it's truly a bizarre pair but from Class D's perspective, they're a relieving, safe and capable pair.

They had a promising start as 2nd place. Not a bad start and cheers began to rise up.

"Go, Suzune!".

Sudou, who had secured 1st place, let it get to his head and in violation of their promise, called her by her first name but his voice didn't necessarily reach Horikita, he's probably safe.

However, they immediately stalled right after and their ranking fell.

Before I realized, the ones running in 1st place were girls from Class A. It

was a pair led by a girl who vaguely possesses the same aura as Horikita. At that moment, the Class C pair with Yajima in it that were in 2nd place, began their pursuit.

"Something's strange".

"Ahh? What is it?".

Sudou, who's busy cheering, didn't so much as look at me before cutting in like that.

"No...I thought Horikita's movements were rigid".

"...now that you mention it, that's right".

Horikita had always pulled her partner along by force during practice but in the actual event, it appeared as though Kushida is taking the lead. As I suspected, the pain in her leg is affecting her.

I had considered that it's because she's paired up with Kushida but it appears she's received a considerable amount of damage from her fall during the obstacle course race.

She seemed as though she were pushing herself to up her pace but her body's simply not capable of keeping up, that's my impression. Rather than shrink, the gap between 1st place and 2nd place began to widen gradually and Class B that's running in last place began to creep up on them. The two of them appeared to have decided to outrun the others by shifting courses. Their aim is to take up positions in front of Class B to obstruct their path forward.

Class B also tried to undauntedly give them the slip but since their speeds were almost equal to one another, it didn't go well.

Shrill cheers also rose up as the intense struggle over 3rd place occurred. By being too focused on obstructing their path, Horikita and Kushida gave an

opening for a moment which allowed Class B to turn the situation around.

"Uwoooooo, that's disappointing!".

They ran the best they could but they came in at last place. The victory we had expected has now grown distant.

A 10 minute break took place, and people either headed for the toilet or rehydrated themselves. Saying she'd be heading over to the infirmary to apply a compress, Horikita headed into the school building.

Even if it's just pouring water on a hot stone, it's still better than doing nothing I suppose. I didn't go anywhere, and instead remained in our camp while observing the other classes. As far as groups go, it's possible to pick up various sorts of information on them just by observing from a distance. And it was Class A, as I suspected, that proved it.

The twisted relationship between Katsuragi and Sakayanagi was highlighted. Anyone can see with their naked eye that they're clearly divided between two factions. Perhaps neither side has any intention of getting along with the other, since there's barely any contact between them. It is by no means strange for a class to have two appointed leaders. Even in our class, while having Hirata as the primary one, there's still Karuizawa and Kushida and in this case, even Sudou is leading the class. Of course we are changing it up each time but even so, our class is still united as one. We're not fractured to the point that we'd have internal disputes.

However, I could tell that there's blatant antagonism between Class A. It's something we didn't see in the previous exams, it's something that we cannot tell just from the fluctuations in points alone.

"It's impressive they were able to keep up their internal strife up until now".

After all, the Sakayanagi faction has the greater numbers.

Not too long after, as Hirata came over to me after having returned from the restroom, I decided to call out to him.

"Hey, what kind of student is Sakayanagi?".

"I see you're also curious about her, Ayanokouji-kun".

"One would get curious if they heard that she's a leader surpassing even Katsuragi".

What I don't understand is the mindset of the girl named Sakayanagi, the way she is. During this sports festival, she did not issue a single order and continued to keep her silence yet she conspired to take disruptive action against Katsuragi. Not a conflict with the other classes but rather a conflict within Class A. It's to the extent that she seems willing to lose points as long as it allows her to take out Katsuragi. Of course, it's possible that she's instigating this conflict in order to dominate the class.

But normally considering it, the enemy of your enemy would be your friend. First of all, the sane thing to do would be to establish cooperation in order to not lose to the other classes.

"She's very polite, good with people and also mature. That's why I didn't particularly think it was strange. Students from the other classes probably feel the same way too. But, it seems like it's different within Class A. I've heard rumors that she's aggressive and cruel".

There's probably a side we aren't aware of but we can't just take the words of the ones being attacked at face value either. Because we haven't even talked

to her yet. Besides, it's also a fact that messing around is impossible in this sports festival, especially for her. Since her body prohibits her from exercise, she may have no intention of blatantly taking action either.

"I don't think there's any need to be cautious of Class A this time. We're allies after all".

"I guess so".

There's nothing to gain from pulling each other's legs. At the very least, there probably won't be any disruptive acts taken against Class D and I can say with certainty that there haven't been any such acts.

On the other hand, what about Class C? It wouldn't be strange even if they took disruptive action against us. I looked towards the opposing camp. There, as though they were serving a king, male students were clustered around Ryuuen, who was at their center. As of right now, he's the man who fights with strategies most alien.

Even in this sports festival, he's fighting with the intention of closing in on and hurting the other classes mentally and has damaged them that way.

In particular, Sudou has pronouncedly been the recipient of such influence. Besides that, there's all sorts of trickery abound.

Then finally, I wonder how Class B is doing, having to fight against a formidable enemy like Class A while having to work together with Class C, from which a betrayal is possible.

Ichinose and her group, who are always cheerful and optimistic and seek to fight fair-and-square.

At first glance, I felt there have been no deviations from that stance of theirs. From the constant smiles and gestures of various students, I could see that they were enjoying this sports festival from the bottom of their hearts.

After the short break, the order of the contests went in reverse temporarily and the curtains rose on the girls' cavalry battle. The 1st year girls all gathered at the center of the grounds. Of course, it's still a competition between the DA coalition and the BC coalition.

The rules for the cavalry battle are the same for both boys and girls and have a time limit. It's a mechanism set up such that scores are allocated based on the number of enemy horsemen defeated and the number of allied horsemen remaining after a period of 3 minutes. Four horsemen make up one team.

From each class, four horsemen were chosen and it ended up as a 8 vs. 8 match (due to that the surplus students were kept on reserve, treated as emergency substitutes).

One horseman is worth 50 points and each class has one horseman designated as the general and the general horseman is worth 100 points. You can acquire these points even if the opponent is still standing so as long as you can steal away their headband. If we had a peerless warrior it's possible to gain as many as 400 or 500 points in one stroke. By the way, Horikita is one of those in Class D chosen to be the jockey. The ones acting as support underneath her are Ishizaki, Komiya and Kondou. As far as maneuverability goes, they're not too bad.

As for the other jockeys, Karuizawa, Kushida and Mori were chosen.

The problem here is Mori's horse, which is composed of unathletic students. If we're targeted, there is a high possibility that she'd be the first to go down.

By designating that weak horseman as the general, they've adopted the strategy of keeping it out of the fight and protecting it with the remaining three horsemen. Perhaps they're aiming for a counterattack if the enemy attacks them?

Once the start signal is given, the horsemen from Class C and Class B quietly begin to close the distance. Amongst them, as I thought, the one overflowing with motivation was Class C's Ibuki. Ibuki, who happens to be the jockey, issued orders and headed towards Horikita without hesitation. No, it's not just Ibuki.

"O-Oi oi, what the hell's happening!?".

Ike, who had been watching, cried out and beside him, I could see Sudou clench his teeth.

Class C did not attack their other enemy, Class A, at all and did not pay any attention to Class D's general nor the other horsemen either. They only surrounded Horikita's horse. Their objective was all too clear.

Four horsemen attack Horikita. Is their strategy to crush us one after another, or do they think it's fine as long as they defeat Horikita? They're both possible given that Ryuuen is in command.

Outnumbered numerically, the only thing we could count on would be backup from Class A but perhaps they intend to profit from our fight, since Class A only performed feints and showed no signs of openly participating in the fight.

"They're blatantly targeting Horikita aren't they?".

"Shit.....it's probably on Ryuuen's order. That piece of trash!".

"Well, it can't be helped. Horikita is well-known as the person who's holding Class D together".

The importance of crushing the head is the same whether it's war or sports. Ryuuen's tactics aren't half bad. Seeing that situation, the first ones to act in her support were Karuizawa and the cavalry under her command. Shinohara dashed there while supporting Karuizawa, who's the center. However, the one who got in their way was Class B's general horseman, Ichinose.

Unlike Class A, Class B is properly following Class C as they take independent action.

Running into one another, it's Karuizawa vs. Ichinose.

The ones who initiated the attack were Karuizawa and the others.

I suppose that's inevitable, given that they need to settle this as quickly as possible to support the targeted Horikita. The three girls supporting Karuizawa aren't particularly athletic. At best, it's a horse built from cooperation between close friends. On the other hand, Ichinose has utilized Class B's most prominent and talented people for her horse. They weren't afraid of Karuizawa's attack and with a movement surpassing hers, they dodged her attack.

However, despite being able to make a direct attack, Ichinose's movements didn't seem as sharp. In response to her attack, Karuizawa was able to react well and return fire.

The coordination vs. maneuverability match, contrary to expectations, showed signs of dragging on.

"This is a really good match!".

As the audience's excitement soared, the situation besides the two struggling horsemen began to change. Cheers burst forth. While I was busy watching Karuizawa and the others, one of the horsemen had their headband stolen away. It was Horikita. She was attacked simultaneously by four horsemen and no longer able to avoid their persistent attacks, she was finally crushed. She fell off her horse quite flashily and is now collapsed on the ground, trying to raise her upper body back up in frustration. However, in a situation like this, not even Sudou would have stood a chance of winning.

The cause of her defeat lies in Class A, who did not rush to aid her right away.

In any case, it's no use crying over spilt milk. Horikita's defeat marked the onset of a melee. Having lost a horseman and having Class B pursue them on top of it, Class D's unity wavered in an instant. Some fell off their horses and others had their headbands stolen away, and aside from Karuizawa, the other two horsemen resisted in vain before they were defeated.

Karuizawa, who had been fighting against Ichinose, momentarily ended up in an 8 vs. 1 scenario before, at the very end, she managed to steal away the headband from a different Class B horseman through a suicidal resolve and succeeded in ending that fight with a mutual kill. Having lost a horseman, Class C and Class B attacked the remaining Class A and wiped them out. As for the opposing team, they ended up losing only two horsemen as casualties.

Biting back her frustration, Horikita returned to our camp. Sudou calls out to her immediately.

"Don't worry about it. It was hopeless anyways, it's the others' fault for being too slow with their support".

"...it doesn't change the fact that I lost. I was swallowed up by that momentum of theirs".

Certainly, Class C gave off the feeling of obstinately aiming to defeat Horikita.

I had thought this earlier as well but if that's the case, no horseman would have stood a chance either way.

"Leave it to me. I'll go on a rampage and make up for this as well".

Sudou coolly said that. Normally words like this wouldn't even reach Horikita, but in her weak state right now, they seem to have resonated within her.

"I'll be expecting that from you".

It was brief, but she responded like that to Sudou.

"Alright, let's go guys!".

Sudou shouts. The boys' cavalry battle begins. I served the role of the horse on the right side. Sudou stands firm in the middle and Miyake's on the left side. Hirata assumed the role of the jockey and the class's strongest horseman was formed.

A peerless warrior capable of attaining victory even if the allied horsemen were to be defeated.

"Oi Hirata. You focus only on not falling down or having your headband stolen away".

"...so we're using 'that' strategy, right?".

"We were thoroughly beaten during capture-the-flag after all. We're going to win without holding back".

I couldn't see his face, but I knew Sudou must have been grinning. They're probably planning on using that tactic we've practiced over and over again

during our training.

"But I'd like to make a proposal of my own, would that be fine? I was watching the girls' match earlier and I've thought of a way to win. I've already told Katsuragi-kun about it as well. It'll be bad if we keep being crushed each and every time".

The horsemen of Class D followed Hirata's orders and joined up with the horsemen from Class A at the same time the starting signal for the match rang. By becoming almost indistinguishable from Class A, we'd inevitably end up forming a massive cluster. They did abandon Class D to its fate during the girls' match but surely simply losing isn't what Class A wishes for either.

Looking at the situation unfold, the one who assumed the role of Class C's general, Ryuuen, laughed daringly. If fine details like cooperation cannot be achieved, then use broad orders to direct everyone forcibly. Following Katsuragi's orders, eight horsemen from the DA coalition assault the enemy team.

"Just aim for that shitty Ryuuen's head! Raah! Send him flying!".

In an instant, as the match begins across the entire field, Hirata's horse, Sudou, dashes forward with all his strength.

But a horseman from Class B stands in the way of his rampage in the middle. However...

"Don't get in my way!".

Sudou, without stopping, slammed into the enemy horseman's body with all his might and threw him off balance.

"Uwa!?".

The enemy, whose physique is inferior to Sudou's, could do nothing but

collapse, jockey and all.

"How about that, huh!?".

He looks down at them like a wild beast and moves onto his next prey. Normally hitting the body itself would be considered foul play but the school has already confirmed that there's no problem with it rulewise.

The enemy team faltered from that strong impression they received at the very start.

It was a strategy that could not be realized without the physique and personality to go with it. But this aggressive strategy has its drawbacks. Even if we knock down a jockey, it wouldn't count as a stolen headband. Rather, it would be treated as a self-destruct. The 50 points we should have obtained would end up floating away. But even so, if we bet on stealing their headbands, we'd incur a proportionate amount of risk.

That's about right for a Sudou-like strategy. But we cannot let our guard down just yet.

In Class B, there's the manoeuvrable general horseman that Kanzaki and Shibata are a part of and in Class C, there's still the general horseman composed of physically strong power types with Ryuuen as their jockey.

The DA coalition won't stand a chance of winning unless those two are taken care of. It's also eerie how we cannot read Ryuuen's mindset.

"Sudou-kun, let's defeat the ones around us first. Leave Ryuuen-kun for last".

"Huh? Don't say something boring like that! What we should be aiming for is the general's head!".

It's not like I don't understand what Sudou's trying to say through his howls but the wall in front of Ryuuen blocking us is a thick one.

"If we get swept up by our emotions here, that's giving him exactly what he wants. Let's do what's necessary to win in the end".

"Tch---!".

In front of us, two horsemen from Class C begin their attack. Still holding a grudge from when he was stepped on, Sudou resists his urge to attack Ryuuen.

"I get it, first all we have to do is rout these guys right!?".

To defeat these enemies, focus is needed. Hirata reined him in well.

We fell during capture-the-flag before an overwhelming power but this time, things are going differently. Three horsemen from Class B and Class C combined have already been beaten by Sudou, showing an overwhelming difference in power.

Riding that wave, Katsuragi and the other Class A students succeeded in taking down Shibata and Kanzaki's horse despite losing three of their own.

The only remaining enemy is the general, Ryuuen himself. On the other hand, both Hirata and Katsuragi's horses have survived and Class D has an additional horseman remaining, creating the ideal situation.

"Oraora, it's 3 vs. 1 now though? This one's in the bag!".

Exchanging looks, the two horsemen, Katsuragi and Hirata, surround Ryuuen. The other horseman too, while keeping a slight distance, targets Ryuuen.

From the fact that he was able to steal away a headband, I could guess at the strength of Ryuuen's horse to a certain extent but even so, he would still be

overwhelmed by our numerical superiority.

However Ryuuuen did not panic. He wasn't perturbed. Rather, he seemed to be enjoying this desperate situation.

There's no negligence and neither did he seem defeated. That sort of feeling. Hirata and Katsuragi, if the two of them attack simultaneously, even if in the worst case scenario that one of them goes down, the other can still steal away Ryuuuen's headband.

Then our victory will be assured.

It's precisely because the situation is like this that Ryuuuen is able to pierce through the chink in his enemies' hearts.

"I've remembered your name, Sudou. I stepped on you earlier. It seemed painful".

"Keep saying that. I'm going to be beating you down now".

"You sound quite high-and-mighty for a mere horse leg. It feels pretty good looking down on a horse".

"Hah. Just because you're riding on a horse doesn't mean you're all that".

"Heh.....then this is all meaningless unless we go at it one-on-one".

"Ahh?".

"No, I mean, if you're saying you can't beat me unless it's 2 vs. 1 then it can't be helped. But 'winning' basically only holds meaning if you win one-on-one. Or are you going to put on airs after beating me with a pincer attack?".

"What the hell...!".

"Don't, Sudou-kun. It's a bad idea to rise to his provocations. Let's cooperate with Katsuragi-kun".

".....you don't get it".

"You're the one who's not getting it, Sudou. I understand you've taken care of these guys before but back then, you must have mostly been using cowardly tactics right? The comrades I trust would never be beaten by a frontal attack".

Some of those supporting Ryuuen's body also happen to be members of the basketball club who got into trouble with Sudou.

"Don't fuck around. Those guys are trash who can't even fight well".

"You're acting rather bullish even though you have no proof of that. If you're saying that's not true then face me one-on-one. And if you can beat me then, I'll do anything, even if it's prostrating before you".

"...got it. Don't go forgetting those words, Ryuuen! You heard him, Katsuragi. Don't stick your nose in this!".

"What are you talking about? It's sheer folly to let this chance go. We should use a pincer attack to make sure he goes down".

"If you stick your nose in this, I'll destroy your horse".

Apparently he took Ryuuen's cheap bait. He already has nothing in his mind except a one-on-one. He understands well the fact that Sudou always had a bullish personality and is quick to fight.

"So you're determined to do it one-on-one no matter what then, Sudou-kun?.....if we're doing it then let's win".

Hirata already knows Sudou's personality and behavior well. Once he flips his switch, it won't really be turned back off that easily.

Perhaps he had judged that continuing to carelessly try and persuade him otherwise would not be beneficial, as he agreed to the one-on-one.

"Naturally. Hirata, make absolutely sure your headband doesn't get stolen!".

Along with Sudou's forceful signal, the horse proceeds forward. Katsuragi, with a bitter expression, decides to watch the battle unfold. It's because if he interfered, Sudou would attack him even if he happened to be an ally.

Sudou charges forward and performs a body slam. However, the enemy horseman stood firm without being perturbed by it. Their power was equal. At the center of the horse protecting Ryuuen is the half I've been hearing about, Yamada. His strength is amazing. Just as the rumors claim, he's robustly strong.

Sudou clicks his tongue. I wonder if that's his frustration at being unable to overcome them.

Of course, Miyake and I, who supported Hirata from his flanks, could not use as much horsepower as Sudou is using. Suppose Sudou's horsepower is a 10, then the two of us would be a 5.

On the other hand, part of Ryuuen's horse, Yamada, would be a 9 or a 10. The rest of them tough enemies consisting of 7s and 8s.

"Interesting. Hey, bring it on. Or are you going to lose to our Albert in strength?".

Provoking Hirata, Ryuuen beckoned us without even setting any traps beforehand. Up until now, as far as the matches go, Ryuuen's had good fortune with his opponents and in all the individual contests he'd participated in, he's taken 1st place. He's quite athletic.

He observes us after brilliantly dodging Hirata's extended hand.

While supporting Hirata, I looked at the battle against Ryuuen and as far as I can see, we're evenly matched.

It wouldn't be strange no matter which side wins. However, he's only aggressive vocally, as Ryuuen showed no signs of pointlessly attacking us.

He's conserving his stamina and maintaining a ratio of 1 attack for every 3 attacks from Hirata. In short, this battle is just a waypoint for him and he's saving energy for the fight later against Katsuragi and the others, who are currently standing by.

He seems to be absolutely confident that he won't lose. If so, we need to strike at that opening. If we repeatedly attack then an opportunity will present itself to Hirata.

"Not yet, Hirata?".

Sudou said that in a pained voice while receiving most of the attacks coming from the enemy horseman alone.

"Just a little bit more---!".

He extends his arm, mixing a feint into it as well. His arm then bends and finally, managed to grasp Ryuuen's headband. However, what he grasped was only a few centimeters of the tip. He tried his best to pull it further into his hands.

"!?".

Hirata had indeed grabbed ahold of the headband but he didn't make it as far as stealing it away since the headband slipped out of his hands.

"What are you doing, Hirata!? Take it! I'm using up quite a bit of strength

here!".

"Sorry...my hand's a bit slippery!".

While breathing heavily, Sudou once again aims to attack. And Ryuuен fearlessly awaits it.

Compared to Ryuuен, who has yet to launch an offensive resembling an attack, Hirata's only been on the offense so far and he's beginning to breath heavily.

"What's the matter? Is that it?"

"Kuu.....! Sorry, Sudou-kun, fall back for now!".

In accordance with Hirata's shout, we put some distance between us. There's a difference in the consumption of stamina between Ryuuен, whose side hardly moved from that spot and our side that's been performing intense movements. Ryuuен's probably focusing on the upcoming battle against Katsuragi after defeating us.

Sudou, whose knees were trembling, took up his stance again while breathing feebly.

"Make the next one....the last, Hirata. Make sure you absolutely steal it!".

".....I understand. I'll try doing it".

Hirata also calms his breathing and concentrates only on stealing Ryuuен's headband away.

"Give 'em hell!!!!".

Mustering up the last of his strength, he performed a body slam on them but the horse did not collapse. Once again, a fight between the jockeys broke out.

However, Hirata assumed they would not initiate an attack and defenselessly extended his arm. The results that came of it would be well worth the risk taken.

"Got it!".

Straightforwardly and boldly, he reached out. Hirata once again succeeded in grabbing ahold of the headband.

However, once again, the headband slipped out of his hands.

"Wha---!?".

Ryuuuen did not overlook that upset, and his hands reached out to grasp Hirata's headband while he's still in a defenseless position. That hand of his, in the form of a counter, deeply gripped the headband. And forcefully. When he pulled back, the headband fell from Hirata's head all too easily. The moment he sensed that we had lost, Sudou collapsed onto his knees and Hirata fell off the horse.

Hirata's headband was noisily hoisted up.

Immediately after, as though it came from within the field, a warning was issued from the referee.

"Shit!".

Sudou, who was going wild, glared at Ryuuuen as he stood back up. However, if he keeps standing still like that, I don't know what kind of warning he'll receive. I pushed Sudou's back and headed out.

"How regrettable".

Ryuuuen, as though sneering at him, left behind those words. It's still too early to accept defeat though.

The general horseman, Katsuragi, a survivor from Class A, boldly challenged Ryuuen. Katsuragi, who had assumed the role of the horse's head, issued orders to the jockey, Yahiko, and builds up a thorough defense. Now that Sudou's withdrawn, they were able to link up with the remaining horseman from Class D and a 2 vs. 1 situation is realized.

However, just as I had thought they were able to grab ahold of the headband like Hirata did, a similar scenario unfolded where they were unable to pull it off and ultimately Yahiko's headband, along with Class D's headband, were both stolen away.

Despite only utilizing minimal movements, Ryuuen demonstrated marvelous strength and survived to the very end.

As the signal marking the match's conclusion rang out, he took off his headband and swung it around in a display of triumph. Doing that and thoroughly repeating his acts of provocation are also probably a part of his strategy.

"He's the only one I absolutely didn't want to lose to! Pull yourself together, Hirata!".

Because Ryuuen's the one person he didn't want to lose to, Sudou's frustration is at an all-time high today. It's a situation where it wouldn't be strange even if he went on a rampage and tore the place up.

"Sorry, Sudou-kun. That headband was strangely wet and so I couldn't quite pull it off. I thought it was sweat at first but that feels a bit off.....".

Hirata said that and showed us his hands. When I touched his fingertips, I realized he had some kind of clear and sticky fluid stuck on his fingertips.

"That's not sweat".

"Then that means that bastard.....!".

After confirming it by touching it with his own fingers, Sudou approached Ryuuen.

"Oi, that's foul play you bastard! You slathered your headband with something!".

In response to the howling Sudou, Ryuuen fearlessly and boldly replied.

"Ahh? I don't know anything about that. Even if that's so, it's probably just the hair wax. Don't be a sore loser".

He could say it came from his hair when he put on the headband. Perhaps it's because he had been swinging it around after his victory or perhaps it's simply because he'd wiped it on the ground but rather than being drenched, the headband in Ryuuen's hand was only dirtied. It seems the evidence has been erased.

"Sudou, we'll end up causing an uproar here. For now, I think it's better if we returned to our tent".

I could tell that the referee is openly glaring at us. Even if we cause trouble here, we wouldn't be able to prove that Ryuuen had smeared it and as a matter of fact, I do believe he's used hair wax.

If not then it would be a risky move that could result in foul play, something he wouldn't do.

"I know! More importantly, Ayanokouji, you're also at fault here. You need to provide better support more".

Even after returning to our tent, Sudou showed no sign of calming down. I took my distance from him to give him some alone time to cool off.

Karuizawa called out to me and Hirata once we came back from our cavalry battle.

"Hey, Kiyotaka. Isn't this bad?".

"What is? Wait, why did you just call me by my first name?".

"Why you say?.....I've begun to call him Yousuke-kun so I'm doing the same for you too".

Then why are you only dropping honorifics for me? Are you saying I'm even lower than him in your eyes?

I don't even have to think deeply about it.....it's probably just that.

"More importantly, it's about Horikita-san. Isn't she having a hard time for quite a while now? Even during the cavalry battle just now, she was a mess. Even if I try and follow up for her if it's like that, it's just absurd".

"That's right".

Horikita is being tormented by the contests and not just the team competitions but as a whole, her rankings have fallen significantly. The reason for that is an obvious one. Due to her fall during the obstacle course race, her right leg has been injured. One would normally suggest withdrawing but if that were to happen, Class D as a whole would be taking a huge step backwards.

"Well, I don't intend to blame her though. Her opponents are just too much".

Like Karuizawa said, it's not like it's Horikita's fault. Each and every time she keeps running into difficult opponents. No matter what contest it may be, if she keeps having to face students who happen to be the best in their clubs, then naturally winning would prove difficult.

But this is far too biased to write off as a mere coincidence.

"It can't be helped. She's being targeted after all".

"Targeted? So you mean it's not a coincidence that she keeps running into all these amazing people?".

"I can't think of anything but that. You should also know just how athletic she is".

It's not that Horikita is bad, it's just that the opponents she's forced to compete against happen to be superior. However, by consecutively placing bottom, she couldn't help but stand out to both enemies and allies alike.

More so because people have started to take notice of Horikita in particular.

The fact that she was the first one targeted in the cavalry battle only means that they're targeting the root. And in all likelihood, the one who ordered that is---the one conducting himself like a king in the enemy camp, Ryuuuen Kakeru. No one but him would do this.

He's progressively prioritizing attacking Horikita over leading Class C to victory.

"It's what you'd call harassment".

"You're saying someone's harassing Horikita-san...? But, how.....".

"By the way, it's not just Horikita. They know everyone's group numbers for the contests. They fed weak opponents to the more athletic ones like Sudou and Onodera and for the unathletic one like Sotomura, Yukimura and Ike, they had them compete against students who are capable of barely winning. Basically, what it means is that we're being toyed with".

Then there's the fact that it's all students from Class C.

"...the class's information slipped out...the list on the participation table was leaked?".

"That's right. All of this was set up in advance and the information was communicated to Ryuuen".

"That sort of thing.....if I recall, Horikita-san's opponents were always---Yajima-san and Kinoshita-san...does this have something to do with the traitor you were talking about earlier?".

I nodded slightly. I made her understand just how bad of a situation this is.

"That sort of thing...how did you find out....? How should I put it, it would be less strange if you told me you're the traitor.....that's not it right?".

"Unfortunately enough".

Leaving aside the 'who' for now, what's important is that the class's information is being leaked.

Our order of participation in the contests that we agreed on, with Hirata being first on the list, as well as our strategies, all of it is known to Ryuuen. Based on that information, he did two things.

One is to feed weak students to the talented students like Sudou and Hirata. And then he forces unathletic students like Ike and Yamauchi to compete against students who excel in sports beyond the shadow of a doubt in order to rack up wins that way. Of course, we are also taking that into account when coming up with our combinations but since Class C knows everything, they simply wait for us to make our move. That way, there's no mistaking the fact that Class C would produce better results.

The other is his targeting of Horikita. But that has nothing to do with leading his class to victory. He himself, for the sole purpose of crushing Horikita, is sending out powerful pieces to attack and crush her.

As a matter of fact, she's already losing face. If we rank Class D, then Horikita is already sinking to the very bottom of it. These strategies indeed reveal the peculiarities of the man known as Ryuuen Kakeru.

If he truly did not wish for his strategy to be revealed, he could have made sure to switch up the students in detail. However, the fact that he didn't do so would mean that he wishes to shock us by having us catch onto his strategy, it's because his desire to scare us that way is clear.

"So you're not going to help her?".

"How?".

"That's....something I don't know".

"The participation table for this sports festival has already been confirmed. There's nothing we can do about that".

"So you're saying Class D might lose like this?".

"I suppose so".

"Is there nothing we can do?".

"Rather than consult me, I think this is something you should go over with Hirata".

"That's---that's true but...somehow if it's you, I thought you'd be able to think of something.....".

This sports festival is open for public viewing. Unlike the uninhabited island, there aren't very many blind spots. Since we're being watched by a great many people, both teachers and students will find pulling something off without being noticed a difficult task.

You could say that fighting upfront like Ichinose and Katsuragi, or taking a risk and using cowardly tactics repeatedly like Ryuuen are the only methods one can utilize.

Even in Ryuuen's case, from his movements and attitude, I could tell that he committed foul play only after thorough rehearsals and practice. In short, what it means is that most of the results have already been decided from before the sports festival even began.

"What do you think of Horikita?".

"What.....I don't like her. She's conceited and impertinent".

"But you're still worried about her".

"Maybe I saw her as being similar to me".

Targeted, taking concentrated fire and forced into distress. So she's projecting her old, bullied self onto her.

"Right now, Class D is last place right.....? Is there any way left to win?".

"Not to worry. So far everything's going as I predicted".

"So you have been putting some thought into it after all. So? How do we win?".

"Win? I don't intend to win in particular. Right now what's truly important is that we do nothing".

"Ehh?"

Karuizawa opened her mouth agape when I answered like that.

"For this sports festival, just do what you can. By doing that, it'll prove beneficial later".

"What do you mean by---".

As I pondered over how best to escape Karuizawa's interrogation, I suddenly heard an angry bellow.

"I'm seriously going to knock the shit out of that bastard!".

Sudou, who had turned into a demon, walked forcefully towards Class C.

The continuous provocations he received during the team competitions, and Ryuuen's statements that seemed to be targeting Horikita. All of that appeared to have been for the sake of causing Sudou to go on a rampage now.

"I get what you mean, Sudou-kun. But I think we need to stay calm about this. You should know what'll happen if you attack Ryuuen-kun".

Hirata stood in his way to stop him but he forcefully shoved Hirata.

"Shut up! He's the one fucking around here! He's committing foul play!".

"I do think there's a high possibility of it being foul play. But isn't it difficult to prove that?".

The trampling he received during capture-the-flag and letting go during tug-of-war, both of those can be considered foul play but it's still in a gray area

and as for the hair wax he used during the cavalry battle, since there's no evidence of it now it's nothing more than mere speculation. At the very least, drawing close to him while being controlled by his rage, Sudou wouldn't be able to solve anything. More likely, he'd have the tables turned on him instead. If he attacks the other classes this publicly, there's the possibility that it wouldn't just end with Sudou being disqualified.

"I'm the leader during the sports festival. Obey me, Hirata, let's gang up on Ryuuen together".

"I'm not denying that you're the leader. Considering this sports festival, there's no doubt that you're the leader. But I want you to look around. Just how many people right now acknowledge you as their leader?".

Sudou looks around.

Starting with Ike and the others, who cowered before his anger, most of the students kept their distance from the irritated Sudou. They're all keeping their distance so as to not incur his wrath. Horikita too, was looking at Sudou's speech and conduct with exasperated eyes.

This is the current state of Class D. It's something we need to accept and improve upon.

"I'm desperately trying for the sake of the class.....".

Sudou squeezed those words out angrily but all the other students except Hirata raised their voices.

"Is that really so? Rather than wanting the class to win, isn't it just that you want to show off? Isn't it just that you want to show us just how amazing you are? At the very least, I think so. You're just being swept along by your emotions, and you decide usefulness and uselessness based on that. You get

angry. If the class can win with just that alone we wouldn't even be having trouble. If you're going to throw your weight as leader around, you need to make rational decisions and give accurate advice".

It was Yukimura who cut in like that. Despite suffering from his own results in the sports festival, he's earnestly putting in effort.

"Shut up.....".

"I feel the same way too, Sudou-kun. It's precisely because we're relying on you, Sudou-kun, that I want you to see the bigger picture. And I want you to respond to the feelings of all your comrades".

"Shut up.....".

"You should be able to do that, Sudou-kun. That's why---".

"I'm telling you to shut up!".

Go~. Just as I thought a dull sound like that rang out, Hirata, who had been standing next to him, was shoved from behind and had collapsed onto the ground.

Sudou's eyes were bloodshot and he doesn't even seem to have realized the mistake he made. If someone says too much, they'll probably be the next ones to be beaten. No, he's already trying to beat Yukimura up.

However, by beating Hirata up, Sudou's already bathing in attention regardless of whether it's wanted or not and the teachers are eyeing him as well. Despite it being a class's internal affair, if violence is involved, it won't end with just a warning.

"What's going on?".

Chabashira-sensei, who is responsible for watching over the class, walks over

to the collapsed Hirata. Then looking at Sudou's rage and the red mark left on Hirata's cheek from being hit it's more or less easy to grasp what's happening.

"Did you hit him?".

Not even hearing him out, Chabashira-sensei only asks for the truth. Not having felt any gratification, Sudou angrily answered without even denying it.

"....what'll you do if I did?".

Sudou affirms it but on the contrary, Hirata stood up and panickedly corrects her.

"That's not it, sensei. I just fell down on my own".

"I hardly see it that way".

"You're wrong. Because I'm saying so, there should be no problem then".

We cannot afford to have both the fact that Sudou punched and Hirata was punched come to light. Hirata made the right call. After a slight delay, Chabashira-sensei delivers her judgement.

"Certainly you're right. If the victim is saying nothing's wrong then first of all, there's no problem. However, objectively looking at it, there's the possibility that there's some kind of trouble going on between you guys. For now, keep your distance from one another. Then I'll be filing a report to my superiors. As a preventive measure".

"There's no trouble here and I don't want to cause any misunderstandings. I understand".

Thanks to Hirata's calm response, nothing came of it. Hirata took his distance

to stay out of Sudou's field of vision.

On the other hand, Sudou was no longer able to suppress his rage and kicked a pipe chair near him with all his strength. Under Chabashira-sensei's watchful eye, beating up Class C is impossible to pull off.

"Do whatever you want. Go ahead and lose, you small fries. This sports festival can eat shit".

For a moment, Sudou looked at Horikita, who had been watching the whole thing but he averted his eyes. Sudou left and started walking back towards the dormitory.

"This is bad, Ayanokouji".

"This has nothing to do with me though".

Kouenji is absent due to ill health. And now Sudou's walked out on us. Rationally speaking, Class D's situation can be summed up as a shamefully terrible one.

"Are you alright, Hirata?".

"Yeah, I really got it good though".

Fortunately, it seems like only the inside of his mouth is a bit cut up and no large and visible external injuries occurred.

"But what do we do.....this is bad".

Leaving aside the chaotic Class D, the cavalry battles for the 2nd years and the 3rd years continued on smoothly. Ultimately, Horikita did not call out to Sudou but rather, her eyes were stolen away by the appearance of the brother she could not approach.

In the end, even after the cavalry battle ended, Sudou did not return and the final universal participation event, the 200 meter dash, began. The school will continue on with the contest, paying no mind even if one or two students happened to be absent.

That's the rule, that's how it'll be. Beneath us, Ryuuen approached.

"Hirata, what happened with Sudou?".

The absentees will simply be disqualified and will not be able to obtain points. They're following the clear rules to the letter. Perhaps Ryuuen had been observing Class D from a distance, but he spoke as though he were there close by when everything went down.

I wonder if this time he's trying to disrupt Hirata's mental state.

"Something came up and Sudou-kun's taking a break. He'll be back soon".

"Kuku. I don't think you should be saying baseless things like that".

Having his name called for the second race, Ryuuen entered the course.

"More importantly, up until now, Ryuuen-kun's taken 1st place in all the individual competitions right?".

Behind his back, Hirata called out to him while silently displaying his fighting spirit.

"What's wrong with that?".

"In terms of the participants this time, you're likely to take 1st place. It appears Ryuu-en-kun's quite lucky".

"Luck's on my side after all".

"I don't know how much longer your luck will last. Just by doing something, the current can change".

"Ahh?".

"What I mean by that is I know what you're thinking".

Ryuu-en laughed scornfully as though saying he had no idea what he's talking about. Hirata then continued.

"The fact that you've obtained the list on Class D's participation table as well as the fact that you know the physical abilities of Class D's students in detail too. And I also understand that you intend to make use of that. We're not idiots. There are a few trump cards we've kept hidden".

"That would have been interesting if it weren't a bluff. By looking at the contests between Class C and Class D so far, you'll inevitably stumble upon something strange. Regardless of whether you knew the truth or not, you should've at least tried to trick us".

"Yeah. That's why I'll say this. Until this day ends, I'll be showing you something interesting".

"Something interesting? Then I'll be waiting in anticipation".

At most, Ryuu-en was only half-listening to Hirata's mysterious provocation. Seeing how he took 1st place in the 200 meter dash, the possibility that he was shaken up by it can be considered nil.

"So there's a little over an hour until Sudou's next match huh.....?".

The 200 meter dashes for the 2nd years and the 3rd years followed by a 50 minute afternoon break. If Sudou fails to return by then, it'll be checkmate. If our ace is absent, there's no winning in the Recommended Only Participation events coming in the second half.

There's only one person in this class capable of forcing him into action.

I wonder if that person finally understands what her role is and how vital it is? Having come in at 3rd place during my 200 meter dash, I quietly waited for Horikita to finish up with her contest and return.

"Horikita. Do you understand the gist of Sudou's situation?".

"His leadership was questioned and he came to realize what a disappointment he is before running away".

"...well, roughly speaking".

"Why are you here? Surely you won't ask me to go bring Sudou-kun back".

"If you already know, don't ask. It's almost lunch break, isn't your power needed here?".

"I don't get it. There are other people you could rely on. There's no way I could possibly bring him back, right?".

Is she seriously saying that? Was what I thought but she's probably being serious. She hasn't realized at all yet that Sudou is looking at her as a member of the opposite sex.

"In the first place, I'm not exactly in a position where I can afford to look after others.....".

Horikita, who's currently struggling in her matches, is negatively affecting the class's points. She probably has her hands full with her own problems. It's not like I can't understand those feelings of hers.

In addition to that, there aren't many classmates who are keen to go after Sudou. They've abandoned Sudou after he acted selfishly despite knowing he's capable of significantly impacting the outcome of the sports festival.

The amount of trust Sudou had accumulated becomes concretely visible here.

If it were Hirata or Kushida that had stormed off, the entire class would have been out looking for them. Kouenji is similar to him in that sense. As a matter of fact, aside from Horikita and Sudou, everyone ignores his existence. Nobody's taking the absence of one member seriously despite its importance.

"Then let me ask you this frankly. You cannot take care of your classmates, you cannot take care of yourself, what are you even worth then? You're just a burden".

I was prepared to incur her wrath when I gave her the deepest cut.

"You sure are harsh.....I'm sorry I got injured but I'm also experiencing a lot of misfortune here. Aren't there things you just can't do anything about?"

"Misfortune, eh? So you don't see your injury, as well as Class D's current state, as anything more than a coincidence. Proof that you haven't realized anything".

"Don't mock me. I've also realized more or less the strangeness of it...that the information on the participation table's list had been leaked to Ryuuen-kun. And the fact that the fault lies with a traitor from within the class. But it can't be helped, right? Even if it's someone who would betray the class, I hadn't

expected them to act in a way that strangles their own class. That's why I'm not flustered".

"What else have you noticed?".

"Else?...I don't know the details of it, but Ryuu-en-kun provoked Sudou-kun?".

"That's right. He attempted to thoroughly crush Sudou, the key player of our class. No matter how much information he's obtained, Sudou's still invincible as far as individual competitions go and he's a powerful presence in the team competitions as well. That's why he repeatedly targeted him mentally to get a rise out of him and succeeded in getting him to withdraw using elements outside the competition itself".

Sudou ceased to be an asset and because of his rampage, Class D's morale has plummeted.

"Yes. That's why we're in this current situation".

"Is there anything else other than that you've noticed?".

"You, it can't be.....you want me to tell you my conjectures? That Ryuu-en-kun's the one who set that trap so I would get injured? Certainly I did think of it. That he incited Kinoshita-san to make me fall. But, it's not realistic to blatantly attempt to cause injury under the public eye. Even if they were able to make me fall, I don't think they would intentionally cause an injury to the extent that I would no longer be able to satisfactorily continue on with the competition".

Off the mark.

If I felt like it, I could have offered her evidence that it was indeed intentional. But that's not important.

"How long do you intend on being useless, Horikita?".

I said as such. Unless I take drastic measures like that, the girl known as Horikita Suzune will not open her eyes.

"...what basis do you have to call me useless?".

"I called you useless because you are useless".

"How unpleasant.....I'm confident that in both written exams and physical abilities, I'm superior to those worthless people over there. In the first place, since the information leaked, isn't it already too late? Not just me, but just about anyone would be left unable to do anything in this situation. Would you mind giving some basis?".

"If you're a run-of-the-mill student then that's fine. But that's not the case, right? If you're aiming for Class A and intend to raise your comrades up to the same then it's about time I tell you about the necessity of cultivating a mindset that can see the bigger picture".

"That's why I'm telling you to show your basis!".

Horikita said so with a bit of fierce anger showing. The classmates around us turned to look for a moment to see what's going on.

"I've realized that the information on the participation table has been leaked', 'Ryuuken provoked Sudou', 'It might have been that the injury was intentionally caused'. Certainly, just like you said, it's a situation where you cannot do anything about it. As for why, it's because you didn't do anything about it. And as long as you don't do anything about it, it'll continue on forever. Do you intend to complain again when Ryuuken pulls something off brilliantly once more? Surely that's not it, right?".

"That's---but, what could possibly be---".

"A situation where you prioritize improving your own rank while Sudou is absent or a situation where your rank plummets while Sudou gets called back and pulls the class along. Which one would be in the best interests of Class D? There's no need to even answer that right? Right now you don't even hold a candle to Sudou. Get a hint already that you're an absolutely useless student. Sudou's methods are clumsy but he's contributed more during this sports festival than anyone else. And he had been eagerly trying to win. Can you afford to leave him be just because he couldn't afford to worry about others? Leave him be as it is? Isn't that the same as allowing your own valuable asset to perish?".

If I say this much, Horikita should be able to understand too. Even as she gets annoyed by it she should become aware of it. What I want her to realize is 'what I ought to do from now on'.

"It's something obvious even an elementary school student should be able to answer right? That this one act would lead to the start of our counterattack".

Ryuuken strategically crushed Sudou. Then all we have to do is strategically call Sudou back. It's a simple matter.

"You're throwing away a chance to get a weapon that belongs to you and you alone".

"A weapon for me alone.....?".

"From here on out, if you're aiming for the upper classes there's a limit to what you can do on your own. As a matter of fact, right now you're in a situation where you cannot do anything on your own. You'll surely encounter more and more of such exams. At such a time, the man known as Sudou Ken

will definitely become a valuable asset. In order to make use of it, what is it that you ought to be prioritizing right now? Is it to pray that your injuries heal here? That's not it, right?".

Just as I am using Hirata and Karuizawa as weapons, Horikita is also blessed with an opportunity to obtain a weapon of her own. If so, it's foolish to let that go.

"I---".

"It's up to you to think of the rest. This is the end of the advice I can give you".

That's right, there's nothing else after this. I'm neither going to offer her a strategy to win against Ryuuen nor tell her the way to pull through it. Right now, what Horikita needs is defeat and healing.

10

The morning half of the sports festival ended with Class D in dire straits, and we entered the lunch break. There were those who had their lunch at the cafeteria, some who ate on the grounds, since we were notified that we could move about freely. Especially during the sports festival where a sense of solidarity could be strongly felt, regardless of whether you're a boy or a girl, there's plenty of opportunity to have lunch together with senior students. More so than usual. Unlike the usual, our classrooms are currently off limits and so the places where we could eat were limited.

If we're talking about the main charms of the sports festival, then lunch

would be one of them. There's a huge mound of catered bento boxes piled up on the grounds. It appears today's lunch was not made at the school's cafeteria but rather luxury bentos ordered from the outside. There's only one variety but there's also the fact that it's free so most of the students will likely opt for it.

On the other hand, a portion of the students left the grounds without laying their hands on the bentos. One of them is Horikita. Perhaps my words finally reached her, since there's a high probability she's heading out to look for Sudou.

And Kushida is yet another one. Telling the girls she's close to that she's heading out to look for Sudou, she ran off.

"Guah---I'm beat! Why do I have to do this?".

"Because you lost".

To avoid congestion, Yamauchi headed off to get everyone's portion after losing at rock-paper-scissors.

"I'm starving, let's hurry up and dig in".

Ike and Yamauchi weren't showing much interest towards the fact that Sudou had withdrawn. In the first place, they've been hanging out with Sudou ever since a while after enrollment, so they know his personality well.

Besides, in this case, even if he doesn't participate in the contests, he won't be hounded on the matter. At most, he'll only lose his private points. Of course, it'll be a loss for the Red Team, but subtract that and it may have been better to be rid of Sudou's tyranny.

Most of the girls have witnessed Hirata getting hit. As a result, Sudou's reputation (leaving aside the matter of if he had one to begin with) plummeted and it's probably forfeit.

To see very little change despite losing the ace in this sports festival is also eerie, in a sense.

"For now, let's just find someplace to eat".

As the three of us decided to move elsewhere, Hirata appeared with a few boys and girls in tow.

"Can we tag along too?".

He called out to Ike and Yamauchi like that. Ike and Yamauchi were momentarily startled by that. That's understandable, there's no way they wouldn't feel startled if Hirata approached them despite them not being particularly close. But since the girls would also be sitting alongside them here, during this sports festival, the two of them couldn't find any reason to turn him down.

"Of course that's ok".

When he answered like that, a group of boys and girls numbering about 10 was established.

Then, occupying a suitable spot, we began having our lunch. We enjoyed our lunch for a while but eventually, people finished eating here and there and with that, Hirata and Karuizawa came over.

In a place like this where fellow classmates gather, it wouldn't be odd or unnatural for this trio including me to be formed.

"As expected, it seems Ryuuken-kun's made his move".

Hirata cut in with that amidst the ruckus. Karuizawa then opened her mouth and interjected as though she had been waiting for this.

"So? Who's the traitor? You know right, Yousuke-kun?".

Karuizawa asked that but Hirata gently shook his head.

"There are several things I don't understand myself. I wonder if we could clear up those questions?".

"That's right. However, I cannot answer the question of who the traitor is".

"Huh? I don't get it, why?".

"Because if we aggravate the situation now, it'll only cause the class to plunge into further chaos. There'll be problems if we don't deal with the traitor quietly and calmly".

".....I understand. I won't interrogate you on that. But why did you submit the participation table as it is to the school despite knowing a traitor will appear? Couldn't we have sneakily adjusted the participation table on our own? If we had done so, we wouldn't be facing this much adversity. Not even that, we could have turned the tables and gained an advantage beyond even Class C.....".

"That's right".

What I had wanted was for Horikita to discern the presence of the spy and have the ability to deal with it accordingly.

"It seems like someone else's problem. And the traitor might be somewhere around us too right? It may even be that they're among us....is this sort of carefreeness ok?".

Karuizawa looks around. She appears to see even the few students here as suspects. Traitors are certainly troublesome and depending on the

circumstances, it may be more convenient to just leave them be. Besides, even if we had used a strategy like what Hirata had suggested, it probably wouldn't have worked on Ryuuen.

Even so, it would be difficult to make them understand even if I told Hirata and the others of this reason.

"I've measured the traitor's moral sense. Something like that".

Saying that, I deceived them.

"Moral sense?".

"I thought I wanted them to reform themselves without needing to pursue them ourselves".

Hirata, who had been listening, intently stared at me.

"All of this is according to Horikita-san's orders, is how it is right, Ayanokouji-kun?".

Hirata, who had already begun harboring his suspicions, may have already reached a point where he no longer trusts me but even so, I need him to believe me even if it's only for appearance's sake.

"Yeah. It's all as Horikita ordered".

Hirata did not interrogate me any further and nodding once, he appeared to have been convinced.

"So where is that Horikita-san and what is she doing right now?".

"She's currently doing something only she can do. Or at least it'd be good if

she were".

"Could it be about Sudou-kun?".

Hirata, who possessed a keen intuition, looked around, and confirmed once again that the two of them weren't anywhere to be seen.

"It's not easy to win in the second half without Sudou, right?".

"That's right.....as far as we're concerned, we're dependent on Sudou-kun".

Karuizawa seemed slightly dissatisfied with having to depend on Sudou but she understands that it is a fact. The outcome of this sports festival rests on Horikita's actions.

If my words did not reach her, Sudou won't return and it'll be game over.

Chapter 6: For Whose Sake?

I headed towards the infirmary inside the school alone, feeling a sense of loss after Ayanokouji-kun verbally demolished me. Since he usually follows his self-proclaimed mature policy of non-interference, I didn't expect him to act in that manner and speak out. Having been surprised by that, I wasn't able to answer satisfactorily.

"...that's not it".

It's because he was right, because he hit the mark, that I wasn't able to retort.

".....".

Either way, what I ought to be doing right now is to do something about this leg of mine that I can't move the way I want. Treatment is necessary if I am to go after Sudou-kun.

There were emergency first aid personnel stationed on the grounds but wanting to avoid standing out to the best of my ability, I had chosen the infirmary inside the school. However, when I checked the infirmary, it appears there's someone who arrived before me. Out of the three beds inside, one of them is shrouded by a curtain and I couldn't see the situation. It appears someone's resting on that bed.

"Sensei, what's the condition?".

During the intermission before the lunch break, I had the emergency first aid personnel apply taping but its effects were minimal. After inspecting the condition of my leg, the teacher raised her face.

"Let's see.....I've said this earlier too but participating in any further competition will be difficult".

Although it was diagnosed as a sprain, it's neither getting worse nor better. Currently I'm capable of barely running. But at the very most, I can only manage running. I cannot muster up the strength needed to win in a contest.

I desperately tried and overcame the individual competitions but the Recommended Only Participation contests will likely prove to be even more difficult. If I participate in them, I will surely stray far from victory. That alone, I absolutely cannot allow.

"Do you plan on participating in the Recommended Only Participation events?".

"Yes. That was the plan. But I think I'll be bidding farewell to any participation. Because I can see if I participate with my leg in this condition, I'll only be liability for the class".

"That is a wise decision".

Fortunately, I have a great sum of points I obtained from earlier exams. Even if I abstained, by paying compensation, I can make up for it. Even if I prepare a substitute for all three contests I had been planning on participating in, the total sum would add up to 300,000 points. It's not cheap at all, but if this raises the class's chance of victory even a little, then I'll have to make a clean decision on this. My dream of running alongside my brother will be cut short though.....

At this point, fretting over personal matters like that is meaningless. The important thing is who to entrust the substitute role to.

"Thank you very much".

Having received treatment, I gave my thanks and left the infirmary behind. I headed towards the main entrance so as to return to the grounds.

The window glass reflected me as I dragged my leg behind me and feeling pathetic, I tightened my lips. I do harbor suspicions towards Kinoshita-san, who called out my name but I have no one to blame but myself for falling and getting injured.

There's no changing that fact.

I tried my best to project a calm front so no one would notice and continued walking. When I was about to leave through the main entrance, Kushida-san panickedly ran over.

"I'm glad I was able to find you, Horikita-san. Umm, there's something I'd like to talk about.....".

".....what is it? I have business to attend to later so I'd like you to keep it short".

"Yep. Sorry, but this isn't a good place. Would you please hear me out? It looks like it's going to be problematic"

"Can you please explain here? I'll make my decision after hearing what this problematic thing is".

After looking around, Kushida-san whispered to me.

".....umm you see, it seems Kinoshita-san, who ran into you and collapsed, suffered a serious injury. Right now, it looks like it's bad enough that she can't even get up, that's why.....umm, Kinoshita-san is saying she'd like you to go see her".

Hearing those words, I couldn't conceal my surprise. Certainly she did seem injured but to think such a thing happened.....

"Where is she right now?".

"This way".

After that back-and-forth, Kushida-san led me in the direction of the infirmary.

1

When I returned, once again, to the infirmary, Chabashira-sensei was there inside the room. The teacher in charge of the infirmary opened her mouth.

"That's a relief, I was just about to say barely missed Horikita-san".

"I sent Kushida to go call you but it looks like she found you right away".

Standing beside me, Kushida-san was listening in on the teachers' conversation with a slightly uneasy look.

"What is this about?".

From the bed walled off by the curtain I saw earlier, I could hear a girl's sobbing. Chabashira-sensei parted the curtain slightly. Behind it was Kinoshita-san from Class C, who is lying on top of the bed. Immediately shutting the curtains again, I was called out into the corridor.

"Kinoshita-san ran into you during the morning's obstacle course race and fell. Do you recall that?".

"Of course. She ran into me and fell after all".

That incident ended up throwing a wrench into my sports festival.

"It's about that.....Kinoshita is saying that you, Horikita, deliberately caused her to fall".

For an instant, I couldn't comprehend what she was saying.

"No such thing. It was a coincidental accident. If not---".

"If not?".

I stopped short of saying that it's Ryuuen-kun's strategy like Ayanokouji-kun told me. I do feel like it's spot on but it's only speculation. There's no evidence after all.

"No.....it's just a coincidence".

"I'd like to believe that as well but the situation isn't looking good.

Kinoshita has testified that during the middle of the race, you kept on repeatedly looking back at her. For verification, we checked the video footage and you indeed checked Kinoshita's position twice".

"That is because she's the one who repeatedly called out my name. That's why I looked back".

"She called your name, huh?.....I see. However, even if that happens to be the case, there's still a huge problem. She said you forcefully kicked her in the shin. In fact, she was absent from all subsequent contests and when we had a teacher take a look at Kinoshita's injuries, they seemed to be pretty severe ones. The injuries appear to have been intentionally inflicted is what we're

thinking".

"It's also just as groundless if I claim the severe injuries were inflicted accidentally when we fell. I didn't do anything".

"Of course, I believe in your innocence. However, Japan happens to be a country with a bias towards uplifting the weak. This school is no different in that regard. As long as we cannot eliminate the possibility that it was intentional, it's natural for us to deliberate on it".

"That's stupid".

"But, this isn't the end of it. If you ignore this, the problem will grow. Obviously this has reached the ears of the other teachers as well, and the longer this drags out, even to the student council. If that happens, the aftermath will be disastrous. You haven't forgotten what happened when Sudou fought with Class C, have you?".

If this drags out, my brother will inevitably learn of this as well. It'll unmistakably be a foolish little sister bothering him. However as long as I'm innocent, I have no other choice but to continue making an appeal. Regardless of whether this is Ryuu-en-kun's strategy or a coincidence, I cannot afford to utter lies.

"If your purpose in calling me is to confirm the truth, then I have said it. I'll repeat, I didn't do anything. I have some business to attend to from now, so would you mind if I excused myself?".

Right now, what I have to do is find Sudou-kun as quickly as possible and bring him back. As I turned my back, Chabashira-sensei called out to me from behind.

"Considering the current situation, it'll be more soothing to consider it intentional than a coincidence. Ever since the obstacle course race, Kinoshita's been absent for all subsequent contests and taking that into account, just as you've acquired your points, she can bid farewell to her participation in the Recommended Only Participation events. Well, with her leg in that state, participation would be impossible in the first place though.....Either way, Kinoshita's an athletic student. If we're talking about speed, she's about equal if not better than you. Matter of fact, it's hard to imagine Kinoshita's severe injuries are just the result of a coincidence".

Even if she says something like that, I'm still innocent so it can't be helped. It's easy to say I'm innocent but the clock's ticking. Right now, I cannot afford to waste time on something like this.

"I was planning on withdrawing from the Recommended Only Participation events either way. Ever since the obstacle course race, my ranking hasn't been satisfactory. If I will be considered absent just like Kinoshita-san, I do not mind accepting that as well. However, allow me to emphasize that I did not intentionally make her fall for the sake of injuring her".

I wonder if this is alright? I asked that of Chabashira-sensei. However---

"But it doesn't seem like Kinoshita's going to listen, she's saying she'll report this to the school. Judging from her testimony and the footage, it doesn't seem like we'll be able to close this case. Looking at it from her perspective, it's as though she had been forced into accepting this situation after all. It'll also put Class C through a tough time since they'd have lost Kinoshita. You do understand what this means, right?".

"...probatio diabolica, right?".

Chabashira-sensei did not deny it but rather, crossed her arms silently. To prove that there are aliens on earth, all you'd have to do is capture one alien

from somewhere on the planet but to prove that there are no aliens on earth, you'd have to search every nook and cranny of the earth which is something impossible to pull off. That's the devil's proof. What Chabashira-sensei wants to say is that unless I can prove my innocence, then it's necessary to take measures to prevent unfairness...

"How did you happen to hear of this, Chabashira-sensei? Who else knows of this currently?".

"Kushida consulted me on the matter. She said she didn't want to make a big deal out of it but didn't know what to do".

"Sorry, Horikita-san. Kinoshita-san insisted that I consult a teacher on this no matter what.....".

"Thank you for your concern. Because if it had been a teacher from another class, this would have escalated into a big deal. But I have my doubts. Where exactly did you hear this from Kinoshita-san?".

Kushida-san anxiously looked at the entrance to the infirmary.

"Because I'm good friends with Kinoshita-san.....when I checked in on her during the break, she told me about this".

"So that's how it is".

It isn't strange if this is Kushida-san we're talking about since she has a large social network. Either way, the only ones who know of this right now are the parties concerned: Kinoshita-san and myself. As well as Kushida-san and Chabashira-sensei. If possible, I'd like to keep it at this and resolve this problem but.....

"Would you like to speak with Kinoshita-san?".

"I don't know. Right now she seems a bit frightened so she might be emotionally unstable.....".

"Please. I don't want to aggravate things either".

I bowed my head and Kushida-san also similarly bowed her head.

"I'm begging you too, sensei".

"Alright, then let's try talking to her a bit".

Just as we received permission from Chabashira-sensei, I could hear footsteps from beyond the corridor. That person made a beeline for the infirmary. Putting his hands in both pockets, he acted like he owned the place.

"Looks like it's become quite a big problem".

"Ryuu-en-kun.....".

Why is he here right now?

Shaking away my confusion, I feigned calmness. But as though he had seen through it, he laughed sneeringly and stopped in front of us.

"I came here after Kinoshita asked for me. To think someone would have deliberately caused that injury of hers".

Saying that, he passed by us and entered the infirmary. We too, panickedly followed him. Entering the infirmary, Ryuu-en brushed off the teacher's attempts at stopping him and opened the curtain veiling the bed in which Kinoshita-san is receiving treatment.

"Hey, Kinoshita. You ok? Looks like you've been through some tough

times".

Seeing Ryuu-en-kun, Kinoshita-san openly trembled in fear.

"I hear you've injured your leg? Show me".

He said that before he pulled Kinoshita-san's leg out from beneath the sheets.

"This is bad. Not half bad all things considered.....".

Under Ryuu-en-kun's hand was Kinoshita-san's painful-looking leg wrapped up in bandages.

"Sorry.....I tried to hang in there and participate in the next contest too but.....my leg just wouldn't listen.....that's why.....ahh!".

"Don't blame yourself, Kinoshita. I know you tried to participate in the three-legged race".

"...it was an accidental collision. Kinoshita-san, what exactly are you trying to accomplish by saying I made you fall?".

"!".

When I questioned her with a slight glare, Kinoshita-san averted her eyes. Ryuu-en-kun then stood in front of her.

"According to what Kinoshita's been saying, you fully intended on making her fall. You deliberately did it, didn't you?".

"Cut the jokes. Are you saying I'd do something like that?".

"You can never tell what someone will do. Besides, look at the facts.

Kinoshita, who happens to be better than you at sports, sustained serious injuries and had to withdraw. On top of that, she was planning on participating in all the Recommended Only Participation events later. In contrast, you continued participating in the contests in spite of your injury. You're asking the impossible if you want me to not be suspicious of that".

I too, understand the significance of losing a member from a complete roster. But from the loquacious explanation he gave, my misgivings of him rose further. Was having Kinoshita-san run into me his goal, as I suspected?

Was having her in particular collide with me a sacrifice to throw off suspicion, since she's more athletic than I am?

But.....that would lead to further doubt. What does he stand to gain from having Kinoshita-san collide with me when she is far likelier to earn points than I am? Furthermore, if she truly had been planning on participating in all the Recommended Participation Only events then that means Class C stands to lose as many as 400,000 points. Is this all solely for the sake of crushing me and basking in victory?

For just that, does he mean to injure his own classmate, pay the price for that and lower their chances of winning?

At the very least, from what I've experienced in my life this far, I couldn't glean any meaning from such an act of inefficiency.

"What are you thinking about so quietly?".

Ryuuken-kun bends forward as though peering at me while keeping his hands inside his pocket.

"Well, even if we have our little back-and-forth it won't do us any good. Right, Kinoshita?".

In the middle of it, Ryuuken-kun forcefully urges Kinoshita-san to speak.

"Horikita-san.....you told me after I fell.....that I definitely won't win.....".

"I said no such thing. Are you even aware that you're spouting lies?".

"Horikita, you were only looking back during the incident with Kinoshita. Why exactly is that?".

Chabashira-sensei again asks me the same question.

"I admit I was looking back. However, it's only because she called out my name many times over from behind me. At first, I ignored her. But clearly things seemed strange and so I looked back".

"Is that so, Kinoshita?".

This time, Chabashira-sensei asks Kinoshita-san rather than me.

"I never called you, not even once".

When Chabashira-sensei tried to confirm it, rather than admit it, Kinoshita-san denied it.

"The person in question herself is denying it, sensei. Besides, even if Kinoshita happened to call Suzune's name, what's wrong with that? Just calling a name doesn't amount to foul play. On top of that, it was probably a desperate cry that stemmed from a desire to win. Kinoshita is second to none when it comes to having a competitive spirit after all. If you keep reacting to things like that each and every time, there'll be no end to this".

This argument is going to endless if this keeps up. There's no mistaking the fact that these two must have conspired together.

"Umm....Kinoshita-san, Ryuu-en-kun. I think it's unfortunate that things turned out like this but I don't think Horikita-san is the type of person to deliberately injure her opponent like this".

Having listened to both sides, Kushida-san spoke up as though shielding me.

"But Horikita-san told me.....that she absolutely won't let me win.....!".

"That's probably just your desire to not lose getting to your head, is it not? I think Horikita-san was also surprised by the fall, I think she was desperate too".

I did not say it. I did not say even a single word to Kinoshita-san.

But I endured it. However, Kinoshita-san continued.

"But---I can't forgive her.....now I have to take a break from even track and field practice...".

"...don't you feel any shame? Painting lies and ensnaring someone, is that fun for you? Or could it be that Ryuu-en-kun set everything up? I doubt that it's mere coincidence you conveniently showed up here".

I cannot afford to accept the legitimacy of her claim just because she cried.

Because it is a lie.

That's why I decided to take a drastic measure. If he's here then rather than a turn for the worse, I need to carry this situation and turn it into a more favourable one.

"So you're blind to your own shortcomings and now it's the injured Kinoshita's fault as well as mine, huh? You're quite a terrible woman".

"Don't make me laugh. You provoked Sudou-kun a while back, I won't let

you say you forgot. You're trying to use that same trick this time around as well, aren't you?".

"That incident had nothing to do with me. It's absurd to tie this matter into that".

At the very least he doesn't seem like he's going to admit to anything.

"It's clear to everyone. That you collided with Kinoshita in a self-destructive act. That clinches it. There is no room for further discussion. Let's go over this with the superiors already, shall we?".

"That's---would you let me talk this over for a little bit more with Horikita-san.....can I?".

Kushida-san begged Ryuuuen-kun as though making an appeal. I'd like to tell her that's unnecessary concern but as for me, I'd rather not help out with anything that could cause this story to spread.

Even though I feel like I'm trapped in a spider's web right now, I can't help but struggle desperately.

Ryuuuen-kun seemed to be slightly in thought, then he made this proposal.

"I don't have time to leisurely talk this out. Once the lunch break ends, I've got a Recommended Participation Only event starting. I'll be participating as well so I'd like to round things up here. Letting the bigwigs make the judgement would be best though".

After looking at me, Kushida-san and Kinoshita-san once, Ryuuuen-kun spoke again.

"I don't mind if we can strike a quick and easy deal".

"Strike a deal?".

"I'm talking about you shouldering any losses incurred by Kinoshita and Class C".

"That's not funny, I don't even have to listen to this".

If so, the amount of recompensation to be paid won't be cheap. Besides, I'd end things on a bad note.

"Then we're done. You won't strike a deal but you're telling us to not report this to the bigwigs. That's too selfish of you, Suzune. This won't fly".

"Wait. What exactly should we do.....?".

Interrupting me, Kushida-san listens to Ryuuken-kun's proposal.

"You seem to understand things well. That's right.....if you'll fork over 1 million points then I'll have Kinoshita withdraw her complaint. That way we'll be able to prepare a substitute for the Recommended Only Participation events and Kinoshita will be able to acquire a 'special income' thanks to me as well. Simple enough right?".

"Don't be ridiculous. I haven't done anything. I don't need to hand a single point over".

"Then go ahead and prove it, Suzune. Let's make a clear distinction between black and white. Ok?".

"You all seem to be very confident in yourselves. You think your lies won't be exposed?".

"We're going to prove that we aren't lying. Let's have the Student Council

President-sama deliver his judgement".

Ryuuuen-kun knows about me and the student council president....in other words, he's provoking me with a tone that implies he's figured out Nii-san. As for me, I absolutely cannot do something that would cause Nii-san any trouble.

The sister of the student council president committed disruptive acts and deliberately caused injuries. If such a rumor were to spread, the damage Nii-san receives would be immeasurable. It's the same trick as before but unlike that time, there are no openings for escape.

In Sudou-kun's case, they pretended to be victims based on the premise that 'nobody would be watching'. But this is different.

He made "the entire student body into witnesses" and played the victim. He has the advantage. Furthermore, there's the fact that Kinoshita-san is a student who is as athletic as I am if not more.

Then there's the fact that there's video footage of me turning around, a suspicious point.

The fact that Kinoshita-san had been planning on participating in all the Recommended Only Participation events.

Then finally, the fact that she sustained injuries severe enough to prevent her from continuing. There are no factors in play for me to recover with. And best of all, is the timing with which they sprung the trap.

Not immediately after Kinoshita-san injured herself but rather the fact that they had her lie down made it seem more truthful. It means they did not file a complaint immediately after falling but challenged the next contest as well.

In other words, she tried to endure it, that she tried to bear with it made it seem more truthful.

But ultimately unable to cope with the pain, she withdrew and afterwards, she quietly opened up about me having intentionally made her fall before feigning fear at further retribution from me.

Now I'm certain. That this is an encircling net meant to be used against me. And also---that this situation has already crossed the point of no return. That it's a mistake I made the moment I decided to carefreely approach this sports festival.

I keenly realized that while still leaving behind several unknowns.

"Umm....would it be no good with just my points alone.....Ryuuuen-kun?".

"Ahh?".

"I don't think Horikita-san's the kind of person to deliberately do something like this. That's why I don't want to make a big deal out of this. But.....I don't think Kinoshita-san's the type of person to lie too.....an unfortunate coincidence, couldn't it be just that.....that's why.....".

"A beautiful friendship. But that's no good. As a member of Class C, I think Suzune did this out of malevolence. If I think about Kinoshita, I feel it'll be meaningless unless I get money out of Suzune. Of course, I won't stop you if you're willing to pay up too though".

If we continue struggling here, it'll just get out of hand. But I cannot afford to break.

"I've decided. Kinoshita, we're going to complain about this to the teachers and then to the student council too".

As though to wake her up, Ryuuen-kun issues orders to Kinoshita-san.

While distorting her face in pain, Kinoshita-san raised her upper body.

"If they look at this situation, the school should understand too that this is a serious matter. They won't stand for this vicious stance that would do anything if it's for the sake of an inferior person's victory".

I have to choose.

The path where I pursue the truth and clash with Ryuuen-kun. The other is to make a compromise here.

Obviously I'd have chosen the former. But, there's nothing in the world that can unravel that truth. In other words, I'd just be wasting time and trust.

If so---striking a deal with him here would be.....

I desperately squeezed out my voice and called out to stop the two of them from leaving.

"Wait.....".

That word clearly reached Ryuuen-kun. They stopped walking.

"What is it, Suzune? You have no intention of responding to discussion, right?".

"If I pay, then you'll make it so that this never happened right.....?".

"So you're admitting that you committed foul play in order to win?".

"I won't admit that.....because I'm not lying".

"Then this is strange. What exactly will you be paying for then?".

"This time, I lost to your strategy. That's why I'll be paying for that, is what I mean".

It's humiliating, but I couldn't say anything except that.

"Did you hear that, Kinoshita? She doesn't think she's done anything wrong at all. Can you forgive her?".

".....I won't forgive her.....".

"Hear that? Unless you acknowledge your fault sincerely, we have no intention of responding".

".....".

"Is what I would like to say but you have your pride too I guess. I understand you don't want to call yourself the bad guy in front of your teacher and your friend. That's why I'll give my response since I have a generous heart. However, it's a different story whether or not Kinoshita will accept that".

He gave a devilish smile while manipulating the situation back and forth alone as though to play with my heart.

I want to be released from this situation as soon as possible.

"If I pay a million points, you'll make it so that nothing happened, that's what you said. There are no other conditions, right?".

"Certainly. But that was only the case a while ago. You declined once right? The same conditions won't apply now. If this is to be the second round of negotiations, then naturally the conditions will change".

How far does Ryuu-en-kun intend to attack while provoking me?

"That's right. Try kneeling and begging right here. Maybe Kinoshita's feelings and my own might change".

"Wait, Ryuu-en. This is too much".

In response to Ryuu-en-kun who requested I kowtow, Chabashira-sensei, who had been a spectator, opened her mouth.

"Teachers shouldn't butt into this. This is a problem between us students".

Ryuu-en-kun, who showed no fear even against teachers, said so as a follow up.

"Well, I won't force you to make a decision right away. A teacher's eye is also on us. That's why I'll hear your answer once the sports festival ends. Will you end this with a million points and a kowtow or will you revive this matter and have the school deliberate on it? Which one will you choose?".

Then he added this as well.

"Don't think this problem will be over just because the sports festival ends, ok? I'll dig this matter back up thoroughly no matter what and fight against you. After school, you bring Suzune to me".

Saying that to Kushida-san, Ryuu-en-kun and Kinoshita-san both left the infirmary. Having been left behind, I stood while feeling a sense of loss.

"Are you ok? Horikita-san.....".

"I'm fine.....more importantly, how many minutes has it been. Sensei, how much longer is the lunch break?".

"It'll still be going on for about 20 minutes. You haven't eaten yet right? Better get it over with quickly".

It's already such a time.....it's not that extreme but I don't have time to be eating lunch right now.

Because I have to find Sudou-kun as quickly as possible.

"Excuse me".

Hurriedly, I left the two of them behind as I left the infirmary.

2

All of this, because of my negligence. All because I challenged this sports festival while thinking only of myself. The fact that Ryuuken-kun got his hands on our participation table and that he had planned something, and that his aim was to make me fall. I failed to see any of it coming. I was not mentally prepared for it.

That's why I became agitated and failed to come up with a solution and that's why I'm currently in a state of confusion. My gait feels heavier than before.

"This is pathetic.....".

That's right, I saw myself as being pathetic. As I approached the entrance, I noticed the presence of two people who walked into the school building. If they happened to be ordinary students, I wouldn't have even needed to pay attention to them. But that was not the case.

"Nii-san---".

Perhaps he heard it, perhaps he didn't. That small whisper of mine that leaked out, disappeared with the silence.

The student council president of this school as well as my older brother. Then also, one of the female students from the student council who works for my older brother. Secretary Tachibana.

Secretary Tachibana noticed my presence and diverted her gaze towards me, but my brother did not even spare me a glance.

I'm used to being ignored by him. Truthfully speaking, I'd like to call out to him and talk with him. However, as long as I'm floundering in Class D, I have neither the qualification nor the right to do so.

I endured it with a downcast gaze. It's not like my brother would stop for me anyways.

That was supposed to have been the case but---

"Do you understand exactly what sort of situation Class D is in right now in this exam?".

Those words were not directed at Secretary Tachibana, but words that Nii-san spoke while looking at me.

".....I am currently realizing it".

I honestly said so. It was my mistake for not thinking that the participation table's list would be leaked and aimlessly spending my days.

When it came to the details of the individual contests, I was brilliantly outsmarted by Class C.

"But please do not worry---I won't be troubling you, Nii-san".

That's right, that alone is something I must absolutely avoid doing. This incident is caused entirely by my shortcomings. Fortunately, he's offered to settle things with a million points and a kowtow.

Considering Chabashira-sensei is also a witness to that, it won't turn into a disaster at the last minute. If so, ultimately it may be for the better. Because now this could end without giving Nii-san any trouble.

But not like this, I wanted to have a proper conversation with him. That thought was my only regret.

Ideally, as I had set out to do, I would be able to do it in the final relay. But that dream of mine disappeared with the leg injury I received. But just by letting him see this wounded figure of mine, my brother won't be sparing any pity for me.

That's why let's stay positive. Now that I've been beaten to this extent, I have nothing left to lose. Besides, I understand there's still something left in this sports festival that I'm capable of doing.

"Please excuse me".

Saying that, I dashed through the entrance to the outside. Enduring the pain in my leg, I ran around the facility. To find Sudou-kun.

But I won't be finding him that easily. On this large campus, it would take up a considerable amount of time just to look around. When the remaining time had ticked down to about 10 minutes, I returned to the ground.

Due to the fact that the Recommended Only Participation events are drawing close, there's the possibility that Sudou-kun may have hurried back. Because

he has always tried his best to take top place amongst our school year.

I prayed for that to be so.

"As I feared, he didn't come back...".

If there's still somewhere I hadn't been to, it would have to be Keyaki Mall or the dormitory. There's also the possibility that he could be somewhere in the school building. It's proving quite difficult to find him.

And before me, he.....Ayanokouji-kun appeared. I wonder if he's just finished eating his lunch.

"You're breathing quite heavily".

"I'm looking for Sudou-kun. He hasn't shown up even once here?".

"Yeah. So far. Are you finally in the mood to persuade him?".

"It's because he's a valuable asset for Class D. Besides, even if I didn't want to, I'd end up realizing it".

"And that means?".

He appears to be interested in the changes to my mental state but right now it's pointless to tell him about Ryuuuen-kun. And besides, it's not like things will get better even if I tell him.

Kushida-san and I, as well as Chabashira-sensei. It's best to resolve this between just us.

The lunch break is already wrapping up but Sudou-kun has not yet shown up. Class D, already in dire straits for the afternoon's Recommended Only

Participation events, reeled from the loss of Sudou-kun and defeat seems certain.

"Do you have any idea where Sudou might be? Time's running out".

"No, not yet. But the places he could go to are limited. If he doesn't want to be seen, then the possibility that he's returned to the dormitory is high".

"Is your leg ok?".

"I'd be lying if I said it didn't hurt, but it's not like I can't run. Will you come along?".

"I'll have to decline. Even if I act together with you, I'd only be getting in your way".

"I see.....".

That may be convenient for me as well. I thought so as I endured the pain and started walking.

Chapter 7: What You and I Lack

The bell rang and the latter half of the sports festival began. It's now time for the Recommended Only Participation events. It's expected that for the remaining four contests, elites chosen from within the ranks of the class will be the ones participating.

"Speaking of which, Ayanokouji-kun will be participating in the scavenger hunt right?".

"If possible I'd rather not though.....".

It can't be helped though since I happened to win at rock-paper-scissors. Six from each class will be participating in the scavenger hunt contest. It's a contest set up such that a single person from each class will be running in it, causing four people to form one group for that race.

As a result, the obtainable points are set higher than they were during the individual contests.

"The problem is the absentee, Sudou-kun.....".

Since Sudou, who would have participated in all contests, happens to be absent, he'll be treated as an absentee at the rate this is going. Whether to prepare a substitute or not. That is the question.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to hear your opinion, Ayanokouji-kun. I'd like to ask Horikita-san for her opinion but that doesn't seem to be an option".

That's right. Horikita has yet to return to our camp. I had thought in the worst

case scenario, she'd be back alone by the time the afternoon half started but this is unexpected.

That leaves the possibility that things may be proceeding swimmingly intact.

"If it's Hirata, you'll be able to make the right call even without relying on me, right?".

".....I wonder. But, as for my personal opinion, I think a substitute will be necessary. When it comes to individual contests, our class is probably the worst. That's why in order to win in overall points, we have to win here".

"Then, the question is who to use as a substitute".

"100,000 points are required for a substitution after all. I'll do something about the points. The substitutes we can use that I think would be fine are Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun".

"Because if they take 1st place, they'll be able to acquire points for their tests?".

"Yeah. I think it's a good idea to make use of that merit".

It can indeed be said that in the scavenger hunt, where luck is a significant factor, this would be a good plan. Ultimately, Ike and Yamauchi had a rock-paper-scissors duel and Ike, who won, triumphantly joined the participating group.

"Alright! I'll try my hardest for Sudou's sake too!".

His fighting spirit alone doesn't seem like it'd lose to Sudou's. Prior to the contest, the referees provide an explanation.

"There are items marked as being difficult to obtain in this scavenger hunt. It is possible to draw again but there will be a 30 second window before you'll be able to do so. You will need to inform the referee present when you draw lots of your desired course of action. In addition, the contest will end as soon as 3 contestants clear it. That will be all".

After that supplementary explanation was given, I prepared to join in on the second round of the scavenger hunt I'm scheduled to participate in.

"Yo".

The man beside me called out. I don't even need to look, it's Ryuuuen from Class C.

"So that muscle head won't be participating in the scavenger hunt? I figured he'd participate for sure. Also, I can't see Suzune anywhere. Surely they aren't fucking each other backstage right?".

"No idea. It has nothing to do with me.....I also don't know the internal affairs of my class very well".

"What a shitty response".

It appears he immediately lost interest in me, as Ryuuuen walked away. But still, it seems like he'll be a part of the same second race too. Not too long after, the first race began.

It seems the other classes have assembled their athletic students properly as Ike was overtaken from the start.

However, what's crucial here are the contents of the items scavenged. Coming in at last place, and finally reaching the box, Ike drew his lot and checked it.

The lead contestants are already going this way and that, leaving the grounds in search of their designated items to scavenge.

"Uoooooooooh!".

Loudly striking a guts pose, Ike suddenly turned and ran back towards the starting area.

"Ayanokouji! Please lend me your left foot. Your left foot!".

"Left foot?".

"Shoes, I meant your shoes! That's my item!".

What he showed me was a note with 'Classmate's Left Foot (Shoes)" written on it.

"No, if I gave it to you, I wouldn't be able to run anymore.....".

"Geh!?".

He came running back because I happened to be close by but he can't just borrow a shoe from someone who will be running in this very scavenger hunt. Ike panicked over his mistake and rushed over to the camp.

However, it appears the other students are also having a hard time with the scavenger hunt since I still couldn't see anyone heading towards the goal. Ultimately, through luck of the draw, Ike stumbled upon a way to prevail and in the tumultuous opening act, he seized 1st place.

"This is no trifling matter.....".

Then after several tens of seconds, Class A came in followed by Class B and then Class C at last place.

And with its end, the signal came for us to start with the second race. I then also headed towards the area where the lots are drawn, following slightly behind the faster ones who dashed forward.

"Now then, what exactly's going to be written down.....".

I inserted my hand into the box that's placed in front of me. Inside, there seems to be quite a bit of paper. Taking care to not draw multiple pieces of paper, I snatched one out.

I unfolded the paper that had been folded into fourths.

"Bring along 10 friends".

".....you've got to be kidding right?".

The moment I skimmed across the paper, I could feel my field of vision darkening.

Even a single friend would already be a difficult hurdle for me but 10? They've got to be kidding right? Even as I mulled it over in my head, I failed to think of 10 people.

"What are you spacing out for! Hurry it up, Ayanokouji!".

Ike, who had gotten cocky after getting 1st place, shouted out to me like that but there's nothing I can do about it. Two people I could count as friends within the class (Horikita and Sudou) are both absent and that alone puts me in checkmate. As long as Ichinose and Kanzaki are my enemies, I can't quite rely on them either.....

"I'd like to request a change.....".

I requested to change my lot in accordance with the rules. Already, the other students are running off in pursuit of their items. I stood by for 30 seconds and drew my second lot.

"The person you love".

"No, no, no.....no, no, no, no".

What the hell is up with the contents of these lots. I can't help but think they're screwing around with me.

"C-Change".

I could sense the confusion coming from the Class D students who were watching me but what can't be helped just can't be helped. If someone else were to draw something like this, I wonder what they'd do.

If I showed this paper to someone of the opposite sex, it might as well count as a confession. Even if I ask them to just play along, it's already considerably embarrassing.

Before deciding on the item to scavenge, I ended up shouldering a minute of handicap.

"A table clock".

On the third attempt, I finally ended up choosing something I could realize at last.

However, if it's a table clock I'll have to head into the school building for one.....?

Just in case, I tried searching for a clock in the teachers' tent but I couldn't find a table clock there. While I busied myself with it, three contestants ended up reaching the goal.

".....this is impossible".

Abandoned by fortune, I was unable to produce any results and came in at last place. It's not about holding back or not holding back, this is just a contest where I simply can't do anything about it.

1

The afternoon contests should be starting right about now on the school grounds. At last, I've found the red-haired student sitting on a sofa in the dorm's lobby.

"Sudou-kun".

I called out to him with a gentle voice so as to not startle him. Sudou-kun put some slight distance between us before turning back to look at me.

"...Horikita".

The reason he's surprised by my appearance is probably because he simply didn't expect me to show up here.

"Why did you come here.....? Could it be you're here to persuade me?".

"Do I look like the type to come all the way here to persuade you?".

"It.....doesn't seem that way to me. Then why? Did you come here to scold me again?".

"I wonder. I'm also at a loss for words".

"Ahh?".

Sudou-kun tilted his head as though he didn't understand.

Why, I wonder. When I finally found Sudou-kun, I felt as though I couldn't say anything. I think back on why exactly I went to such lengths to look for him.

"If you withdraw, Class D will stand no chance".

"I suppose so. Matter of fact, aren't they in trouble right now?".

"Yes. I guess right about now they're at the very bottom and to turn things around, taking 1st place consecutively on the Recommended Only Participation events will be necessary. Even then, it'll still be pretty much impossible for us to stand at the top".

In our class, there are those who excel at sports much like Sudou-kun himself but overall, there are places where they prove themselves inferior to him in this sports festival.

"Even though I've been carrying them, damn it all. That bastard Hirata.....".

"He's not at fault simply for stopping your rampage. On the contrary, you should be grateful to him. If you had, by any chance, raised your hand against Ryuuuen-kun, you might've been disqualified from the sports festival itself".

"I just couldn't stand being on the losing side of it. What he did was against the rules".

"The problem with you is your speech and conduct but you were earnestly trying your best for the sports festival".

In this case, he acted unlike himself. In a sense, that in itself is a miracle. For the sake of his classmates, he acted as a leader in spite of his lack of experience and tried to carry them through the sports festival.

He was as quick to fight as ever but at the root of it all was a desire to win.

I could tell just by seeing how he's taken 1st place in all contests save for the 200 meter dash he was absent for and it's clear from afar that even in the team contests, he's been an overwhelming force.

In regards to that, I need to acknowledge Sudou-kun and evaluate him accordingly.

"But there are also plenty of areas you need to reflect on. The ultimate proof of that is the fact that you're here all on your own".

"What's the supposed to mean?".

"If you were someone people could trust in and rely on, then rather than me you would surely have a lot of classmates here instead. To convince you to come back".

Perhaps that angered Sudou-kun once again, he gave the table a light kick.

"That attitude's the problem here. Class D's always been bossed around by you. The midterm exam, the incident with Class C. Snapping and going on a rampage this time around. It's because you keep doing things like that that no one will follow you".

"So you're seriously going to preach to me. Spare me, Horikita. I'm really pissed off".

Having been judged to this extent, Sudou-kun started fidgeting and frantically letting out his feelings of irritation.

"I do think I've done something bad but I can't hold myself back either. That's why it can't be helped right?".

"Amazing how you thought you could carry everyone like that".

"I never said that in the first place. The other guys begged me to, right?".

"But even so, since you've accepted, there's a certain responsibility you bear".

"Shut it. I don't care about something like that".

"You're still as childish as ever. In society, this isn't something you'll be forgiven for, right?".

"Shut up!".

He shouts. He directed a fierce glare at me as though to intimidate me into shutting up. But I won't give in.

"Tch.....what's the matter?".

If it had been anyone else, they would've given in.

Sudou-kun ran out of patience with me after I didn't once quiver and he averted his eyes.

"Your weakness is that you're too easy to figure out. What would happen if you didn't happen to study? What would happen if you were to instigate violence? You lack the imagination to think ahead".

"Ahh damn it all, it's already over! Leave me alone already! Your preaching is making me want to vomit!".

Sudou-kun does want to make things work, he wants to stay here at this school. But even so, to continue instigating violence. There's got to be some circumstances behind it. Unless he learns the rules and routines, Sudou-kun will stay on this loop forever.

I---even though I desired to be alone forever.

That's why, even if I end up being hated, I won't stop my words. Right here, I will see him for all that he is.

"If you dislike it, you're free to hit me".

"Huh? That sort of thing.....there's no way I could do that sort of thing.....".

"Is it because I'm a woman? I may be late in saying this, but I'm quite strong. I'll knock you down before your fist reaches me".

"So you fully intend on fighting back.....? Honestly, you're a really strange woman. Just like you said, the others didn't come chasing after me. But you alone, came after me".

Although that's partly because Ayanokouji-kun admonished me on the matter though. It's just, I don't feel the need to say that in particular since I'm standing here because I'm convinced of that. But perhaps Sudou-kun's also a bit spent, since he started talking as though to suppress his anger.

"The reason I accepted the role of leader is because I thought the sports festival would be a piece of cake as long as I'm good at sports. And it is a fact that I didn't lose to anyone from the other classes. But you know, it's in the nature of team contests that you can't do anything as long as someone's there to pull your leg. Both in capture-the-flag and in the cavalry battle, I lost no thanks to those useless guys. I just couldn't stand that".

I understand that this is a situation that warrants complaints.

Certainly, even for our school year, Sudou-kun's athletic ability is outstanding.

But there isn't a single person with the capability to keep up with him.

"I can tell just by looking that you hate losing in a field you're good at. But is that really all?".

If he simply doesn't wish to lose to anyone at sports, then it wasn't necessary for him to accept the role of leader. Sudou-kun shouldn't realized too that they'd struggle when it comes to team contests.

In other words, there's definitely another reason behind this.

Sudou-kun tilted his head a bit as though he were giving it some thought but soon enough, he gave his reply.

"...for them to pay attention to me and respect me I guess? I thought maybe I could have something like that for myself. I wanted to show up the ones who made fun of me.....lame, right?".

Once he had regained his calm, he realized both his own desires and the fact that he abandoned them all without being able to fulfill them and he forcefully scratched his crimson dyed hair.

"And with this I'm also a complete pariah, huh? Well, that's fine. It just means I'll be going back to how it was like in middle school for me".

".....".

Listening to those words from Sudou-kun, I fell silent. Now then, I wonder if all my preaching will reach his heart. I was argued down by Ayanokouji-kun, lost to Ryuuuen-kun and my brother abandoned me too.

I felt I had no right to reprimand him.

It's because someone I had seen as being beneath my level all this time, now seemed to not be so anymore. Certainly, Sudou-kun is clumsy and is the type of person to not think ahead.

He possesses an uncontrollable disposition.

However---by changing perspectives, I could also begin to see him as someone who continued fighting all alone while confronting that loneliness. He who possessed the courage to confront that solitude may yet be far superior to me.

While feeling anxiety that my words won't reach him, I sincerely tried to squeeze out those words. I continued the conversation that was never my forte.

"....it's strange. These feelings of yours are basically the same as my own".

"Ahh? What do you mean?".

"The desire to be respected by someone. The desire to continue fighting on your own. I'm the same".

He and I are similar. In the sense that we both carry a certain contradiction yet continue fighting against that solitude.

"Thinking back, the signs were there. Back during the midterm exams, I felt irritation towards the students who could not study, including you. I felt angry at people who couldn't even do what's natural. I just couldn't muster up the desire to cooperate with you. Compared to that, you did brilliantly in this sports festival. Because at the very least, you carried the ones who could not handle sports".

Studies and sports. Even if they happened to be the antithesis of the other, in theory they may pretty much be the same. What I had felt towards Sudou-kun and the others in those days, Sudou-kun is strongly feeling that now.

"Then you understand my feelings. Right now, I want to be alone".

"And I truly wish to let you be. But right now, if we lose you, Class D's defeat will be certain".

This isn't just about Sudou-kun's personal problems. It'll have a significant impact on the class's chances of victory.

"You too, abandoned the class at first like me right? Then you have no right to lecture me".

Briefly retorting, Sudou-kun gently stood up from the sofa.

"...that's right".

That's right, there is no weight behind my words. Because up until the very last moment, I thought the same thing as Sudou-kun.

"You're disappointed, right? But I'm used to it. I was born to garbage parents. That's why I'm also garbage. I came here because I absolutely didn't want to turn out like them but slowly, I'm ending up just like my parents.....".

Perhaps he intends on returning to his room, Sudou-kun looked at me once with eyes that had abandoned everything. I wonder what words I should call out with after seeing that. I myself no longer know.

"It's wrong to think that someone born to garbage will turn out to be garbage. You can't blame others for how you'll turn out. That's something you have to decide for yourself. I won't acknowledge that mindset of yours".

I forcefully rejected it. Because I felt that despite understanding him, I had to reject it still.

"If the sister of a genius will also turn out to be a genius, just how much trouble would be saved.....?".

"What do you mean?".

"...right now, you're still a nobody. To become a somebody, that's up to you. At the very least, you have outstanding talent in the field of sports. Sure, you have a rough attitude but you still advised plenty of students during practice. It's precisely because I've been watching you do so that I know you're not a hopeless person. But right now, you're scum. You're looking away from reality and trying to escape from it. If you continue trying to disappear like this, then that's when I'll truly label you as garbage".

"Then just label me as garbage already. I don't care about that anymore".

"So you're going to throw a tantrum just because things didn't go your way?".

No matter what fierce words I throw at him, no actual response came from him.

Perhaps he's already locked down his heart but 'I' am incapable of unlocking that door.

The bell rang, signalling the end of the lunch break. The signal that the afternoon contests will be starting. This confirms that Sudou-kun won't be making it in time for the scavenger hunt.

"Go back, Horikita".

"No. I cannot go back until I've brought you along".

"Then do as you wish".

Sudou-kun starts walking again and he enters the elevator.

"I'll be waiting here for you to come back. Forever".

".....do as you wish".

The elevator door closes shut. Up until the very end, I did not avert my eyes from him.

2

"Fuu~.....that was unfortunate. A little bit more and we'd have been able to beat Class B.....".

"I guess so".

We prepared a substitute for the omnidirectional tug-of-war in Sudou's absence but we were still soundly defeated just now. We challenged them

believing in the slim possibility of success. But we lost. We had plummeted down to the bottom.

As a class, we had decided to re-evaluate our coordination but it was Hirata who, more than anyone else, received the most damage.

Just like with the scavenger hunt, he bore the burden of providing the points necessary for substitution and as such, he's lost a considerable amount of points. It's an extremely dire situation where we have to tackle any and all contests without our greatest ace, Sudou.

"Doesn't look like Sudou-kun's coming back yet".

"Hirata, are you planning on providing the points for the next contest as well?".

"Yeah. Because it's necessary. A necessary expenditure".

But even so, conveniently for us, Hirata's paid for three so far. Twice for Sudou who missed out on the scavenger hunt and the omnidirectional tug-of-war and once for Horikita, who missed out on the latter. It wasn't cheap by any means.

If he has to pay for the next one as well it would come to a total of 500,000 points. No matter how many private points he's saved up, it's still overspending.

"Well.....leaving aside Sudou, Horikita will probably pay for herself later".

She is indeed absent, but it's quite the inhuman thing to do having Hirata pay for it all. Fortunately enough, she's obtained a large sum of points from the previous exam similar to Hirata himself.

"Isn't it about time you let them bear the cost too? The ones participating, I mean".

"That may be so. But 100,000 points is a large amount and saving up that much isn't easy after all. I'm the one who went ahead with the substitutions and all so I can't really go around asking them for points".

"Don't you think that the one who bailed is at fault?".

On top of that, Hirata got beat up by Sudou. But it seems Hirata thinks nothing of it.

"There's the class's victory to consider too but if we can rank higher and win prizes here it'll give us an advantage in the exams to come. It's best to participate still. If they have to pay their own way through, there are probably a lot of students who would pass up on this".

Certainly, most of the students who are in dire need of points in their exams also fret over their financial troubles. Of course they'd want points for themselves but since there's the possibility they'd plummet to the bottom instead and be at a disadvantage in their exams, they'd hesitate.

Because it'd be a miserable sight if they happened to lose both money and points.

The remaining contests are the mixed gender three-legged race and the last one: the 1200 meter relay.

Hirata tries calling out to see if there's anyone interested in participating. But before he could, Kushida came running over.

"Umm, Hirata-kun. Could you let me help out too? I'd like to participate in the three-legged race. Of course, I'll pay the points for it.....can I?".

"Ehh?".

Surprisingly enough, it was Kushida who put her own name forward.

"I can't let Hirata-kun be the only one bearing the burden. Besides, I also want to try my best to contribute for Horikita-san and Sudou-kun's sake as well...".

"Of course that's a welcome offer. Since Kushida-san's pretty good at sports too".

"Thanks. I'll go tell Chabashira-sensei that I'll be participating in Horikita-san's place then".

Saying that, she ran off.

"Then, now for the boy. I'll ask around".

"Hey, Hirata. This contest, is it ok if I act as Sudou's substitute? I'll pay the points for it too. There's no guarantee I'd be able to contribute to the class but if that's fine with you".

"Well---sure. Of course I don't mind.....but are you fine with that?".

"It feels awkward having you bear the burden alone. Besides, I'm feeling a bit anxious about the next exam. I'd like to secure at least one point".

Having received permission, I immediately went after Kushida. I cut into the conversation she was already having with Chabashira-sensei.

"So, Ayanokouji, you're going to be Sudou's substitute?".

"Yes".

"This is unusual, considering you like playing spectator".

"So Ayanokouji-kun's going to be replacing Sudou-kun. I'm looking forward to it".

"Likewise. I'm not very fast so you'll have to forgive me for that".

"I think rather than speed, the three-legged race puts more emphasis on coordination though".

While having that conversation, we made preparations right away for the contest.

"Yahho~ Ayanokouji-kun. And also Kikyo-chan. Looks like we're in the same group---".

Ichinose came up to us while saying that. Both her and Shibata, that is.

"Wah---tough opponents. To think the two of you would team up.....".

"That's true for Shibata-kun but I'm not that special you know? I haven't gotten 1st place in anything yet".

"Really? That's unexpected".

"I got 2nd place once and I got either 4th place or 5th place for the rest. To tell the truth, someone else was supposed to participate but she sprained her foot in the 200 meter dash before lunch. Looks like quite a lot of people are getting injured this year".

Apparently Class B has their own absentees. So this pair is an improvised one.

"Shibata-kun, is it ok if I tie it now?".

"Okay".

The Class B pair who began happily tying their string.

"Alright then, we should too.....umm, can I leave tying the string to you? It wouldn't look good for a man to start tying it on his own".

"That's fine. But how strange, when you practiced with Horikita-san, you were the one who tied it right, Ayanokouji-kun?".

It's a frequent thought of mine but she's really observing the class quite well.

"She's...an exception. I can't afford to do the same with other girls".

"Do you mean to say she's someone special to you?".

Rather than a special someone, it'd be more factual to say she's someone with a special status. But it'd be hard conveying that.

"More importantly, it's hard to believe Horikita-san went looking for Sudou-kun.....how should I put it, Horikita-san always makes it a point to never miss classes right?".

"I was also surprised".

"But even so, you didn't look that surprised to me".

Kushida said so while crouching down and tying the string to my foot.

"It's just because I find it difficult to express myself facially in the first place".

"You mean a poker face?".

"Kushida".

"Wait just a bit longer ok? I'll be done tying in a bit".

Replying in a cute voice, Kushida tied the string beautifully. I decided to abruptly interrupt Kushida.

"It's you, isn't it? The traitor who leaked Class D's participation table to Class C".

"...come on, Ayanokouji-kun. What's the matter with you all of a sudden? Even for a joke, that's far too cruel---".

"I saw it. You snapped a picture of the participation table we drew up on the blackboard with your phone".

"That's just a record so I don't forget. It'd be a big problem if I forget my own turn after all".

"To only memorize one's own turn through writing it down by hand. Wasn't that the consensus?".

"Really? Sorry, I forgot".

Having finished tying the string, Kushida slowly stood back up with her usual smile directed at me.

"By any chance, did that cause you to suspect me?".

"Sorry but I'm confident I'm right. If not, Class C wouldn't be able to attack us this conveniently".

The time the two of us can be together like this is limited. In a way, this is the perfect opportunity to talk.

"Hmm, but still, even if someone were to leak Class D's participation table by any chance, that doesn't necessarily mean Class C will be able to conveniently win right?".

"That's true".

Of course, since it's not like Class C went unmatched in all the contests, it's difficult to ascertain the truth. Even if they've figured out Class D's order in its entirety, whether they win or not will still depend on the members from Class A and Class B.

Still, it is a fact that this raises their chances of winning that much more.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun. Assuming I'm the culprit responsible for leaking the class's information---and me snapping a picture with my phone was the deciding factor, then that must mean you knew the participation table had been leaked right? Then why didn't you alter the participation table later? Couldn't you have submitted a new participation table later as a countermeasure? If you had done so, the participation table I snapped a picture of would become outdated and meaningless, don't you think so?".

"That would be pointless. If the traitor is a student from Class D, all of that would mean nothing".

"And this means?".

"For instance, suppose we altered the participation table in time like you said, Kushida. Then we'd keep quiet and submit the new participation table. Even if we do that, as long as the traitor's a student from Class D, they'd still be able to check and inspect it anytime they want. If they simply asked Chabashira-sensei to show them the participation table, it's well within class rights for them to see it".

If it's just checking the list, then you'd be allowed to do so at any time. In other words, even if we acted behind the scenes, ultimately the order will still be figured out if you repeatedly check the participation table.

Kushida...no, Ryuuuen would surely do so in that case.

"But if you had kept the participation table hidden until the last minute and then submitted it, then whoever sees it after wouldn't be able to make any alterations to it anymore right? I still think you could it prevented it beforehand".

"In that case, then perhaps the participation table might not have been leaked. I didn't think that far ahead".

"Ahh, but if you did something like that on your own then it might end up confusing the others later I guess---.....that's no good right?".

That line of thought isn't too shabby. To neuter the spying being done on the participation table, it's necessary to act in advance. Certainly, like Kushida had said, by submitting the participation table just before the deadline, it would be impossible to accomplish anything even if one obtains said information since the deadline has already passed.

However, doing so would cause confusion amongst our classmates who aren't in the know. It would also invite animosity from them since alterations had been made onesidedly despite everyone having already reached a consensus.

That is precisely why, taking that and the possibility of a leak into account, the optimal course of action would have been to come up with multiple participation table patterns for the class.

By doing so, no matter which one is submitted in the end, we'd still be able to compete regardless. If so, it would also act as a countermeasure for any leaks and it wouldn't invite any animosity from the class either, the opponents we'd face based on this participation table would also be random so there would be nothing they can do about it.

The leak would be completely neutered.

"I get the gist of it but I'm not the culprit you know? But I don't want to suspect my classmates either".

"Then shall we confirm it with Chabashira-sensei? Whether or not any students have gone out of their way to check the list after the participation table was submitted. If such a person exists then surely they'd be the culprit".

Especially if someone like Kushida, who had already confessed to taking pictures of it on her phone, happened to have gone out of her way to go see it then she'd be all the more suspicious for it.

".....".

Kushida closed her mouth and for the first time, her smile disappeared. In other words, it's an implicit answer that meant an affirmation. However, she smiled deeply again right away.

"---fufu. You're really something else, Ayanokouji-kun".

Kushida laughs. It was a face I had seen before, a Kushida I didn't know.

"It can't be helped if the cat's out of the bag. That's right, I leaked the information on the participation table".

"You admit it then?".

"Yeah. It'd have been surely exposed either way if you had asked Chabashira-sensei. It was only a matter of time. Besides, even if I told you the truth, Ayanokouji-kun, I'm confident I won't be exposed. You haven't forgotten, have you? My uniform that you touched? If that's revealed, it'll become a big deal you know?".

It's a threat that if I were to expose Kushida as the traitor to someone, she'd submit her uniform with the fingerprints on it to the school.

"Certainly, I won't be able to expose you as the culprit. But, by the way, tell me something. The exam on the cruise. That result came about because you informed all the students of the fact that you're the 'target' through Ryuuen, right? And you asked Ryuuen for a favor in return for you leaking that information".

"And that favour would be? Do you know what I wanted to accomplish so badly that I'd even betray the class for it?">

"If you act this blatantly during the sports festival, I'd end up wising up to it even if I didn't want to. It's the same request you wanted to make to me a while back isn't it?".

"Ahaha.....yeah, I see. So Ayanokouji-kun really figured it out".

"Yeah. Why you would betray the class. I wanted to know the exact reason behind it".

"It's because I want to 'expel Horikita Suzune'. That's the reason".

"I just couldn't figure out the reason why you're so persistent when it comes to targeting Horikita though".

I had wanted them to resolve this matter between themselves before the

sports festival but things didn't pan out that conveniently.

"Sorry but I'm going to get Horikita-san expelled. No matter what you say, I won't change my mind on this".

"In other words, in order to accomplish that, you'd even sabotage Class D?".

"That's right. I don't mind not being able to climb up to Class A. I'll settle for getting Horikita-san expelled. But don't get me wrong. Once Horikita-san is no longer here, I'll wholeheartedly cooperate with everyone from the class and aim for Class A. I promise you that".

Apparently, getting Kushida to stop is impossible. She's committing this act of treason with that sort of strong resolve. If necessary, she'd likely approach even people like Katsuragi, Ichinose or Sakayanagi.

"Ahh, but I have changed my mind about something. Just now too. That's the fact that you, Ayanokouji-kun, are now on my list of people to expel. In other words, after the two of you have been eliminated, I'll aim for Class A".

She said so with her usual, untiring smile. An expression that's almost dazzling.

"Haven't you considered the possibility that Ryuuen might expose you?".

"I'm not an idiot either so I haven't done anything that would leave any evidence behind. Ryuuen-kun's capable of casually tricking people and he's also a liar. Well, whether or not he'd betray me is a gamble I made though".

Even so, I just wanted to say there are plenty of ways to deceive someone. Looks like Kushida is serious about crushing Horikita.

The way this school is set up, if there's a traitor amongst your allies then you'd end up repeatedly fighting desperate fights. The order on our participation table, our strategy, all that information has been leaked. To ask us to win in spite of all this is unreasonable.

Well...the side that assumed there's a traitor present and was left unable to formulate any strategies is also at fault though.

I'd expect someone truly talented to instead use the traitor and pull a stunt to pave way for victory.

"Horikita-san's a mess throughout the sports festival. Shame you couldn't save her, right?".

I don't know about that. After giving her that brief reply, we participated in the three-legged race while antagonizing one another.

3

Roughly an hour has passed since Sudou-kun left. If the programme has progressed smoothly then they should be on the cusp of the final contest right about now. The hole left behind by Sudou-kun isn't small by any measure. I can imagine Hirata-kun and the others putting up a good fight but I can't expect much in the way of results.

The powerless me could not do anything except aimlessly and dumbfoundedly stand around.

All I could do was to keep standing in front of that elevator. Even if I'm told to go back to our camp and withdraw, I lack the ability to pay the points necessary for a substitute. The points I have on hand will later be confiscated

by Ryuu-en-kun. In other words, I cannot pay for the student who will be participating on my behalf. I'd only be a powerless existence even if I were to go back.

But that's not the only reason why I cannot afford to leave this place.

Even if I only left briefly, were Sudou-kun to come back in that period, he'd surely be crestfallen. Besides, in spite of the fact that Class D's defeat is all but certain, I thought I'd like to do what I can.

I believe Sudou-kun will come back.

That's all there is to it.

And then, that feeling paid off.

"You...did you seriously stick around?".

"You finally came back, Sudou-kun".

I maintained my composure but deep down inside, I was happy.

To the point I spontaneously called out when I saw the figure of Sudou-kun in the elevator.

I'm truly grateful there are cameras monitoring the interior of the elevator. Because I was able to gain time to calm myself.

"Isn't it already over? The sports festival, I mean".

"That may be so. But if we go back now, we may still be in time for some contest".

"What's the point? Even if we participate in something like that, we may as well have already lost".

"Certainly a disastrous outcome beyond our expectations may be waiting for Class D. I had to withdraw thanks to my injury and Kouenji-kun was absent from the start. And Sudou-kun also withdrew halfway through it. Our classmates too, compared to the other classes, don't have much of a shot at winning".

The Recommended Only Participation events I wanted to tackle in hopes of turning the situation around would surely prove to be a disaster too.

"Since you've come all the way back here, I assume this means you feel like going back to the competition?".

"Nah. I just came here to check if you're still here or not.....".

"That's right. I've been sorting out various thoughts in my head while waiting an hour for you. What kind of person I am, what kind of person you are. I've been rethinking it. After all, you and I are similar".

Once alone, I had calmed myself and finally I feel like I've arrived at a clear answer.

"We have nothing in common. You and I are just too different".

"No. You and I are similar. The more I think about it, the more I feel that way".

This isn't a lie. These are words from the bottom of my heart.

"Always alone. Always lonely. But you believed you could do it and carried on that way. If there is a difference between us, it would be that the

acknowledgement we crave either derives from a single person or from a group of people. I've told you about the student council president before so you know about it right?".

"Yeah. That guy who's always putting on airs right? Looks like quite a guy".

"He's my older brother".

"...ahh?.....speaking of which, you said something about having quarreled with him....right?".

As Sudou-kun starts thinking back on it, I began speaking about my brother with Sudou-kun as though I were monologuing.

"Our sibling relationship is far from being a pleasant one. The reason behind that is my lack of talent. My outstanding brother dislikes being associated with someone as incompetent as me. That's why I tried my best to become someone talented. In both studies and sports. Even now".

"W-Wait a minute. Aren't you smart and good at sports too?".

"From an average person's perspective maybe. But from my brother's perspective, all this is nothing special. Merely what is normally expected".

In all likelihood, Nii-san reached my current level when he was either in his 1st or 2nd year of middle school. Or it could have been even earlier than that.

"That's why I ran, in order to catch up to my brother, without facing anyone around me. As a result, I was always alone. Whenever I looked back, I always saw that nobody had followed me. I had thought that was just fine. Because I believed as long as I am talented, then eventually my brother would acknowledge me. Even during this sports festival, I've been thinking according to a very calculative mindset. That if I participate in a lot of contests and produce results, then even my brother would stop to look at me.

That's also the sole reason why I said that I wanted to be the anchor during the relay. Because I had a fleeting hope that if I do so, he might call out to me or cheer for me. For the sake of the class, or for my own sake, deep down inside things like that were of secondary concern".

By confronting Sudou-kun's weakness, I also succeeded in confronting my own weakness.

"Does he really not acknowledge you? Even though you're trying this hard".

"Yes. Not one bit. But I finally realize now. I'm not talented at all. During this sports festival, I was beaten here and there all just as Ryuuken-kun had intended and I wasn't able to leave behind a single satisfactory result. There's no way my brother would acknowledge someone like me. The reason I'm aiming for Class A is so that my brother would acknowledge me. That hasn't changed. But I have realized the methods I've been using to achieve that are wrong. I'm not alone. That for the first time, by having allies, I may be able to get closer to that peak".

"Aren't you going to give up?".

"If there is a difference between us, that might be it. I will never give up. I'll work hard to be acknowledged by my brother, to become someone who isn't a disgrace".

"It'll be painful, for someone walking that path.....".

"I suppose so. If you're the only person in the world then you'd surely be at peace without having to suffer. But it's no use thinking about such things. Because we aren't alone in this world. There are billions of people in the world and even around us, there are plenty of people. We can't possibly ignore them".

A person cannot survive alone. They must walk that path with someone else.

This sports festival has proved to be a trial for Class D and yet it's become something to be thankful for.

"I said that you'd continue to act violent. And so I turned my back on you. But that wasn't the case. That wasn't the right answer. If it ever seems like you'll stray from your path again, I'll be there to pull you back onto it. That's why until we graduate, please lend me your strength. I too, promise to lend you my strength to the best of my ability".

I stared at his eyes. I looked without averting my eyes. Because I wanted him to accept my resolve.

"Until just a while ago, this wasn't the case.....why do your words have so much weight now?".

"It might be because I've honestly admitted the truth. The truth is.....that I'm a pathetic person and I've only been averting my eyes from that fact".

I can't flaunt this fact to others. But if it's someone who's the same as me, then that's a different story.

"I'll say this again, Sudou Ken-kun. Lend me your strength".

"Horikita.....".

Sudou-kun balled his hands into fists forcefully and hit himself on the forehead with them.

"Ahh.....what the hell is this feeling? I don't know but I feel like my eyes are

finally open.....".

He said so as he took a step towards me.

"I'll cooperate with you, Horikita. I.....I feel like my existence outside of basketball has been acknowledged for the first time. That's why I want to reply to those feelings of yours".

I could feel myself beaming with a natural smile towards those words of his. A feeling I've felt for the first time. I wonder what this throbbing in my chest is. The only thing I could tell is that it isn't something like friendship or love.

Something separate from those.....that's right, embarrassingly enough I now have someone I could call a comrade.

Different from both Ayanokouji-kun and my brother.

What I lack. Something I surely am in shortage of. However, I wonder if I've taken that small first step.

Epilogue: Beginning of a New Era

The last event of the second half, the 1200 meter relay that would bring the sports festival to a close is about to begin. Tensions are running high for everyone other than Class D.

"So this is the final event.....even for this one we'll have to prepare a substitute---".

"Hah, hah. Sorry, kept you waiting! What's going on?".

A breathless Sudou came back, with Horikita arriving soon after.

"Sudou-kun, you came back".

".....sorry, it took me some time to take a dump".

He had a bright and cheerful look on his face. However, quite a lot of students turned to look at Sudou coldly. Sudou took their stares head-on.

"Sorry. All because I snapped, I ended up hitting Hirata and caused morale to plummet. It's also my fault that Class D is in such dire straits".

Before anyone could blame him, Sudou said that and gave a deep bow. If Sudou had been the way he was just a while ago, he wouldn't have done such a thing even as an act.

I feel like something must have definitely happened.

Hirata, after a brief moment of surprise, laughed happily.

His cheek, which had swollen up a bit, looked painful. But he doesn't even seem to care about that.

"What's up with you, Ken? This is unlike you".

Ike unexpectedly cut in after seeing that.

"I have to admit I'm in the wrong if I have done something wrong. Please let me apologize to you too, Kanji".

"It's not like it's your fault I lost or anything. I'm not good at sports.....I'm sorry I wasn't of any use".

One apology led to another. The students who were glaring at Sudou too, have been unable to produce results the way Sudou had.

"If you haven't decided on the substitute for the relay then please let me run".

"There isn't a single student other than Sudou-kun we could leave it to. Right, everyone?".

The rules for the final event, the 1200 meter relay, requires that boys and girls be mixed. From each class, the runners must be evenly balanced between male and female.

Three boys and three girls each must run 200 meters.

"May I ask for a substitute runner.....? I won't be able to produce satisfactory results with this leg".

After Sudou's case wrapped up, Horikita requested that with an apologetic look on her face.

"Are you fine with that, Horikita? You tried so hard to be in this relay, right?".

"...it can't be helped. In this state, I'm not even sure I can win against Ike-kun. Sorry".

In this somber and grim meeting, after Sudou had done so, Horikita also gave a deep bow.

I wonder if she's ever been this honest up until now.

Both Horikita's heart and body have been thoroughly demolished by Ryuuen. The role of anchor she holds onto tightly, on this day at this time, is all because she had pictured herself by her brother's side.

Her hands trembling in frustration, she fought desperately against the dream that couldn't possibly come true.

If she forced the matter and participated in the contest anyways, then without a doubt, Class D would lose. Having heard that, Hirata nodded and decided that Kushida would be participating in her stead.

Then, with Sudou as the first one on the list, there's Hirata, Miyake, Maezono, Onodera. The five of them with Kushida as Horikita's replacement took on the challenge with that lineup.

It's because there aren't any other sprinters in Class D aside from them capable of participating. The members were confirmed and as I made eye contact with him, Hirata simultaneously opened his mouth.

"Umm...sorry about the suddenness, but the truth is I---".

But as though cutting him off, yet another male student started to speak.

"Please wait, I apologize but....would you let me withdraw too?".

The one who said so was Miyake, one of the boys slated to participate. He seemed to be dragging his right foot a bit.

"Actually, I sprained my ankle during the 200 meter dash before noon...I thought it'd get better with some rest but it's still hurting".

Apparently even here we've got students who've sustained injuries.

"In that case, looks like we'll need a replacement from the boys as well".

Having said that, Hirata closed his mouth and looked around.

However, for this final contest, no student would want to participate unless they were absolutely confident in their speed. After a brief wait, there were no volunteers and so I decided to make an offer.

"Then would it be fine if I ran? Of course, I'll pay the points for the substitution".

"Ehh, you will, Ayanokouji? Speaking of which, you.....are you fast?".

Of course, no one would have the impression that I'm a fast runner.

"I'm all for it. I've been watching him up until now and I think he's the kind of person who'll make sure he produces results".

A word from Hirata was enough to shut down anything resembling an objection. This is the weight behind the words of the man who earns trust on a daily basis. It left everyone incapable of objecting.

"Also, we can't say that Class D has its best members. That's why our strategy should be seizing the initiative and securing our lead. How about that, Sudou-kun? Considering the rules too, I think we'd secure predominance if we can

run ahead. If we can get the start right and if it's Sudou-kun, who runs fast, doing the overtaking then we may be able to gain some distance in one stroke. I'll maintain that lead and hand it over to the next student".

The ultimate relay where 12, including senior students as well, would have to start simultaneously.

Since lanes cannot be prepared for all 12, we'll have to start side-by-side.

The rule here is that you may take the inner lane from an opponent you have overtaken. In other words, the most crucial thing here is our initial positioning. If you can pull off a starting dash then you won't have to get caught up in a free-for-all.

"...well, no helping it. There's no other way if we want to win".

Sudou will go first. Hirata, whose speed is assured, will be going second.

After that, the three girls, including Kushida, will have their turn and in the end, it'll be my turn. We'll be going in this order. It appears even I have been given a higher evaluation compared to the girls since I was entrusted with the role of anchor.

As for the reason, they probably wanted to sandwich me in between the slower students. It saves me the trouble.

From across all school years and from across all classes, the chosen elites gather at the center of the grounds and amongst them the figures of the older Horikita as well as Nagumo of the 2nd years could be seen.

"I'll leave it to you, Sudou-kun!".

Hirata shouts and in the same vein, Kushida and the other runners also send shrill cheers flying Sudou's way. Sudou, looking determined, enters the course. It seems the 1st years have it good to a certain extent, since Class D is on the innermost lane. It's set up such that Class A of the 3rd years is on the outermost lane.

Since there are three girls when it comes to the 3rd years, it can be said that we'll have an overwhelming starting advantage.

As excitement peaked, the last relay finally began.

Of course, Class D no longer has any chance of winning the sports festival but if we can obtain victory here, it may alter future events drastically. They must have had such a premonition.

Cheering voices came from our camp as well.

"That was close. A bit longer and I would have withdrawn".

"I suppose so. Miyake being injured was unexpected".

From the start, the plan was for me to replace Hirata and participate in the last relay instead. Of course, no one other than Hirata knew of that.

"This is fine, right? Ayanokouji-kun?".

"Yeah. Sorry about having you go around laying the groundwork".

"It's the natural thing for me to do as part of Class D. I'd rather we not keep getting beat by Ryuuken-kun too. It's alright if I assume he'll be slightly surprised by you running, right?".

"I'll do my best to not let you down. More importantly, for now let's cheer

Sudou on".

Sudou made a good start the moment the starting signal rang out without so much as a hint of nervousness.

A dash that had the best timing that I've seen so far. From the very first step, he had enough force to overtake 11 people. Wah! I could hear such cheers fly along with the sprinting students.

"Amazing, fast".

Even Shibata, spectating from beside me, gave his praise. Sudou ran at an overwhelming pace.

The 2nd year and 3rd year boys too, were supposed to have been fast, but they got caught up in a free-for-all and were left struggling to position themselves.

Having overtaken them via that opening, Sudou maintained a lead of over 15 meters and came back.

"I'll leave it to you, Hirata!".

Class D is in an uproar over that lead. The baton passes to the next runner: Hirata.

The hybrid type man who excelled at both studies and sports. He shone brilliantly even here.

One after another, the other students followed in tow but the gap that had formed could not be bridged and our planned lead was maintained all the way

up to Onodera, who would be running third.

If there's a problem then it would be from this point. For a girl, Onodera is fast. However, the boys following her from behind were closing in on her. That lead will certainly be lost.

By the time it passed to Maezono, who's running fourth, the lead was almost nonexistent and even as she ran, she was overtaken by a boy from Class A of the 2nd years. One after another, new students began to run.

We participated whilst aiming for 1st place but as expected, the senior students are formidable. Furthermore, Onodera had been overtaken by someone from Class A of the 3rd years and one after another, they closed in on her. One from Class A of the 3rd years and one from Class A of the 2nd years each passed by her.

As expected of the competition, huh?

However, such happenings are an inherent part of the sports festival. A girl from Class A of the 3rd years who was fourth to be handed the baton, stumbled and fell about 50 meters before the next runner.

She panicked and got back up but someone from Class A of the 2nd years immediately took top spot via that opening and a severe gap formed.

By the time the baton passed to Kushida, fifth to run, Class D had already been overtaken by Class A of the same year and had fallen down to 7th place. As suspected, when it comes to overall capability, the other classes hold the advantage.

I thought we'd at least aim for the winners' podium but the fight appears to have become a difficult one.

In a situation where 1st years were unable to even compete, Class B of the 1st years alone managed to hold onto 3rd place with effort.

The ace of Class B who could gather attention to himself in a single stroke, Shibata, seems to be acting the role of the anchor and just like me, he took up his position and awaited his turn.

As the fourth runner from Class A of the 3rd years fell, the situation between the men lined up beside one another as anchors changed entirely.

"Looks like we win this fight, President Horikita. If possible, I'd have liked to run against you".

Glancing at the approaching top runner, a student from Class A of the 2nd years, Nagumo laughed.

There's about a 30 meter gap from the 3rd year's Class A student running in 2nd place. A distance at which those equal to one another in ability can never win.

"Even in overall points, we're likely to win. Looks like the dawn of a new era".

"Are you serious about changing it? The school, I mean".

"Up until now, there's been a lack of fun when it comes to the student council. It stubbornly stuck to protecting tradition. Even though you speak such harsh things you've never forgotten to leave behind a safety net. Soft rules that ensured expulsions won't occur. Such things are already unnecessary, aren't they? That's why all I'll be doing is creating new rules. For the ultimate meritocratic school system, that is".

Nagumo said so as he slowly started to walk forward. He started on an approach run to receive the baton closing in.

The baton is passed onto the representative of the 2nd year's Class A: Nagumo.

Not too long after, Shibata also received his baton under the ideal condition of being in 2nd place.

"Alright, nice! Leave the rest to me!".

Shibata, with fiery eyes, started running as though chasing after Nagumo.

Due to the students between us leaving, for just a moment, I made eye contact with the older Horikita.

There's not much to be gleaned from a brief conversation but this man is fighting once again.

"To think you're the anchor".

"I'm just replacing an injured man. Originally, your sister was slated to be in this position".

"I see. She's struggling in her own way then".

Even if it's only for this moment alone, Horikita has dreamed of standing alongside Horikita Manabu.

Even if she couldn't exchange words with him, she had probably intended on conveying her own feelings to him.

"I've been watching your class and up until a while ago I thought of you guys as a hopeless class. But in this final relay, I don't feel any of that from you

guys. What happened?".

"You sure are keeping an eye on us. Class D of the 1st years isn't really something you ought to be paying attention to, right?".

"I keep an eye on all classes. No exceptions".

"If something has changed then it'd be your sister".

"...I see".

No surprise. He only replied briefly with that usual, composed expression of his.

"I'll ask you this. What about you? I can't feel any passion from you".

"I'm the usual me. I have no interest towards this sports festival. I can already tell the outcome".

The class's feelings.

Sudou's feelings.

Horikita's feelings.

I have no strong interest in any of that.

It's just, I had a single premonition.

"You won't be able to see it after you graduate but...our class will become stronger".

"I have no interest in such an assumed future".

As the older Horikita glanced at his approaching teammate, I stopped him

with my words.

"Then in that case, would you happen to be interested in seeing exactly what kind of person I am?".

"What?".

The timing's about right to start on an approach run. However, just as I expected, he stopped.

"If you'd like me too, I don't mind racing against you".

"...you sure are a man who says the most fascinating things. Was it just my misunderstanding? Up until now, I thought you hated standing out and avoided taking any direct action. Even in this relay, I had thought you'd simply let things play out and end".

"If you'll abandon any possibility of making it to 2nd place in order to race me then I'll accept. It's not every day a 1st year and a 3rd year are lined up side-by-side to compete".

In response to my unexpected provocation, the older Horikita stopped entirely and turned to face me.

"Interesting".

Replying briefly as such, he no longer made any move. The one most bewildered by this would have to be the fifth runner for Class A of the 3rd years. He had done his best to carry the baton to hand over yet the brother received the baton while standing still.

"You did well".

"Ahh, ehh, ahh....".

The 3rd year whose name I didn't know left while in shock at the attitude of the older Horikita who had received the baton. In all likelihood, this is an unprecedented baton relay.

Naturally the spectators who had realized this bizarre situation turned their eyes towards the older Horikita.

Class A of the 3rd years, once 3rd place, was overtaken one after another and at last, Class D's Kushida approached me.

Kushida too, realized this bizarre situation but she ran over at full speed. A distance covered in a few more seconds.

"I'll just say this before the race".

"What?".

As the two of us started on our approach run, I said this one sentence.

"---run with everything you've got".

For just an instant, I felt that the older Horikita, who had disappeared behind my field of vision, laughed.

At this very moment, the baton passed over to me.

"Ayanokouji-kun!".

I accepted the baton Kushida handed over and as the opening act, I dashed forth at full throttle.

In my whole life up until this moment, I've never once ran seriously in this wide, sprawling world.

The situation is completely different compared to when I had continued running indifferently in that cold, inhuman room.

It's still the start of October. The cool season is still far off.

I basked in the cold wind.

I don't care about catching up to and overtaking the runner in front.

In this moment, all that matters is the race against the man running next to me.

As though cutting through the wind, at full speed, we closed the distance between us and the runner in front.

"You've got to be kidding right?".

As he was overtaken, the student gave a dumbfounded shout but he was left in the dust.

Also, I can no longer hear the cheers.

Strategy and ingenuity have become irrelevant.

All that remains is my one-on-one fight against Horikita Manabu, who is running next to me.

Beyond the first curve, beyond the straight line and finally to the last curve.

Alright---I'm going to accelerate even further---

Cheers that resembled angry bellows rang out throughout the grounds.

1

"...that was super fast".

After the contest, Karuizawa said that to me while averting her eyes from me.

"Isn't it just that my opponent happened to be slow?".

"No, no. Are you really saying that after seeing everyone's reactions?".

"Leaving jokes aside, ultimately I didn't beat the student council president, did I?".

"Well, there's no helping that. The person running in front of you fell".

As the two of us closed in on him at an astounding pace, the runner in front of me panicked and fell and ended up blocking my way.

I dodged him but that slight delay proved to be significant and Horikita's older brother ended up overtaking me.

I don't know what the result would've been without that accident but I don't really care for such things. At the very least, all that's certain is that I've gathered attention from all over the school with this final contest.

A lot of the ones who had finished running looked at me inquisitively.

"Ayanokouji! Aren't you a fast one! Have you been holding back until now!?".

Sudou, who came running over to me, forcefully slapped me on the back. Since he put all his strength into it, that hurt.

"Running is about my only forte after all. But that was overdoing it. I guess this is what you'd call hysterical strength".

And not just Sudou, but also several students who were surprised by my run came over to me and called out.

"That still doesn't explain it. That speed, I mean. You liar".

Slightly dragging her foot behind her, Horikita came over. She used her hand as though it were a blade and stabbed me in the abdomen.

"You guys, this isn't the sort of treatment you should be giving a soldier who fought his best.....it hurts".

Since Horikita came over to me, Karuizawa took her distance from me so as to not be a disturbance.

From afar, Sakura was also looking at me but since there's a crowd around me, she did not approach.

"If you had run like this from the start, then things would've been different.

But why did you suddenly get serious? Now you'll be basking in attention".

That's exactly it. Unlike Hirata or Shibata, students who were already recognized as being fast from way back or Sudou, who's been giving it his all since the very start of the sports festival, I've been half assing it up until now.

That gap will definitely have an influence but that depends on the way you think about it.

It's not particularly difficult to make it look like tampering with the list on the participation table, keeping me in reserve until now and all the manipulations behind the scenes were all part of Hirata and Horikita's strategy.

It's particularly effective against someone like Ryuuen, who likes to outplay people.

"Looks like they're going to be announcing the results soon. Let's go".

It appears the results will be announced at the same time as the closing ceremony. All the students turned towards the giant electronic notice board.

"Now then, we will be announcing the results for this year's sports festival---".

On the electronic notice board, we were divided up between the Red Team and the White Team and the tallying of the numbers began. The numbers began to rise.

The total acquired points from all 13 events. The winning team is.....

"The Red Team wins".

The points were displayed alongside those letters. It truly was a hard-won

battle but the Red Team, composed of the DA coalition, appears to have won.

"Next up, we will announce the overall points for each class".

Dividing up the 12 classes into three categories on the display, the overall points for each class were displayed all at once.

For us, the breakdown for the 2nd and 3rd years mean nothing. What's important is what position Class D is in.

1st Place: 1st year Class B

2nd Place: 1st year Class C

3rd Place: 1st year Class A

4th Place: 1st year Class D

"Ugyaah! As I thought! We've lost!".

"...well, I guess it'd end up like this".

It's great that the Red Team won but apparently we 1st years have been quite a liability.

I suppose it's an inevitability, having two absentees in the form of Kouenji and Sakayanagi ended up being a major factor in it.

For both the 2nd and 3rd years, Class A took 1st place with an overwhelming difference in points. Class D too, took 2nd and 3rd place and that displayed a high level of stability.

However sadly enough, despite having won as part of the Red Team, Class A only placed 3rd in terms of overall points and so that's a minus 50 points for them.

Since Class D is the lowest ranking one, that would be a minus 100 points.

Due to the White Team having lost, Class C will also have 100 points subtracted. As Class B is 1st place in terms of overall points, they'd gain 50 points and lose 50 points due to the White Team's loss and so it ended as a step back for all the classes.

Now that it turned out like this, I feel like everyone's overwhelmed and exhausted. Even after they've tried their best, their class points still decreased so it felt like it didn't pay off.

Of course, students who won out individually will be able to supplement any future exams with this so I won't go as far as to say it was all pointless.

"Lastly, we will be announcing the MVP for each school year".

This is the part Sudou's looking forward to the most in all likelihood.

If he can take 1st place, Sudou would be over the moon from having gained permission to call Horikita by her first name.

However---

The MVP for the 1st years is Class B - Shibata Sou.

That was displayed on the electronic notice board.

"Guaaaah! So that's how it is after all!".

Having lost his last hope, Sudou screams out. Shibata has consistently taken either 1st or 2nd place repeatedly. Sudou had placed 1st in all individual competitions but as expected, being absent had a significant effect.

The fact that he had also lost the relay that would've awarded him a high score was the final nail in the coffin.

He continued to stare at the electronic notice board in frustration even after the closing ceremony had ended.

"Sudou-kun, you didn't place first in our school year. You do remember the promise right?".

"...yeah, it's regrettable though. But a promise is a promise. I'll call you Horikita from now on".

"That's some impressive dedication".

Horikita laughed in a slightly teasing manner.

"I forgot to tell you this but I just remembered that you onesidedly pushed those conditions onto me and I haven't made any requests in turn yet".

"What's that mean?".

"If you take 1st place, then you'll call me by my first name. You proposed such selfish terms to me so isn't it natural that I make a request in turn now that you've failed to achieve that?".

"Well, that's, right.....".

"That's why I will punish you for not being able to achieve your objective. Never again will you use violence without a justifiable reason. I forbid it. Can you promise me that?".

"...it's a punishment, right? I'll keep that promise".

"Of course, don't forget that you're not the one who gets to decide what a justifiable reason is. That's either up to me or a third party".

Sudou obediently abided by that as well.

From this incident, he may have realized his own foolishness and may have decided to act more mature.

Horikita slowly turned her back and started to walk off.

"That's right...during this sports festival, much like you, I was unable to live up to everyone's expectations".

"Ahh? It can't be helped, right? Since you got injured and all".

"Even so, I cannot forgive myself. That's why I also need to be punished".

Horikita said so as she turned around and then, she said this.

"That's why if you wish to do so, I don't mind allowing you to call me by my first name".

"Hah? O-Oi?".

"That is my punishment".

It's Horikita's own way of making a compromise, it's what they call 'finding

common ground'.

"Although we're in last place, thanks to that I was able to gain hope for the fights to come. I am truly grateful".

"...o-oh".

Sudou shyly rubbed the bottom of his nose and looked in the other direction, blaming the setting sun for his reddened cheeks.

"Uooooooooooooohhhh, alriiiiiiiight!".

Sudou shouted loudly as though to blow away all fatigue and raised both his hands to the sky.

"This sports festival is awesome! It's awesome, Suzune!".

"Good for you, Sudou".

"Yeah!".

"Sorry about butting in while you're celebrating but do you have some time to spare?".

Just as we decided to wrap it up and approached the school building, someone called out like that. The one who said that was a composed looking girl.

I don't know her name and I don't know her personality either but the only thing I could tell was that she's a student from Class A that I noticed during the cavalry battle.

"After this, after you've finished changing that is, would you accompany me

for a bit?".

".....why me?".

"Because I have something to tell you. 5 o'clock. Come to the front gate".

"O-Oi, Ayanokouji. What's up with that, what's up with that? What's up with that kind of situation!?".

For a moment, I too imagined something along the lines of a confession but I can't sense anything like that from this girl.

"Oi. What do you mean by having something to tell---".

I tried to stop her but without even paying any further attention to me, the girl left.

"What's up with that? Has the springtime of youth come for you as well?".

"It doesn't seem like that's the case though.....".

"There's still the possibility that the girl, after seeing you show off as the anchor, fell in love with you at first sight".

"...good grief...".

Still, my heart isn't strong enough to ignore her when I've been called for a meeting.

After seeing off that unfamiliar girl, I changed clothes in the locker room and then returned to the classroom.

Since they were instructed to disperse at the closing ceremony, half of the students were already on their way back.

When Horikita, now in her uniform, came back to take her seat beside me a while later, I called out to her.

"This round was a complete defeat. Truly".

Horikita, who replied as such, showed not a hint of gloom on her face.

"But as for me, I feel like I was able to mature during this sports festival. I never thought the day would come when I'd use the words 'using failure as fuel' but.....truly, that's what I feel".

"That's right. If you feel like you were able to mature then isn't that just fine?".

"This class will become stronger. And we will definitely ascend to the upper classes".

"That doesn't suit you. It's sending shivers down my spine".

"...I suppose so. That is unlike me".

Perhaps she herself was bewildered by this as Horikita shyly averted her eyes.

"But there are still tons of problems before we can do so. There's a domestic problem we have to clean up too. But firstly, in order to do so, I'm going to need to kowtow".

"Kowtow?".

That word which suddenly came out concerned me but Horikita didn't really try to expand on that.

"It's something that has nothing to do with you. Thank you for today".

2

Having exhausted themselves in the sports festival, the students began leaving the classroom one after another, looking spent.

Since there doesn't seem to be any club activities today, Sudou-kun left while chatting with Ike-kun and the others.

My neighbour, Ayanokouji-kun, also appears to be leaving, as he hurriedly got up from his seat.

Perhaps he became curious about me, since I had yet to get up from my seat, as he looked towards me.

"You're not going back yet?".

"Yes, you see.....I have some business to take care of".

"Even though you usually always go back early, this is rather unusual".

"Such things do happen sometimes. Well then, that's enough for today".

"Yeah. I'll see you the day after tomorrow then".

Then, one after another they all left and in no time I was the only person left in the classroom.

As for why I've stayed behind, I don't even need to say the reason.

To respond to Ryuu-en-kun's summons.

Throughout this sports festival, I had been made to dance in the palm of Ryuu-en-kun's hand the entire time. It was too late by the time I had become convinced of that.

I was unable to take any countermeasures against it and I just kept on being beaten.

But---

Somehow, I felt refreshed. I am aware that I was completely and thoroughly crushed.

I was able to understand the fact that I am far, far weaker and more pathetic a person than I had imagined myself to be.

I feel like I need to thank him if only for teaching me that.

Nevertheless, the debt he's after isn't a light one by any measure. Because it's not just me, but a lot of other students who have been made to bear that burden. The fact that a million private points will be transferred to Class C means that I need to keep the possibility of a future struggle to myself all the more.

"Sorry I've kept you waiting, Horikita-san. I just got caught up in a conversation with my friends, sorry".

Kushida-san, who left the classroom with her friends once, came back while putting her hands together.

"No mind, looks like there's still some time left until the appointed time. Shall we go then?".

"Yo. So you didn't run away after all, Suzune".

"I'll be damned if I run away here. Of course I'd come".

"Your heart's in the right place. You've become a finer woman than you were before".

I'm not pleased one bit even if he praises me in such a manner.

"But before I talk with you...let's put an end to this farce already, shall we? Kushida-san".

"Ehh? Farce? What do you mean by that?".

In the school building bathed in evening light, I stared straight at Kushida-san.

"I don't really mind you playing the good guy here but that's not what you're after right? This sports festival. You leaked the information. That's why Class C was able to pull it off so brilliantly. The fact that I'm here like this now with Ryuuen-kun is also for that sake...am I wrong?".

"...come on, where did you hear something like that from? Hirata-kun? Ayanokouji-kun?".

"No. These are my own thoughts. I couldn't shake off that sense of unease. He's the only one here right now. Isn't it about time we confront one another?".

"Confront each other? What do you mean?".

"At the very beginning, I saw you on that bus trying to convince Kouenji-kun to give up his seat. To be honest with you, I didn't recognize you back then. But I immediately remembered you afterwards.....".

I looked Kushida-san in the eye. If she is indeed colluding with Ryuuken-kun, then she'll interfere.

Up until now, she hadn't done so because she didn't see a need to.

"Kushida Kikyo-san. I remembered that a student like you had attended my 'middle school'".

Even she wouldn't be able to keep up her constant smile if I revealed something like that.

Right in front of my eyes, for the first time, I saw her change expressions.

But that led to yet another smile.

"Of course you'd remember immediately. I was quite a 'problem child'".

After saying that, Kushida-san stopped speaking and simply lowered her eyes in silence.

"I don't believe that phrase is quite accurate. You were not a problem child, just like how you are in Class D right now, you were a student everybody trusted in. But---".

"Can you cut it out? Stop reminiscing about the past".

"That's right. No point in talking about the past now".

Ryuuuen-kun listened to our conversation with a smile as though he were enjoying it.

"If we're on the same page then you understand, don't you? What I'm thinking about doing?".

"Yes. I've already realized it. That you want me out of this school. But aren't you also taking a big risk? If I reveal the truth, you'll lose your current standing, no?".

"Me. Or Horikita-san. It's clear who's trusted more. I guess it's what you'd call hedging risk".

"But if it were revealed, wouldn't you be in trouble too? For instance, even if no one believes what I have to say, they will still harbor doubts. At the very least, you cannot deny the fact that we did attend the same middle school".

"You're right. But...if by any chance, you happen to tell someone else about me, I will thoroughly hunt you down. That is to say, I'll drag the brother you love so dearly into this".

Those words caused me to tense up.

It's precisely because I've heard about the past of the student named Kushida Kikyo that I know there's a danger that she'll really get Nii-san involved if I incur her wrath.

You could almost say that's the perfect defense against me, without so much as a single opening in it.

But it's not like it's easy for Kushida-san to take action either. Because there's a danger in the notion that if she blatantly gets my brother involved, I might then resort to desperate measures.

That's why she's devised this strategy to chase me out openly without letting it get to that.

"Then wouldn't it have been just fine to ignore me? You know full well I don't involve myself with other people and that I don't stick my nose where it doesn't belong, don't you?".

"For now. But there's no guarantee that'll still be the case in the future. In order for me to be me, I need to make everyone who knows about my past disappear".

"In that case, now that I'm privy to this, does that mean I'm also your prey?".

"Depending on the circumstances, that may be so".

Even as she colluded with him, Kushida-san still said so boldly.

"Kuku. You're a foxy woman. Well, it's precisely because I like that part of you that I decided to cooperate though".

"Let me just say this, Horikita-san. I will expel you. To do so, I'll collude with even the devil himself".

Kushida-san said so as she left my side to stand alongside Ryuuen-kun.

"What a shame, Suzune. Betrayed by a promising ally".

"You were a step ahead of me this time, Ryuuen-kun. No.....I suppose it's been this way for a while now. During the exam on the cruise, on the uninhabited island, during Sudou-kun's incident too. I've only kept on losing".

By acknowledging that once, the words came out easily.

"Let's wrap this up then. Points and the kowtow, I mean. That's what you 'two' are after".

"I'll go ahead and clear this up but Kinoshita running into you was a complete accident. There were no ulterior motives or malicious intentions behind that. It's the way the world works, right? If there's an accident sometimes you just settle it out of court. It's something like that".

"...yes. There's no evidence after all, it's obvious I'll be framed as the culprit".

To prove your innocence, you'll need a fair amount of resolve and power. In this case, I just need to admit it honestly.

"But I'll also add this. That this incident was something you masterminded. You instructed Kinoshita-san to ensure I collapsed. I'm sure of that".

"That's your persecution complex speaking".

"I don't care even if it's just my delusion. But I'd at least like to hear about it. What kind of trap did you set for this sports festival?".

"You're going out of your way to kowtow, if I had to imagine what your delusions are like it'd be something like this".

Ryuuuen-kun laughed enjoyably as he began talking about it as though it were a delusion.

"Before the sports festival, I had Kushida get her hands on Class D's participation table, and I acquired it that way. Then I simply put the right people in the right places and won. Of course, that's not all, I had also thoroughly researched Class D on top of that too".

"Brilliant leadership. As a matter of fact, you lot did win against Class D and Class A".

Although they didn't measure up to Class B in terms of overall strength, there's no doubt that they fought well.

"But couldn't you have won more efficiently? In order to crush me, you utilized two of your aces and one of them even had to withdraw after being injured. That's baffling".

"Kuku. To crush you. That's reason enough. I had no interest in winning in terms of overall points from the beginning this time around".

"But your strategy relied on luck. Good for you, when you ordered Kinoshita-san to make me fall and she acted on it, you were saved by two coincidences. That I was too injured to continue and that Kinoshita-san was severely injured after she fell on her own. Both of those aren't things you can simply aim to pull off".

What caused the gears to fall apart inside me was that part.

Because if she had only received a light injury, then things wouldn't have gotten this serious.

"Certainly the extent of your injury was a product of coincidence. It would've been obvious if I had aimed to injure you. If she messes up while making contact with you, it's Kinoshita who'll suffer a painful experience. That's why I had Kinoshita thoroughly practice a single thing. To make contact with her opponent and make the fall look natural".

If one were to be given such an order, they'd normally rebel against it. What exactly needed to be done to make her so obedient?

"Also...about Kinoshita's injury...do you really think it was an accident?".

"Ehh....".

"Sure, she fell down. But of course, serious injuries aren't so easily sustained. That's why I had her pretend to be in pain and drop out of the sports festival. After that, it's a simple matter. Before she received treatment, I injured her myself. Like this".

He said that as he stomped on the floor of the corridor with all his strength.

Ban! A terrifying, eerie sound echoed through the corridor.

"You did it.....? To her.....?".

"She gave her consent when I offered to give her 500,000 points, you know? It sure is scary, the power of money".

It meant then that from the very start, it was also determined that she'd be sustaining serious injuries.....

From the bottom of my heart, I found his thoughts and his execution of them to be terrifying. If it's for the sake of winning, then there's nothing he wouldn't do.

But, I didn't expect him to be this frank with me.

"Is it fine to go on and on about this just because I asked?".

"What?".

"If I happened to be recording your confession, what would you do then?".

I said so as I brought out my phone.

"You thought about that just now, didn't you?".

"As my final gambit, I'll try to manipulate you at least. But I'm shocked that you'd unexpectedly tell me all that".

I fiddled with my phone and played it back from a specific point.

"Before the sports festival, I had Kushida get her hands on Class D's---".

"If you file a complaint against me, or demand points and a kowtow, then I'll fight back with this evidence. If that happens, I wonder which one of us will be in trouble?".

"Ku....!".

For the first time, Ryuuen-kun's smile disappeared and he stopped speaking as well.

"Suzune...you.....".

"I'm not looking for trouble either. That's why let's settle it with---".

"Kukuku.....kuhahaha!".

Suddenly, Ryuuen-kun burst out in laughter again.

"You really are an entertaining woman. I said so at the very start, didn't I?

That the contents of our discussion are, at most, fictitious. I was only humoring your persecution complex. I only imagined the made up story you onesidedly crafted inside your head".

"Even so, is there even a way to ascertain whether or not that delusion is real? I could delete only the part where you said it's a delusion and edit the recording, you know?".

If the first half of it gets cut out, there's no way to ascertain if it's a lie or not.

"Of course, in that case, I'll just have to hand in the original. No problem".

Laughing fearlessly, Ryuuen retrieved his phone from his pocket.

"Do you know what this is? The full recording.....no, it's visual footage".

He said so as he pointed the camera on the back of the phone at me. Insurance that's more reliable than audio.

It means Ryuuen-kun's already assumed I'd attempt a final gambit.

It means things won't go that easily....is what it is.

If I submitted the audio data to the school with the inconvenient first half of it cut out then there'll be an investigation.

And Ryuuen-kun and the others would be under suspicion.

But it's impossible to declare them guilty with just that.

If I tried to pass off his words, which he spoke on the premise that it's a delusion, as truth then I'd be condemned for it.

"Do you admit it, Suzune? The reality of your utter defeat, that is".

Kushida-san is also laughing boldly.

I realize keenly all the more that I was a fool.

He's not the type of enemy on who the strategies I could think of would work. The last resistance I had also misfired.

"Throw away that pride of yours and give me a kowtow, Suzune".

Having received that death sentence, I decided to quietly get down on my knees.

"I understand---I admit---".

Piron. A sound unbecoming of this place rang out. It's because Ryuu-en-kun's phone rang right in front of my eyes.

I don't think he himself paid that much attention to it. But for some reason or another, he lowered his eyes to the screen to figure out the source of the sound.

However, Ryuu-en-kun's expression hardened for a moment despite him having kept a constant smile all this time.

He started to fiddle with his phone without sparing me a glance.

And from that phone, I could hear what seemed like a recording made somewhere with a variety of noises mixed up in it.

"Listen up, you lot. To set a trap for Class D's Horikita Suzune. What we need to do to crush her. I'm going to offer you that strategy. I'll show you

something interesting".

It was Ryuu-en-kun's voice.

Is it a conversation from back when he was planning the strategy he would execute in the sports festival?

He was explaining in detail what he had so proudly told me a while ago.

"I don't plan on going against your strategy but give me a chance to fight against Horikita---".

In the middle of that, as though interrupting him, Ibuki-san's voice came up.

"In the obstacle course race, you run against Suzune and make contact with her. Do whatever it takes to make her fall. Afterwards, I'll take responsibility for your injury and plunder some money for you".

That voice was saying that. I have no idea what exactly is going on.

"What is the meaning of this, Ryuu-en-kun? What's up with that audio?".

Kushida-san too, seemed unable to comprehend the situation and so she requested an explanation from Ryuu-en-kun.

"I see, I see, I see. I see now. Kuku, now isn't this interesting? Do you know what this means? It means there's a traitor in Class C as well. And they made not only you guys, but also me, dance in the palm of their hand. Kikyo's betrayal as well as the fact that Suzune would fall apart before me. They had it all calculated. Kuhahaha! This is interesting! Interesting, I say! The one pulling the strings behind you is awesome!".

Calling it a masterpiece, Ryuuken-kun swept his hair back and gave a belly laugh.

"You got played, Kikyo. They'd already predicted that you'd turn traitor and hand over the information on the participation table's list to us. They had already predicted each and every little thing".

"The betrayal was already assumed from the start.....? Who could possibly be capable of something like that? Could it be Ayanokouji-kun? I didn't know he was that fast after all.....".

"Well, he's one of the candidates. But I won't draw that conclusion. It's a different story whether or not someone capable of pulling off a recording like this would leave behind a trace this easily. Suzune, and also Ayanokouji and depending on the circumstances, even Hirata may have someone pulling their strings. I'm going to slowly take my time smoking them out. I've failed to get the points and the kowtow from Suzune but I'll satisfy myself with just this outcome".

There's no mistaking it. I don't know how he did it, but he used someone from Class C in order to record Ryuuken-kun's strategy. That alone, I'm sure of.

During the relay, him competing against my brother is also extremely inexplicable. It's unlike him since he prefers to remain inconspicuous.

But it's precisely because I know this that the only person who came to mind was Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun.

In a situation where he's already being investigated, he still daringly acted conspicuously.

If the man who had been ruling over the class from behind the scenes up until

now suddenly took to the front, then naturally it'd be suspicious. He'd be suspected of being an impostor.

Seeing how Ryuuen-kun was unable to narrow it down to Ayanokouji-kun alone, it would mean he's been setting traps behind my back.

"This is it for now then. The sender of this mail probably won't hound us any further".

"Is that really fine? What if they threaten you with the recording?".

"If they had intended on submitting it to the school, then they would've done so later. Doing so after we've already filed our complaint would be most effective. I wasn't able to make her kowtow but as for me, I've accomplished half of my objectives. Not bad".

4

After changing into my uniform I went to the front gate as promised and just as she said she would, the girl was waiting for me.

"You said you had something to tell me.....?".

"Follow me".

"Follow, where exactly.....".

"A special building".

That too, turned out to be quite the bizarre place.

The girl, without offering me a detailed explanation, started walking off and so we reached the 3rd floor of the special building.

This floor is one of the few places in the school where there are no surveillance cameras installed.

"---What exactly---".

When I tried to ask her, the girl told me to wait and then walked off alone.

She then went over to a corner in the corridor and quietly whispered.

"Can I go back already?".

"Yes. You did well, Masumi-san. I'll be counting on you again".

".....sure".

The girl named Masumi quietly nodded and left.

The person behind the voice slowly revealed herself.

Carrying a cane in one hand, she looked at me with a cold smile.

1st year. Class A. Sakayanagi.

"You called me?".

I asked Sakayanagi but she did not reply.

Then for a brief while, Sakayanagi and I ended up staring at one another.

In a school building at dusk, the lone girl stood before my eyes with a cane in

her hand.

"That last relay drew quite a bit of attention, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun".

Just when I had thought she'd finally opened her mouth, it ended up being merely that.

"Yeah sorry but can I send a mail first? I've got someone waiting".

"Please go ahead".

Sakayanagi did not react with displeasure but rather, she smiled at me.

I sent what I had prepared.

"So.....may I assume that it's you? The one who called me out here, that is".

"Yes".

An immediate reply, eh?.

"So what's the matter? If at all possible I'd like to wrap this up quickly".

"After seeing you run, I remembered something. I called you here so I can share with you the shock I felt at that moment. It's almost like this is the lead up to a confession, don't you think so?".

"I have no idea what you're talking about.....".

Clonk. Clonk. Propping herself up with a cane, Sakayanagi stood right next to me.

"It's been a long time, Ayanokouji-kun. Approximately 8 years and 243 days".

"You're kidding, right? I don't know you".

"Fufu. I suppose so. After all, our acquaintance isn't a mutual one".

Clonk.

Clonk.

The tapping receded bit by bit.

What exactly is this about?

I decided to wrap things up and started to walk in the opposite direction.

"White Room".

When those words pierced through my ears and reached my brain I unconsciously stopped walking.

It chipped away at my rationality and I started questioning 'why' and 'how'.

"It's unpleasant, isn't it? To be swept about by information that only the enemy possesses".

"...you...".

"This is a nostalgic reunion and so I thought I just had to greet you".

Reunion?

I looked back at Sakayanagi while still keeping my back turned on her. I

definitely haven't seen her before, she truly is a girl who doesn't have a place in my memories.

I haven't lost any memories in the past either.

I met this girl, Sakayanagi, at this school.

There's no mistaking that fact.

"Understandable. Because you don't know me after all. But I do know you. This must be a strange twist of fate. To be reunited with you in a place like this. To be honest, I never thought I'd see you again. But with this, all mysteries have been solved. The uninhabited island, the cruise and Class D's brush with expulsion. I just couldn't bring myself to believe all of those were Horikita Suzune's strategies. So you were pulling the strings behind the scenes during all that".

"Whatever do you mean by that? We have quite a few strategists, you know".

First of all, analysis. I need to stay composed without panicking. I can afford to think about it later.

"By strategist, would you happen to mean Horikita Suzune-san? Or perhaps you meant Hirata Yousuke-kun? Either way, now that your existence has come to light, it doesn't matter who it is anymore".

.....she's not lying. Apparently she really knows me.

"Please relax. First of all, I have no intention of telling anyone else about you".

"Wouldn't it be easier if you did?".

"I don't want to be interrupted. I'm the only one worthy of burying the false genius".

Clonk. The thin cane tapped on the floor.

"I've found some slight enjoyment in this boring school life".

"Can I ask you one thing?".

"I'm honored to be questioned by you. Please ask away. If you'd like to know why I know you then I don't mind giving you an answer, you know?".

"No, I'm not interested in that. I just want to know one thing".

Sakayanagi and I make eye contact.

"Can you bury me?".

Was what I asked.

".....fufu".

Sakayanagi laughed a bit and then laughed yet again.

"Fufufu. I apologize for laughing. But I did not intend on insulting the statement you made. I know very well just how awe-inspiring a person you are. I've just begun to enjoy this. Beacuse I will be fulfilling my life's wish by destroying the greatest masterpiece your father has made".

I'd like to wish for that.

My defeat would mean that man's defeat too after all.

I thought from the bottom of my heart that I wanted this sad contradiction I carry to be destroyed.

Afterword

Hello, and a Happy New Year. This is Kinugasa Shougo.

It's been 4 months and now volume 5 has been released. To tell the truth, I had planned on releasing it even earlier but yet again it ended up taking 4 months. Surely next time, is what I'd like to say but nothing good will come of declaring that here so I'll refrain.

In this volume, the 2nd semester has started and the opener for it turned out to be the sports festival. This time around, the protagonist acts behind the scenes and the story's taken the form of the entire class and Horikita taking the main role. And finally, a person who is aware of the protagonist's past has appeared. Furthermore, it's also the volume that's the initial trigger causing the protagonist's existence to be recognized throughout the school. The story's still in its early stage but I'll keep working hard on it from now on as well so please look forward to it.

Now then, I've been helped a lot by a variety of people last year as well. Most importantly is the illustrator, Tomose Shunsaku-sama. Also, each and every time I call him pointlessly and we end up chit-chatting but when it comes down to it, I'm most indebted to my editor-sama who's more reliable than

anyone else.

This year too, I sincerely hope to get along well.

To all readers and staff. Please treat me well this year too.

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