

衣笠彰梧
KINUGASA SYOUGO
トモセシュンサク
TOMOSESHUNSAKU

ようこそ
実力
至上主義
の**教室へ**

ようこそ
じつりょく
しじょうしゅぎ
のきょうしつへ





ようこそ 実力至上主義の教室へ 衣笠彰梧
トモセシュンサク

やまだ
山田 アルベルト

Cクラスの荒事担当。
龍園に心酔し、付き
従っている。

かねだ
金田悟

高い学力を持つ、
Cクラスの生徒。
クラスの参謀役を
買って出ている。

しいな
椎名 ひより

小説好きのCクラスの
生徒。ふわふわとした
雰囲気の少女で、あま
り感情を表に出さない。



「今日は付き合ってありがとうございました、坂柳さん」



「いえいえ。
私も楽しかつたです」

「そんなやり取り。振り返ると一之瀬と
坂柳という、珍しい組み合わせの二人
を見かけた。」



「思い出すか?

おまえが前の学校で受けてきた洗礼を」

「い、いや……！」

耳を塞ぐ。
まるで少女が幽霊に怯えるかの
ように、ただただ身体を震わせた。

「こんなもんじや済まさないぜ。
徹底しておまえを壊してやる」

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ようこそ
じつりょく
しじょうしゅぎ
のきょうしつへ

ようこそ実力至上主義の教室へ

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PROLOGUE:

RYUEN KAKERU'S MONOLOGUE

It was during elementary school that I realized I was abnormal. During an excursion, I found a huge snake near our camp. I recall my class being in an uproar from it. People watching from faraway, people panicking nearby and people who weren't all that interested in it. There were various reactions and even adults who were supposed to be mature lost their calm and desperately called for help. I grabbed a huge rock I found nearby and swung it at the head of the snake. I didn't even feel fear of being bitten. There was a scream, and the panic of the teachers followed. I did not even register it. It's not like I wanted to be a hero or anything. I was just confused why there was such a need to be afraid.

That was my first contact with a hidden side of myself. And at the same time I knew, the moment the enemy falls at my feet, I could feel a large amount of adrenaline rushing through my brain. This was my first victory. "Fear" and "joy" are two sides of the same coin. That truth was paper thin in this world. The world is ruled by 'violence'. Your 'status' in this world is determined by your capacity for 'violence'. I saw the corpse of the snake beneath me and my heart was filled with joy. Ever since then, I have had many enemies both internal and external.

Sometimes, when I was surrounded by enemies, I kept on exercising 'violence' to win. And before my overwhelming might, all of them fell at my feet. I was never afraid. I always only thought about revenge and turning the situation around on my enemies. They all eventually fell prostrate before me. The real 'elite' is a person whose capacity for 'violence' is unparalleled. And a human being who never feels 'fear'. But here a problem lies, with every

fallen enemy every day started to grow boring for me. Because in the end, there was not a single person capable of beating me. If there is something that could finally beat me, that thing can only be described as “death.”

Name	Mako Amikura (佐倉 愛里, Amikura Mako)
Class	1st Year, B-Class
Student ID	S01T004741
School Club	None
Birthday	October 2nd
Assessment	
Academic Ability	C
Intellect	C +
Judgment	D
Physical Ability	C
Teamwork	B +



Interviewer's Evaluation

We praise her sincere attitude and straightforward personality. We expect her to develop her strong point of teamwork and become part of the class and study diligently.

Homeroom Teacher Records

She is always cheerful; I can see it in her face when playing with Ichinose and her other classmates. I fully know that she also supports her friends in difficult times, and sometimes is supported by them. She is growing every day.

CHAPTER 1: FOOTSTEPS OF MIDWINTER

Mid-December has come and passed. The changing of the seasons happened quickly and it's become freezing cold. Students have naturally started wearing mufflers, gloves and long socks more and more. The sky today is a cloudy grey, almost as though it's about to snow. Now that I think about it, I've never actually seen snow before. Of course, I've seen it on television and in books but I've never actually held it in my hands and felt it with my skin. I don't know if it will snow here this year but I do want to experience it. After school, in a corner of Keyaki Mall, four students gathered in the space where students rest and go about their business. They are members of Class D. Sakura Airi, Hasebe Haruka, Yukimura Keisei and me. Keisei's real name is Teruhiko but in accordance with his wish, we've taken to calling him Keisei.

I've gotten used to seeing their faces these days. We meet up irregularly two or three times each week to chat without any ulterior motives. The time we spend together depends on the day but we sometimes spend about two hours together and sometimes we split up after just half an hour. If you feel like heading back halfway through it, you're free to do so too. What I'm getting at is that these aren't people you need to be formal with. But we often spend more time than usual together after school on Fridays. The reason for that is our fifth member who's currently absent, Miyake Akito, and various circumstances involving him. "In the end, nobody from any class got expelled. I thought Class C might've made a move about now though. The questions we set weren't easy ones either." As several girls from Class C coincidentally passed by us, Keisei said that.

“Class C doesn’t really look like it’s better at studying than us though.” Haruka immediately replied while fiddling with her phone. And then she made an announcement. “Miyachi says he’ll be here soon. Looks like he just left his club.”

Apparently she’s been having a conversation with the person we’re waiting for. The only member of our group who belongs to a club, Akito, isn’t able to meet up with us immediately after school. “But we got through the exam so isn’t that a relief...? Besides, it’s also not exactly good news to hear of someone from another class getting expelled.” Airi, who doesn’t deal well with harsh things like this, gave her honest opinion.

“Well, there’s nothing better than being able to get along. But wouldn’t that be difficult with the way this school is set up? To aim for the upper classes means kicking down another class after all.” Sounds harsh but Haruka’s right. Hearing that, Keisei was honestly impressed. “Exactly. I get what Airi’s trying to say but if we don’t kick them down then we’ll get kicked down ourselves. To be a winner at this school means sacrificing three other classes. There’s no need for us to be the sacrifices.”

“I suppose so.....”

Airi replied dejectedly at Keisei’s harsh words. “For instance, is there really no trick we can use? Like having all class points be equalized in the previous exam? That way, everyone can be happy and we can all graduate as Class A. Like that’s going to happen though.”

“I think that’d be great.”

“Unfortunately, I think that’s impossible.” Countering Haruka’s strange idea, Akito joined us. “How can you say that?”

“I’ve heard the seniors talking about this. If we happen to be equal after the final exam then additional special exams are apparently held to determine our rankings.”

“What sort of exam?”

“Don’t know. They’re just rumors at best. Apparently we’ve never had a situation like that where different classes end up with the same points.” I suppose the details are unknown even to Akito. But there’s no mistaking the fact that this is valuable information. “Guess it won’t be that simple. I thought it was an interesting idea though.”

“In the end, I guess that means there can only be one Class A”. “So, Miyachi, how was practice today?”

Haruka asked Akito. “What was how?”

“Hmm. Like how well you handled your bow, I guess.”

“Normal. Nothing particularly outstanding or lame. Don’t ask when you don’t even have any interest in it.”

“Isn’t that just fine? To have a casual conversation between friends?”

“Then I suppose that means you’re at least somewhat knowledgeable about archery?” Akito sat down while harboring suspicions.

“It’s not about knowledge or anything, it’s just a competition where you’re supposed to hit targets with an arrow, right?”

“No, that’s the gist of it though...never mind.” Akito tried to explain in detail but seems to have given up on that. “How should I put it? I’ve never been interested in archery from the day I was born. That’s why I’m curious to know what mistakes had to have been made to push you in that direction.” It appears Haruka thinks walking the path of archery is a mistake.

Well, it’s not a particularly dazzling sport but personally speaking, I’m interested. But I do suppose there are quite a lot of students who’ve never held a bow before. “Yeah, come to think of it, why archery? It’s not like this school is famous for it or anything, right?” Listening to their conversation, a question came from Keisei too. “During middle school, a senior who took care of me belonged to the archery club. That’s why I thought I’d pick it up too. That’s all there is to it, no deep reason in particular.”

“The trigger to start doing something. I suppose it’s just that sort of thing.”

Airi too, reservedly joined the conversation. It’s something I’m increasingly seeing these days and a welcome sight. And it’s also because no one acts surprised about it or teases her over it that Airi’s also able to wriggle her way into the conversation naturally. “Airi’s got her digital camera, right? It’s popular these days, I suppose. I guess I can understand that better.”

“Instagram. A hobby unique to girls, huh? It’s really hard to get.” Perhaps Keisei’s unable to comprehend it, since he’s saying rather negative things about it. “Hey, that’s sexual discrimination right there. There are a lot of boys doing it these days too, you know?”

“...really? I don’t think it’s a good idea to spread personal information about yourself like that though.”

“I don’t get it either. What about you, Kiyotaka? Do you do it too?”

“No. I’m not really knowledgeable about those things.” Since this school forbids any contact with the outside, things like SNS and other texting applications will only connect students to one another. If you’re satisfied with that then there’s no reason to speak out.

“Kiyopon doesn’t really look like the type to do those things. On the contrary, if you used Instagram then that’d feel lame. Ever gone partying at a night pool carrying some ice cream and looking cute...hmm?”

“No.” I immediately denied it. It would be troublesome if that’s the sort of person she comes to see me as later. “What about you then, do you use it? Instagram, I mean.”

“Not at all. It’s a bother and I don’t really like showing myself to others.”

“I completely agree.” Keisei nodded in agreement with Haruka’s words. Airi stayed quiet upon hearing that but she seems to have received critical damage from that one blow just now. Apparently she’s stopped doing it now but she

used to take selfies and upload them to SNS as a hobby. “It’s pretty popular out there so it’s not like it’s anything weird.”

I covered for her. No point in having Airi getting depressed over nothing. She probably intended on hiding it but it’s completely obvious how she’s flustered over my remarks just from a side glance.

Airi expressively reacts every time even to a follow up like that so Haruka and the others immediately caught onto it. “I know I’m really out of date and not very fashionable so I can’t really object much to that. I apologize to anyone who happens to like Instagram.” Haruka raised her hands and apologized. “Just because I personally dislike it, rejecting something that’s popular out of hand is certainly a stupid thing to do. I didn’t think it through.” And Keisei also apologized. Mainly to Airi. Airi patted her chest in relief.

“Sorry about changing the topic here but there’s something I’m curious about.” Now that the discussion’s settled a bit, Akito interjected. He sounded somewhat irritated and spoke almost while glaring at his surroundings.
“Doesn’t Class C seem strange these days?”

“Class C? They’re always a strange bunch though. What do you mean?”
Haruka curiously leaned forward with wide eyes. I know what Akito is trying to point out.

It’s about the people who’ve been following us these past few days. It looks like Akito’s also realized. Even now, there’s a boy hiding himself while peeking at us. It’s ‘Komiya’, a Class C student and one of Ryuuuen’s henchmen. There’s almost no doubt he’s supposed to be keeping an eye on our group. But there’s quite a bit of distance between us and even if we ask him there’s really no evidence that points towards surveillance. If he insists that it’s just a series of coincidences then that’s all it’ll take to shut us down. On the contrary, there’s the risk that we could be labeled the bad guys for confronting him over this instead. The reason Akito didn’t say it out loud is probably because he still doesn’t have solid proof.

More importantly, the problem is that there is another person who ‘isn’t from Class C’ observing this group. Akito hasn’t noticed that presence. “During

our study session a while back, those Class C guys made contact with us right?" It's back when we were holding a study session to prepare for the written exam that is the Paper Shuffle. Students from Class C showed up in a public space like the cafeteria and suddenly came over to our group. And from then until today, that interference has continued in the form of a tail. "You mean Ryuuen-kun and Shiina-san, right? Could it be that they're also?"

"Yeah. It's a different person this time though. Today, Ishizaki and Komiya showed up at the archery club. Said they came to have a look so the seniors accepted it but they were glaring at me the whole time so it was hard for me to do anything."

I see. In other words, Komiya came all the way here by following Akito. The reason Ishizaki isn't here is because tailing a large number of people isn't a suitable task for him. Looks like Akito's the one most troubled by Ryuuen's surveillance. "Isn't it just that they're interested in the club?" Airi, who couldn't possibly comprehend Ryuuen's thought process, said so. "That would be great if it were the case. But it didn't feel that way." As though trying to tell us his shoulders are stiff, Akito waves his arms around. Every day, Ryuuen's repeatedly put pressure on him and the pace has only picked up.

It's not like I'm talking directly to him but I can almost hear Ryuuen's fearless laughter. 'I'll hunt you down'. I could feel that sort of strong determination from Ryuuen. "Did they do anything? Like jeering at you or sneezing just when you're about to release the arrow to disturb you? Or maybe they threw little rocks at you?"

"Of course, they can't do anything in front of the instructors and the seniors. By the time practice ended, they went back." Ever since that day, although I myself did not change, it's obvious they've hit the mark. I should assume they've marked Karuizawa too.

He's already probably narrowed down his targets to a select few that includes me as well. If I do one more decisive thing, I think he may even narrow it down to me. And the person who holds that one decisive thing is 'Karuizawa

Kei'. But the fact that he's not acting lightly is proof that he's given it careful thought. Even if he tries to ask Karuizawa about my existence, doing so upfront won't get him anywhere. Now then, I wonder how Ryuuen's going to fill in that last piece of the puzzle. Looking at the pattern of his movements up until now, it's not that difficult to imagine.

The question is 'when' that's going to happen. While I thought about that, Akito and the others continued their conversation. Keisei then draws his conclusion as to why Class C is disturbing us. "Don't you think it has something to do with Class D's growth? We ended up with 0 points not too long after enrolling yet here we are, almost close enough to scratch Class C's back. There's also the results of Paper Shuffle to consider, so we may actually end up becoming Class C by the time the 3rd semester rolls around. They must be panicking." Keisei tries to rationally guess the reason behind Class C's actions. "Now that you mention it, that's right. They're about to be overtaken by the very people they mocked—"

"But...we wouldn't have overtaken them, right?" Airi, recalling the announcement of the class points, asked that but Keisei then replied. "Yeah. The class points announced at the start of December were 262 points for Class D and 542 points for Class C. There's still a 280 point gap between us."

During Paper Shuffle, we fought directly against Class C and triumphed. As a result, we managed to boost our class points brilliantly. 100 points from Class C moved to Class D and we gained a total of 200 points. The gap is now a measly 80 points.

Still, Class C is in the lead at this stage. However—an accident completely unrelated to the exams happened to Class C. "It seems Class C committed a serious rule violation. They didn't announce the details of it but they got hit by a severe penalty, having 100 points taken from them." The other day, I remember receiving a general explanation of it from the school. "I wonder what exactly they did to cause this huge fuss. It's really a very Class C-ish thing to do though." Haruka said exasperatedly but unfortunately enough, Class D can't afford to be laughing at other classes. Despite the exam, we lost 1000 class points a month after enrolling.

“Regardless of the reason, the effect of their self-destruction is significant. If things end just like this then after the winter vacation there’s a high possibility we’ll be promoted to Class C”. Keisei concluded without coming off as arrogant. “Is that the reason Miyachi got involved?”

“There’s nothing saying that’s not the reason.” From the perspective of Ryuuen, who rules over Class C, a demotion isn’t going to be fun. To find some sort of weakness in Class D so he can keep his current position, is what he’s trying to do now. If that’s the case, then it’s consistent with his actions.

Everyone here, except for me, concluded that. “A class change is a problem this school cannot avoid entirely but I also think it’s something that doesn’t happen often. In that case, Class D’s growth after its massive tumble must be reason enough for Class C to panic and it’s natural to try and figure out the reason behind that growth.”

“Despite acting high and mighty all the time, Ryuuen-kun’s still a leader. He’s totally going to lose face.”

“I see. I suppose their desperation is understandable.” Akito probably felt gratified imagining a frustrated Ryuuen with his pride torn to shreds and so he agreed with that.

“But we haven’t really changed all that much, have we? It feels like by the time we realized, that gap already shrunk. Why is that? Is it just because Class C took a tumble?” Most of the students in our class don’t know of the battles that occur behind the scenes and simply take the exams head on. It’s understandable that they would be unable to comprehend why the gap has shrunk. “If we’re talking about just Class D then we triumphed over the other classes during the island exam. We were beaten by Ryuuen during the zodiac exam but we made a comeback during the Paper Shuffle the other day. Compared to that, Class C’s been neglecting their class points, haven’t they?”

“Even on the island, they quickly used up all the points allocated to them.”

“In other words...is Class C self-destructing?”

“You could see it that way. Even their rule violation this time around is pretty self-destructive.” A special exam conducted on an uninhabited island right as the summer vacation started. Each class is equally allocated 300 points for use throughout the exam and we’re supposed to clear the exam by using those points over the course of one week. And whatever points are left over by the end will be added to our class points. All classes, including D, did everything they could to save up as many points as they could but like Haruka said, Class C quickly used up all 300 points. “Isn’t that why our class was able to bridge the gap by that much?” There were twists and turns along the way, but Class D managed to save up 225 points.

“That’s true but we don’t know whether they counterbalanced that or not. For all their spending, Class C seems to have enjoyed their vacation. I’m somewhat jealous that they didn’t have to go through all that.”

“Rubbish. That Ryuuken’s always reckless...no, he’s a man child who thinks doing things normal people wouldn’t do makes him cool. That’s why it’s means nothing if the class loses.” To save up class points in order to rise to Class A. From the perspective of Keisei, who possesses such a strong will, throwing away class points like that might seem like an absurd thing to do. But it’s not like Ryuuken was just pointlessly wasting the points allocated to him on the island either.

As a matter of fact, despite having used up all his points, he handed over all the leftover items such as toilets and tents to Class A. I can’t imagine he’d hand them over free of charge. In other words, he must have gotten something in exchange for the loss of the points. Of course, there’s no way he accepted something intangible like trust or friendship. Something he can obtain in exchange for class points. It’s got to be private points. There are only a few students who are aware of this and Keisei doesn’t seem like he understands. “You boys sure have it easy. Don’t you think so too, Airi?”

“Y-Yeah. That’s right. There are quite a lot of girls troubled by this. I think a bit later and I might have also been in trouble.....” Airi said so while blushing. The island exam did take the girls into account to a certain degree but even then I’m sure they had a far harder time than the boys did. “Why

would you've been in trouble if it had been a bit later?" Keisei, who doesn't know the first thing about a girl's troubles, looked at Airi strangely. "T- That's." Airi, unable to tell him that it's about a 'girl's day', averted her eyes. Haruka, seeing the situation, gave Keisei a few harsh words.

"How should I put this, Yukim~. That ignorant side of yours can be cute but when it comes to stuff like this, you need to read the mood? That sort of thing."

"...what do you mean?" Regardless of whether he just has no tact or genuinely has no idea, Akito gently tapped Keisei's shoulder.

"People have their own problems, is what it means."

"I haven't a clue. What do you mean by 'their own problems'?" Keisei, unable to read the mood, tried to delve even deeper into a girl's circumstances. And so Akito changed the topic.

"Class D won because Horikita saw through Ryuuuen's risky strategy, right? If no one realized that then there's a good chance Class D's leader would have been uncovered, right?" I nodded and gave my honest reply to Akito, who tried to confirm that. "If that had happened, this current situation wouldn't have occurred."

"They were partying the whole time yet still wanted to get that reward at the end, huh? And they made it look like they all withdrew. But why did Ryuuuen-kun have to be the one to stay behind on the island? He's Class C's leader. Wouldn't it have been better to leave behind someone less conspicuous?"

Haruka's not completely off the mark. However, this is something that applies to all the classes. The ones who stand out being the leaders is something everyone would consider first but since literally anyone can be nominated as the leader, it's also natural that you'd end up doubting it. In the first place, no one would be able to pinpoint Ryuuuen as the leader unless they're absolutely sure he's stayed behind on the island. And even if they confirm that he's stayed behind, there's still a very low chance of him being

pinpointed. Because an inconspicuous Class C student could still be in hiding. That possibility cannot be ruled out.

Because it's an exam where the cost of making a mistake is far greater than the reward of hitting the mark. Ultimately, unless you have solid proof, no one can pinpoint anyone else. "Hey, Kiyotaka. Why don't you tell us the information you got from Horikita?" Keisei asked with a serious expression.

"What do you mean?"

"I'd like to know what Ryuuen's thinking and what he's planning on doing. Considering what happened in the sports festival and during Paper Shuffle, we need to be united as a class."

"It also feels creepy for me having Ishizaki and his ilk stuck to me. I agree too." Looks like they're starting to realize that cooperation has become more important than ever. Even Akito and Haruka, who don't pay much attention to the class's problems, appear to share the same opinion. "It's just hearsay but..." Before I proposed calling Horikita over, Keisei said this. "I'm fine with that. Please tell us." All four of them turned to me at once. I feel a weird sort of pressure on me.

"Alright. I won't be responsible for any mistakes." After adding that, I explained the events of the uninhabited island I experienced with Horikita to the group from the beginning. Of course, all of those events were moves I made on my own but officially it's Horikita who thought of them on her own. About how Ryuuen used a radio while hiding on the island to communicate with the spy. How Ibuki isn't the only one and there may be spies in other classes too. And then about how Ryuuen started obsessing over Horikita ever since the exam on the cruise. I also told them about how Ryuuen figured out a way to beat the exam on the cruise.

Of course, I didn't tell them how it was clearly obvious Ryuuen was planning on crushing Horikita during the sports festival and I also kept quiet about Kushida's betrayal. "I guess that's the gist of it. Pretty much what you guys already know about, Keisei." Now having obtained any new information, Keisei crossed his arms while seemingly deep in thought. "The question is,

like Haruka also said, why did Ryuuen go out of his way to stay behind on the island?”

“According to Horikita, it’s because he trusts no one. That seems likeliest. To gather information on the other classes and make an inference from that seems too heavy a burden for any other student.”

The ability to control the spy and to make inferences. The endurance and strength to stay on the island for at least a few days with nothing but the bare necessities. I won’t say it out loud here but that person also has to be someone connected to Class A and capable of working with them.

Considering all that, it wouldn’t be an overstatement to stay Ryuuen’s the only one who could carry out this strategy. If the leaders are to be named once all the students have assembled then he wouldn’t have opted for this strategy. However, we’re supposed to name them after the rollcall on the penultimate day of the exam. In other words, it’s done before the classes assemble. That must be the reason he chose this strategy.

“As expected of Horikita...I wouldn’t have been able to think that far ahead. I had given up on trying to pinpoint the other class leaders and I had also stopped trying to sound out the situation.” Keisei and the others reflect on it. “Isn’t that understandable? Food and hygiene problems, the manual got burned and an underwear was stolen. Class D was in tatters. We couldn’t afford to sound out the other classes.” Akito recalls the events that took place on the island. Keisei also recalls unpleasant memories.

“In hindsight, we really had a tough time.”

“But Horikita-san’s amazing. To think she saw through all that in the exam.” Airi praises Horikita as though she honestly admired her. “I can understand why Horikita-san would be marked. She saw through Ryuuen-kun’s strategy after all.”

“As a matter of fact, it seems they’re still disturbing us even now.” I shouldn’t deny that but rather, I should tell them the truth. And so I added that. “It seems even during the zodiac exam, there was a quarrel between people who were in the same group.”

“I can understand the island and the cruise but why is Ryuuen and his men getting involved with the other Class D students recently. They even came all the way over to the archery club to check on me. That isn’t normal, right?”

Even if Horikita is being targeted, these questions are understandable ones.

“They may be trying to uncover a weakness in Class D. Because Horikita has no weaknesses at all so they may be trying to destroy her surroundings instead.”

“I see. That’s a possibility too...” I wonder if this means Keisei and the others have managed to understand the reasoning behind Ryuuen’s actions.

“As expected of Kiyopon’s girlfriend.” Haruka, despite being impressed, poked fun at me. “Don’t just go and make her my girlfriend”

“T-That’s right. I think you’re being rude to Kiyotaka-kun.”

“Ahaha. Sorry, sorry.” I’ll just go ahead and add this but it’s also being rude to Horikita. To pair her up with someone like me. Even if it’s just a misunderstanding, Sudou might get angry if he hears about this.

“Even if she isn’t your girlfriend, you do like her, don’t you? Or perhaps you’re with some other girl.”

“I don’t like her and I don’t have a girlfriend either.”

“I see. Then that means we’re all going to be lonely this year.”

“Lonely?”

“Look around. It’s almost Christmas.” While sitting on a bench placed in front of a restaurant in Keyaki Mall, Haruka whispered that.

Certainly, the decorations being made almost make you think this isn’t just a facility on campus. Occasionally students who look like couples pass us by.
“It’s not like it’s such a special day, is it? It’s just a day like any other.”

“That may be so for you, Yukimura. But it’s surprisingly difficult for us girls.”

“R-Rumors might crop up.....”

“Yep, yep. Like who’s dating who and who isn’t dating who. Like who spent the night together and who didn’t? And even though you’re single because you want to be single, they’d end up looking at you like you’re something pitiful.”

“...we’re 1st year high schoolers. Our studies are our priority.”

“But did you fantasize about it? You’re blushing.”

“Shut it.”

“Anyways, this mango juice is way too sweet. Way to go.” Akito made a vomiting gesture and pushed the cup towards me. “But it’s delicious though?” Haruka seemed genuinely shocked as though she couldn’t believe him.

“By the way, I personally think there’s going to be a variety of things happening to Class D over the winter vacation.”

“That’s...referring to who’s going out with who?” Airi curiously asked Haruka. “Probably. If there are boys and girls dating each other then there will also be boys and girls who break up. A lot of things happen over Christmas, after all.” Haruka nodded repeatedly as though she had seen many couples like that before. “Let’s leave aside the couples. Do you think there will be any breakups? Right now the only couple is Class D would be Hirata and Karuizawa, right?”

Akito held his throat while saying that. Maybe the sweetness of the mango juice is still stuck in his throat. By the way, I’m drinking mango juice right now too and it’s ridiculously sweet.

“That’s not necessarily the case. Unexpected couples may form without you knowing, Miyachi. Romance isn’t something that’s limited to the confines of our class. If there’s a girl you like, you must act before someone else steals her away from you.”

“Unfortunately, archery’s the only lover I need.”

“Lame. It’s not even like you’re that passionate about it. Uncooooo—”

“...shut up.” Akito averted his eyes shyly as though he’s a bit embarrassed by it. Is that so? We’re already on the brink of Christmas, are we? Since I’m not the slightest bit familiar with it, all of this sounds otherworldly to me.

“Anyways, I have my club. It’s not like I’ll be taking a rest for the winter vacation. It might be a different story if I did have a girlfriend but currently I’m not planning on getting one.”

“By that, you mean you DO want to get one?”

In true interview style, while mimicking the action of holding a microphone in her hand, Haruka interrogated Akito. “I have no intention of causing an uproar like Ike and the others but this is the same for both boys and girls, right?” There aren’t that many people who actually aren’t interested in romance, is what he’s trying to say it seems. “...well, I’m not going to deny that as long as I get my ideal man. Yukimu~ seems to reject romance itself but what’ll you do if you meet a girl who likes you, Yukimu~?”

“What I’ll do...would depend on the relationship between me and that person. That sort of thing.”

“Hmm. So you won’t date her unconditionally just because she’s cute. I see, I see. You’re a serious boy.”

“Shut up.” The two boys being tossed about by Haruka’s teasing. “Kiyotaka-kun, d-do you have any plans for Christmas?” Out of the blue, Airi asked me that from beside me.

“Uwa. Are you asking Kiyopon out, Airi? How bold~”. “N-No, what’s not what I mean! It’s not what I mean, ok!?”

“I mean, isn’t that it? Kiyopon just said he doesn’t have a girlfriend yet a while ago.”

“That’s not it, I mean, I wanted to know what you’re planning on doing. When you spend Christmas alone, I’m curious about what you do.” A couple would certainly go for a date or two. But I’m curious how a single person would spend the day. “I see, that’s true. Miyachi’s got his club but what’s Yukimu~ going to do?”

“I’ll be studying. If we’re promoted to Class C by the 3rd semester we won’t just be doing the chasing, we’ll have a position to keep. As long as there are many students in our class who aren’t very bright, I’d like to make sure we stay ahead even if it’s just in the written exams.” The right person in the right place. He seems to want to contribute in the area he shines the brightest in. Looks like he’s gotten more confident in himself through helping Haruka and Akito study. “I don’t think I’d able to put that much effort into studying. I’ll leave it to you, Keisei.”

“You may leave it to me but even if we graduate as Class A, you’ll still be self-destructing if you don’t put in effort in whatever path you choose to walk.”

Keisei scolds him about how rising to Class A alone isn’t good enough.
“You’re right, I guess so. If I don’t improve myself, I’ll just collapse right after.”

“But then wouldn’t that diminish the value of graduating as Class A?”
Despite understanding, from Akira’s perspective, that gives rise to a certain dissatisfaction. By the time you graduate as Class A, everyone in it would already possess skills befitting the title. I wonder if that’s the assumption this school is going with. I can’t say anything at this point though.

“And what about Kiyopon, who Airi is interested in? Are you going to be alone on Christmas?”

“That’s right. Got nothing special in mind. I think I’ll just coop up in my room?”

“Christmas’s just another holiday, right?” The closing ceremony’s on the 22nd of December. Christmas is right around the corner. “Fu...fufu.” Watching us, Airi started laughing quietly for some reason. She desperately tried to stifle her laughter but she didn’t quite succeed.

“Is there something wrong?”

“S-Sorry. No, I’m just...happy so I laughed.”

“You’re happy so you laughed?” Haruka and the others tilted their heads as though they don’t quite get it. By the time I realized, tears are already slightly welling up in Airi’s eyes. “I’ve never had this much fun before. I’m very happy right now.” Airi voiced her honest feelings she had kept bottled up inside her.

“It’s just meaningless chatter though.”

“I’m fine with that. Because I wanted to talk like this with everyone.”

“I don’t really get it but that’s fine then. I’m also having fun.” Haruka concluded. And then the topic changed once again. “We’re already here. Why don’t we eat dinner together?” No objections came forth and so we decided to move as a group. And that’s when I spoke to everyone.

“I’m off to the toilet. Why don’t you guys go ahead?”

“Then we’ll wait here.”

“No, it’s going to be crowded at this hour. It’s more efficient to go ahead and queue up. I’ll leave the seats to you.” Everyone seemed convinced and so they headed to the Keyaki Mall restaurant. This is a situation that can unfold only because Airi’s become capable of acting without me being there. Concluding that I’m off to the toilet, Komiya followed Akito and the others.

After seeing off the group plus Komiya, I started walking in the direction opposite to the toilet. And I approached a lone girl who sat where we had been chatting. “May I have a moment?” I called out to the girl sitting on a one-seater chair. She’s Class A’s Kamuro. She’s fiddling with her phone and seemingly not aware of my presence, she remained rigid and made no move. “I’m talking to you.” I spoke to her again. “...me? What?”

Looking up, she made it seem like she just noticed my presence now. I took a few steps forward and sat on a different one-seater chair. A prickly sort of atmosphere settled in between us. “You’ve been tailing me recently. Do you have business with me?”

“Huh? What the hell are you saying?”

“On the way back after school yesterday. Keyaki Mall two days ago. Keyaki Mall four days ago. The way back six days ago. The way back seven days ago. Quite a lot of coincidences, wouldn’t you say?”

I turned the screen of my phone towards the girl and went through a slideshow of pictures. “That, but when.....” I had secretly snapped pictures of her tailing me. “As someone who’s tailing me, you can’t afford to look at me when I’m turning in your direction. It’s understandable that you wouldn’t notice me snapping photos of you in that window.”

“What if I’m tailing you? Got a problem with that?”

“Not really. It’s not like I’m being directly harmed by it or anything. I’m not really planning on asking you to stop.”

“Exactly, right? It’s just a coincidence.”

“But what do you think your boss will think if she finds out about this?”

“Boss? What the hell are you talking about? Been watching too many movies?”

“Then I suppose I’ll report this to Sakayanagi. That you aren’t up to par as a tail.”

“...hold on a minute.”

As I put my hands on the armrest and moved to stand up, Kamuro stopped me. Just from that attitude alone, I can tell she’s not particularly happy about this situation. “You’re quite devoted to Sakayanagi. Day after day you’re made to follow me for long periods of time and you still do your job properly. You two must be close.”

“You must be joking. There’s no way I’d actually want to obey that kind of person.”

“No need to lie. As a matter of fact, you’re spending your precious student life doing something as boring as tailing someone. That’s something you’d only do because you trust in and respect Sakayanagi.”

“Absolutely not. I’d cut all ties with her now if I could.”

Intensely spitting that out, Kamuro seemed irritated. “Then why do you obey Sakayanagi?”

“Doesn’t matter why, right?”

“If you’re not doing it out of goodwill then that must mean she’s grabbed you by your weakness.”

“...what are you trying to say?”

“I’ll report the clumsy nature of her tailing to Sakayanagi. If I do that, your inability to act as her arms and legs will be exposed and that weakness of yours she’s grabbed hold of may come to affect you later.”

“So you’re threatening me. You’re threatening me too.” ‘Too’, huh? Looks like Sakayanagi’s not just using Kamuro, she’s also grabbed hold of some weakness of hers. I just asked her a leading question but to think she’d fall

for the bait this hard. “What’s with you? Isn’t it strange that Sakayanagi’s targeting you?”

“Don’t know. I haven’t a clue.”

It appears Kamuro doesn’t know about Sakayanagi’s true intentions either. I’ve obtained at least one answer.

“You’re the Class D student Ryuuen’s looking for, right? That’s the only thing that comes to mind.”

“What’ll you do then?” I did not deny it. In the first place, since Sakayanagi knows about my past, it doesn’t matter how I try to cover it up anyways.

“You’re threatening me but if I ever feel like it, I can also tip Ryuuen off.”

“I thought I’d threaten you but you’re threatening me in return, huh? Then let’s do this.”

I offered Kamuro a proposal. “Feel free to tail me anytime. I won’t speak out. And I don’t report it back to Sakayanagi either. Let’s say in exchange for that, you won’t tell anyone other than Sakayanagi about me.”

“A give-and-take exchange?”

“I don’t think it’s a bad deal.”

“...that’s for sure. I’m not interested in Ryuuen either.”

It appears Kamuro’s agreed, since she nodded and stood up. “I’m going back now. I’m tired.” Saying that, Kamuro went straight for Keyaki Mall’s exit. “Must be quite a troublesome weakness that’s being held against her.” But thanks to this, careless interruptions will no longer occur.

I suppose for the time being, I should settle for this. My identity being leaked to Ryuuen by an unexpected source. Those misgivings appear to have been laid to rest.

Name	Albert Yamada (山田 アルベルト, Yamada Albert)
Class	1st Year, C-Class
Student ID	S01T004708
School Club	None
Birthday	January 16th
Assessment	
Academic Ability	C-
Intellect	C
Judgment	C
Physical Ability	A
Teamwork	B

A black and white portrait of a young man with short dark hair, wearing sunglasses and a dark suit jacket over a white shirt and tie. He has a serious expression.

Interviewer's Evaluation

Though he is not talkative, he looks like an honest student. But in the past, he has had conflicts with his seniors. Therefore, the school will keep a close watch on him. We hope he can develop into an outstanding student.

Homeroom Teacher Records

His English level is high and he can speak it fluently. Paying attention seriously during classes is also worth praising. But since he is lacking in Japanese and Math, he is actively trying to improve his bad subjects.

CHAPTER 2: NOTICE OF PARTING AND REUNION

INTRODUCTION

“Damn it, who the hell do they think they are?” Sudou, entering the classroom while grumbling, passed by his own seat and approached Horikita. I could tell he’s furious from that expression of his. “Listen, Suzune.”

“What’s the matter?” Horikita played along, no longer able to ignore him now that he’s come up to her. “It’s those Class C guys or more like, it’s Ryuuuen. They’ve been tailing me since morning. They even blocked my way when I was walking down the corridor. I’m really getting pissed off.”

“You haven’t gotten physical with them or used any sort of violent language against them, have you?”

As Horikita lightly glared at him, Sudou immediately denied it. “Of course not. I ignored the cancer and came here.”

“I see. Looks like you followed my instructions to the letter.” The most important thing is that he hasn’t caused any problems so far. “By the way, what do you mean instructions?” I asked Sudou. “Suzune told me to just ignore something if I know I won’t be able to handle it properly.”

That’s good advice. Rebuking Sudou poorly will just add fuel to the fire. That’s why having Sudou put up with it even if it ends up stressing him out is the best course of action. “Well, I guess maybe I bumped into their shoulders

on my way through. The guys from the other classes should also know I just got caught up in it so it should be fine, right?”

“That’s right, surely even they won’t use that against you.” After all, they already got the school and the student council involved once and caused an uproar. It would be a different story if he threw a punch but just forcing his way through should be fine.

“So? What did they say to you?”

“They called me an idiot and a monkey, childish names like that. They were picking a fight.” Bang. He punched his own palm to let off some steam. I wonder if this is a continuation of their actions at the archery club yesterday. “Akito also...Miyake also had the Class C guys stuck to him during his club activities.”

“Miyake-kun too? They’re being very active these days.”

“What do you think their goal is? Are they trying to cause another incident like the one they used against me?”

“I don’t know. I can’t say anything at this point. But I’ll think of a countermeasure. Even if they approach you again like this, be sure to not get physical.”

“I get it. I won’t break our promise. I won’t do anything even if they start throwing punches.” Sudou’s words now carry considerable weight compared to the last time he quarrelled with Class C. It’s precisely because she understood this that Horikita honestly accepted them. After satisfactorily concluding his report, Sudou returned to his seat and casually struck up a conversation with Ike and the others. Watching that, Horikita said. “I wonder if Sudou-kun’s finally become a well-adjusted person.”

“Yeah, his manner of speech is still somewhat rough around the edges but it should be within the range of acceptability.”

“Looks like it’s necessary for him to take the next step too.” After saying that, Horikita took a notebook in hand and started writing on it with a pen. “What do you mean by the next step?” I tried to peek but Horikita immediately closed the notebook. “That’s still a far off topic. Right now, what we should be focusing on isn’t Sudou-kun and his troubles.” She quietly added that we cannot afford to be focusing on him alone. I don’t know what’s going on in her head but I couldn’t care less. Recently, Horikita’s been acting after thinking things through more and more. It’s probably because she’s gradually become capable of communicating with Sudou, Hirata and the others.

“Still, Ryuu-en-kun’s being rather active. It’s still right after the Paper Shuffle and I figured he’d keep a low profile for a bit longer. I wonder if this means he’s plotting something again right off the bat?”

“But isn’t that strange? It’s not like there’s a special exam going on right now or anything.”

“Looking back, exams aren’t the only occasions he’s used to attack us. Like attacking Sudou-kun for instance. And it seems he’s also done something to Ichinose-san and Class B unrelated to the exams too. He seems to like doing things outside the box that doesn’t involve fighting over points.” Don’t you already know that without having to ask each and every time? As though asking me that, she looks over at me. Of course, I shrugged it off by playing dumb.

“But I wonder what he’s after this time.”

“Do you really not know? Or are you faking it?”

“What do you mean? I don’t understand.”

“He’s looking for the mastermind controlling Class D from the shadows. And in order to do that, he’s begun making moves without care for the consequences.”

“In other words, he’s looking for you?” When I said that, she gave me an intense glare.

“Using me as your cloak of invisibility will no longer work on Ryuuen-kun.” Horikita continued seriously without humoring me. “What’s your basis for saying that?”

“If, like all the others, he still thinks I’m the one moving the pieces then it would be strange if he didn’t approach me directly. But this time, he’s done nothing to me.” All this time, Ryuuen’s been obsessed with Horikita but it looks like this is no longer the case. “Isn’t that a matter of perspective? Doesn’t that just mean the strategy you used during Paper Shuffle is effective beyond imagination? You could interpret this as him being indecisive about messing up his attack, right? He may be trying to remove the obstacles in the way of his objective first.”

“I wonder about that. I don’t think of it that way though. I should say he’s lost interest in me.”

“Does this mean you weren’t all that unhappy about Ryuuen’s interest in you?”

“That’s not what I mean. Do you want me to kick you?”

“I don’t want to be kicked.” I immediately denied it because she’s the type to actually kick you. “Isn’t it just that this class’s shadow leader stupidly attracted his attention?...feel free to brush it off but do you really want me to say any more than this here?” Even if it’s just before the start of homeroom when all the students have already taken their seats, including Kushida, and there’s no one to eavesdrop on our conversation, it’s still not something we should be discussing here.

“Still, you’ve come to understand Ryuuen pretty well. Ahh no, I’m not teasing you this time.” Since she started glaring at me again, I panicked and added that. “His modus operandi is basically the same thing. Regardless of success or failure, he repeatedly uses similar methods to fight. If he attacks me over and over, it’s natural I’d end up learning from it even if I don’t want

to. That's why she—that's why I predicted he'd use Kushida-san during Paper Shuffle. Of course, I don't even need to say that it would be ideal if that didn't happen though..." No one wants a fellow classmate to turn traitor. If Kushida hadn't betrayed the class, then we might not have had to struggle this hard in our exams. That's what Horikita thinks.

But let's think it through. It's precisely because there's an internal threat like Kushida present among us that Ryuuen let his guard down. If he didn't have a pawn he could act through, he probably would've thought of a different strategy. As a result, for better or for worse, Kushida helped narrow down the enemy's attack pattern. "It's not the only miscalculation but during the Paper Shuffle, I had every intention of outsmarting Ryuuen-kun."

"Isn't that what actually happened?"

"Yes. That's why someone from Class C may be expelled through neglecting their studies. That's why I thought but I suppose that was naive of me to think that."

If you can get your hands on the complete questions and answers then there's no need for you to study. That's why it wouldn't have been strange for expulsions to occur within Class C due to them having let their guard down. That's probably what she meant. Keisei and the others also thought the same. As I thought, everyone's on the same page here. "It's probably because Class C also has smart people in it. It would be accurate to assume they played a support role unlike Ryuuen."

"I suppose so. If they're putting in effort behind the scenes then that's something worth praising." After all, Ryuuen seems very eager to get to the person lurking behind Horikita. If it's for the sake of doing that, he won't shrink back even if it means attracting the attention of the school.

I felt that sort of determination from his actions. "I suppose his persistent attacks will only intensify from now on."

"This has nothing to do with me. Because it's your role to bear the full brunt of it."

“I know that. Being forcibly dragged out by you seems to be my fate.”

“I’m surprised you’re so accepting of it.”

“Because there’s no other choice but to accept it. You’re not going to draw back now, are you?”

Optimism is a good thing. In the first place, Horikita’s got potential. If she can only achieve communication skills on par with Hirata, she will become an existence worthy of her current image. “So—do you have a strategy in mind?”

“For what?”

“I’m asking you whether or not you have a countermeasure against Ryuuen-kun’s search. If we don’t execute our strategy now then things will go past the point of no return.” So Horikita’s worried about my true identity being revealed.

But that’s unnecessary concern. “I have nothing in mind.”

“There you go again...”

She sighed deeply and openly showed irritation at me not telling her anything. “Then I’ll change the topic a bit. Are you still participating in those meetings?”

“Those? Are you talking about Keisei and the others? Is there a problem with that?”

“I don’t think it’s a very useful group. In the first place, it was a group formed because the subjects Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun are bad at necessitated it, right? Now that the exam is over, hasn’t that group become unnecessary?”

“I’m not thinking in terms of how useful it is. It’s very comfortable and I like being with them.” Horikita’s always been about aiming for Class A and that’s

all there is to it with her. Since I never held much interest in it from the beginning, there's really no point in me keeping in touch with Horikita all that much.

If, by any chance, Horikita gives up on the class conflict and then talks to me then I would be able to interact with her the same way I interact with Keisei and the others. "...you will cooperate with me, won't you?"

"I am. To the best of my ability." She doesn't seem very convinced though.

PART 1

Morning lessons are over and it's now lunch break. As I thought about inviting Akito and Keisei over for lunch, my neighbour looked over at me. "What? Surely you're not going to continue this morning's topic, are you?"

"No. I have a request to make."

"I'll pass if it's a troublesome one."

"I won't deny that it's a troublesome one but it won't take long." Horikita said that and then retrieved a book from inside her bag.

"Didn't you say last week that you wanted to read this?" She placed the book, which had the seal of the library on it, on the desk. "'Farewell, My Lovely', huh?" A masterpiece by Raymond Chandler. I've been interested in it for a while now and I've gone to the library several times already but for some reason, this book seems to be very popular here since it's always on loan. I had pretty much given up on it, seeing no other choice but to purchase it.

"I'm impressed you managed to borrow it. By any chance, are you going to lend it to me?" I imagine someone else will borrow it the moment it's returned. In order to ensure I get my hands on it, it's best to get it straight

from the hands of the last person to borrow it even if it's slightly underhanded. "If you want me to. Also, by the way, today's the return date. That's why it would be great if you could head over the library, return it and then borrow it yourself."

"Are you delegating this to me because returning it is a bother?"

"Even if I return it myself, you're going to have to be present there at the library anyway, right? On the contrary, I think this is the right call to make in terms of efficiency."

She has a point. This would only relieve Horikita of the burden of having to return it herself. You need your student card to borrow a book and it's impossible for me to borrow it in someone else's name. On the other hand, you don't need anything to return the book. "Of course, if you refuse then I'll just have to head over to the library and return it myself. But I won't know when this popular and in-demand book will fall into your hands again though. I don't mind having to waste my time heading over to the library." But that's inefficient, isn't it? That's the sort of unrelenting pressure I feel battering me. I wonder if this is Horikita's kindness towards someone wanting to read the book like me.

"...alright. I'll happily accept it."

"I'll leave it to you." After saying that, Horikita handed the book over to me. "I don't mind when you go as long as you do it today during either lunch break or after school. But do make sure to do it. If I get an overdue notice, you'll be taking responsibility for it."

"I know that." I've never borrowed a book from the library before but I understand the process itself.

Borrowing is free of charge but you'll have private points deducted if you're overdue. That's how it works. "Strike while the iron is hot. I'm going now." This would put Horikita at ease too and it's better this way not prolonging this troublesome matter.

PART 2

The library at the start of the lunch break is surprisingly empty. Since food is prohibited inside the library, we can't use it as a place to have our meals. Right now, it appears only a few people are present so it looks like I'll be able to go through the process of returning the book smoothly. "I'm already here so I might as well borrow another book..." Whether I borrow one book or two books, the trouble of returning them will be the same either way after all. Before I return the book, I suppose I'll look for a book I'm interested in reading. While holding 'Farewell, My Lovely' in one hand, I went over to the Mystery corner. Since it's going to be this way, I might as well borrow one or two detective themed books.

It would best if I could borrow another one of Raymond Chandler's. Upon arriving at the Mystery corner, I spotted a lone female student. Struggling to reach out with her arms to retrieve a book that's placed higher on the bookshelf than her height. The book is located at this strange height where one moment it seems like she'd be able to reach it yet being unable to reach it the next moment. Since it appeared as though she'd be able to reach it, she seems reluctant to use the step stool provided. I suppose it's like this whether you're a boy or a girl.

The book she's trying to grab hold of is 'Wuthering Heights' by Emily Brontë. It's a novel written by the Brontë sisters and is well-known in the literary world. No, while the synopsis alone may make it seem like a mystery, the actual genre of it would have to be romance, wouldn't it? I then reached out to grab the book "Wuthering Heights", which the girl was also trying to reach. "I may have done something unnecessary but..." At that moment, I realized that I recognized the female student beside me. "You're Class C's..."

Shiina Hiyori.

She was a student who appeared together with Ryuuen before us a while ago. After quietly looking at my face, it seems she also similarly recognized me. “If I recall you’re...Ayanokouji-kun, was it?” she asked. It seems she’s remembered my name. Considering the strange manner of contact we’ve made with each other I suppose it was inevitable. “Yeah. For now here...” I handed her the book.

“Thank you very much.”

“Do you like it? Brontë.” “Personally, I neither like nor dislike anything. But the book was in the wrong place, genre wise, so I just thought to return it to its proper position” she replied. “I see.” It seems she was trying to do the same thing I was. “By the way, the book you have with you...is “Farewell, My Lovely” right? That’s a masterpiece” she told me.



And with that, it seemed something lit up in Shiina's eyes. "I managed to borrow it from a friend today."

"You're certainly in luck then, it seems Raymond Chandler is very popular amongst the 2nd-year students and there's been a battle over this book for a while. I've been wanting to read it for a while now, but I wasn't able to find it here today either" she continued. "I seem to have done something bad. Monopolizing it" I replied to her.

"I don't mind. I've read it before after all. And besides, while looking for that book, I was blessed to run into another one. It seems the library in this school has a large collection of books. I might graduate before I could read them all" she said while holding the Brontë book in her hands and slightly smiling. "I see, that might be so." There is indeed a large amount of books stored here. Even if you don't read one particular book, you can easily kill time in here.

"Sorry for disturbing you." This is a valuable lunch break. She came here instead of eating lunch, she's surely unwilling to let a student from another class bother her during this time. And so I decide to leave.

"Umm...are you looking for another book to borrow by any chance? If it's only about looking for a book to borrow, I would be glad to lend a hand. Since you're already here, wouldn't you rather borrow another book?" Shiina asks me as she stops me from leaving.

"I thought I'd leave it for another time—what are you doing?" I asked her. Shiina had already taken her eyes off me and was looking around in the mystery corner of the library. "Have you already read the Dorothy L. Sayers series?" she asks me. "No. I've read Christie, but not Dorothy yet."

"If so—how about"Whose Body?" I recommend it. Also the Lord Peter series, if you read one of it you'll surely want to complete the series too". Saying that, she pulled the books off the shelves and presented them to me.

"Umm." The sudden development left me bewildered. I was left uncertain of how to respond to her. "I'm sorry for speaking out like this, did I annoy

you?” she asks me. I was not particularly interested, but I also was not going to refuse her here. And besides, borrowing a book is free anyways so I suppose I’ll go along. “Sorry. I was a bit surprised right now. But since I’m already here I’ll borrow them I guess” I told her. “If you’d like.” I don’t know what she meant by this, but Shiina faced me with a happy expression and asked. “I don’t think it’s lunchtime just yet. If you’re ok with me...would you like to eat together with me” she asks me.

“Eh?” From recommending books, to a development I did not expect. Rather than a chance encounter, I should assume she received instructions to do this from Ryuuen. Whether I refuse or accept her invitation, the impression Shiina would gain of me is the same. Whatever path I choose, I would inevitably be marked as gray by her. “There’s no one in Class C who likes reading novels, so I have no one I could talk to.” Perhaps she just could not stand by silence, but Shiina said that to me.

“This won’t be a problem? Right now Class C is in an uproar looking for someone from Class D right? I think I’m being counted as one of the suspects here.” Shiina probably heard I’m the one behind Karuizawa and Horikita and is likely trying to confirm it. If not, the chances of running into me here are infinitely low. It’s extremely likely she was sent to make contact with me here. In a sense, she’s an even creepier existence than Ryuuen. Because to me, Shiina Hiyori is a completely unknown quantity. I haven’t even noticed her in the previous exams.

I’m sure I could dig up some information on her by using Karuizawa, but now that she’s being targeted by Ryuuen that option is off the table. Since I only have a small community of people I can use, I don’t possess the means to investigate Shiina at the moment. Keisei and Haruka, of course, are not useful for gathering information on other classes. I could use Hirata, but he’s more or less neutral. And since I still don’t know how Hirata feels about me, or how he views me, I don’t want to rely on him for this. At least not with this timing.

“Please don’t worry. I was only making a move formally for Ryuuen-kun. From the start, I was never interested in things like conflict anyways. Or is it

a problem for you to talk to me?”

“No. If there’s no problem on your end, I have none either.”

“That’s a relief, I would hate for classes to fight each other over such trivial things like that. I believe making friends is the most important thing.”

It can’t be helped. The school system was set up like this from the beginning. And besides, most of the students still interact with each other as usual. Since Hirata and Kushida seem to be especially popular, they will simply break through your personal walls to make ‘friends’. “Shall we leave then? It seems time is passing us by.” I then glanced at the clock in the library. “Please let me finish borrowing this book first.” Who would have expected that I would have this kind of development in the library?

PART 3

The two of us headed over to the cafeteria. As 20 minutes have already passed since the start of the lunch break, it’s already crowded with a lot of students. But a lot of the students there appear to have finished their meals as there weren’t many of them lining up at the ticket machine. I chose the daily special but here’s the problem. Shiina appears to be unable to choose, her fingers waving about in front of the buttons. “Please wait.....” I waited patiently for about two minutes after being told that. Looks like she finally made up her mind and chose the same meal I did. “I got a bit indecisive there.”

“It’s fine, it’s not like there’s anyone lining up behind us.”

Right afterward, two set meals were placed on the counter. Shiina seems to be having trouble holding the tray with the meal on it since she brought her schoolbag along with her to the cafeteria. “Isn’t the bag getting in the way? I’ll carry it.”

“No, I can’t possibly ask you to do something that troublesome...”

“It’s ok, tripping while holding that tray would be far more troublesome.”

“Sorry...”

As she apologetically handed the bag over to me, I took it in hand and actually found it rather heavy. I wonder if it’s got textbooks in it. “It’s heavy, isn’t it? Thank you.” Avoiding the crowds as much as possible, we found empty seats and sat down facing one another. And we then belatedly began eating our lunch slowly. “Do you usually eat here at the cafeteria?”

“No. I normally buy my lunch at the convenience store in the morning and I usually eat in the classroom. Do you come here often, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Convenience store food isn’t very delicious. I suppose nothing beats food fresh out of the oven.” It saves you the trouble plus it’s worth the effort too. Shiina then picked up the food with her chopsticks and brought it to her mouth in a very dignified manner.

I observed her movements in admiration. The way she handles her chopsticks is exceedingly elegant. “Hmm, I see...the school cafeteria’s food is certainly delicious. I’ll make sure to keep it in mind.”

“Could it be that this is your first time eating here?”

“I suppose the cat’s out of the bag?”

“I’ve been thinking that since we were at the ticket machine, that perhaps you haven’t...” We’re already at the end of our second semester and students who haven’t made use of the cafeteria are a rare breed.

“I’ve been curious about it for a while now but once you lose that initial trigger to go then you just end up procrastinating, don’t you? I thought this is as good a chance as any so I mustered up my courage to come.” Somehow, I do understand her feelings. You do need a fair bit of courage to show up at a place you normally don’t go to. You don’t know how you’re supposed to act

there so you end up hesitating. Your own feelings of not wanting to show the people who go there regularly how out of your depth you are would end up stopping you. I also had my reservations about buying drip coffee from the convenience store at first. Because I wasn't sure I would be able to smoothly make coffee from a coffee cup with nothing but ice in it. But in the majority of cases, you'll find that it's nothing that difficult once you try it out.

"Then that means this could be the trigger for you to come here from now on."

"Yes." Afterward, we talked a bit while finishing our lunch. Since we are the latecomers here, most of the students eating lunch here have already finished up and left. Of course, there are students here and there who have stayed behind to have a chat or to take their time eating. "I'd like to continue where we left off at the library. If it's not a bother, would you please read this?" Saying that, Shiina places something on the table. Don. A heavy sound you wouldn't have expected from it at first glance resounded. "Have you read any of these books before, Ayanokouji-kun?"

She just took four books out of her bag. No wonder it's so heavy. William Irish and Ellery Queen as well as Lawrence Block and Isaac Asimov.

"You've got good taste..." These are all mystery novels, masterpieces of old.
"You can tell?"

"I'm also a fan of the mystery genre."

"I see."

Shiina happily laughs while bringing her hands together. And that's when I realized something was off about the books. "These aren't from the library, are they?"

"They're all mine. I'm carrying them around in case I meet someone who shares my interest in them one day so I can lend it to them. It was only a book at first but before I found someone like that, they just kept piling up."

“Is that so?” This girl’s got a few screws loose. “Please don’t hold back, take whichever one you like.”

“Then...I suppose I’ll go with Ellery Queen since I haven’t read that one yet.”

“Please do.” If this is her putting up an act, then it’s one hell of an act but I don’t really feel that from her. I can only imagine these actions of hers to be because she genuinely loves books. But I’ve made a strange connection in a strange place. Of course, I should be on my guard if this is a trap that Class C is setting up but I think it’s safe to say this matter is a complete coincidence.

I promised to return it to her at a later date just as the bell signaling the end of our lunch break rang.

PART 4

After school, I got contacted as usual through our group chat. ‘Come to Keyaki Mall if you can. The usual place’. A casual message from Haruka. The moment I tried to reply with my phone, a verbal sword from the neighbor came flying at me. “That grinning face of yours is giving me the creeps.”

“Whose?”

“Yours. You do have some self-awareness, right? Even without me having to point it out?”

“I can at least say with confidence that I wasn’t grinning.”

Because I don’t remember the corners of my mouth curving upwards. “Is it just that you’re even more serious than I am or perhaps you’re playing dumb...? I’m talking about your inner self.” Apparently Horikita can tell that I’m overjoyed at having a friend send me a chat message. “You’re fitting

right in, aren't you?" And with a throwaway remark like that, Horikita took her bag in hand and walked off alone. "I was grinning, huh?" Of course, I'll admit it doesn't feel bad to be contacted like this by a friend but if the conclusion you draw from that is that I was 'grinning' then it's not something Horikita should be celebrating.

Does she really want to remain a loner that badly...? I quickly wrapped things up and left the classroom. If we were a normal group, we could've headed to our destination while chatting the whole way there but for a group like ours lacking a driving force, that's not quite possible. We only gather when there are people willing to meet up. When I arrived at our usual spot at Keyaki Mall, everyone had already assembled. "Akito, what about your club activities?"

"...I'm skipping today's."

"Looks like the Class C guys showed up at the archery club again. From what I can tell, they haven't come to blows with anyone though..."

Apparently there's been a quarrel there. "I told my seniors I wasn't quite feeling it and that I'll be taking a break. Our club's quite lenient, you see." Even if he is taking a break, this declaration is just far too honest. Well, I suppose if he used the excuse that he's not feeling well then he wouldn't be able to show up here after all. "We seriously need to put an end to Class C's reckless actions. At this rate, it's even harming our club activities."

"What about discussing this with our teacher?" Haruka offered. But Akito shook his head.

"Nothing you can do if the only thing you're going to say is that you're being watched by Class C. It'd be a different story if they intruded on a private area but they're free to visit the archery club." Even if that's mostly a lie, they're still free to come have a look as many times as they want. "I guess so. Class C's really giving us grief, aren't they? Ahh, speaking of Class C, I saw it, I saw it. How detestable, Boss." Saying anachronistic words like that, Haruka elbowed me in the ribs. "You saw? What?"

“What do you mean ‘what’? I’m talking about Kiyopon eating together with Shiina-san from Class C”.

...I see. I guess she spotted us in the cafeteria. Even though it’s a spacious area, there weren’t many people left by then so it’s not really strange. “I’ll have you know Airi’s been worried about that ever since to the point she’s been spilling her rice all over the place.”

“Wah! You promised you wouldn’t talk about that, Haruka-chan!”

“Really? Then let’s pretend that didn’t happen just now.” Of course, the brain isn’t really configured to forget things that easily. But with this, I’ve managed to catch on. That the reason she had us gather here today is, without a doubt, because she wanted to discuss this. “Right before Christmas? Could it be a last minute romance?”

“Really, Kiyotaka? I didn’t figure you for the worldly type though.” Almost as if he’s slightly angered by that, Keisei said so. “Naive. You’re way too naive, Yukimu~. All roads lead to romance for a boy and a girl. Also, ‘worldly type’ is such a lame thing to say. Teenagers these days go at a much faster pace than you’re imagining.”

“What do you mean ‘faster’? We’re still in our 1st year of high school, you know.”

“Look here, experiencing romance for the first time in your 1st year of high school is already considered too late. Back when I was in elementary school, some of my classmates were already dating middle schoolers and high schoolers.”

Keisei’s jaw dropped at Haruka’s shocking declaration and he was left dumbfounded. “I-I’ve never heard that before.”

“That just means you never paid any attention to your surroundings, Yukimu~. Most girls aren’t interested in a childish classmate after all.” I don’t think you can really apply this logic to elementary school students but that could just be both Keisei and I lacking experience in worldly matters.

But I must make a correction where one needs to be made. “Sorry to rain on your parade but there’s no such thing going on with me.”

“Really? You sure you’re not just trying to avoid the embarrassment?”

“S-See? I told you but you wouldn’t believe me, Haruka-chan.”

“I had some business at the library during lunch break. I just happened to run into Shiina there by coincidence. I think it’s probably the same as Akito being watched by Ishizaki and the others at his club. She asked me a variety of things too. I didn’t want to turn her down and end up attracting more unwanted attention...” By going along with the flow of the conversation like this, it makes me sound more credible. Besides, it’s not really a lie. Even though our encounter was a coincidence, it’s still highly possible she was trying to sound me out there. “So you’ve finally been marked too, Ayanokouji. Does that Ryuuen guy really hate the idea of being overtaken by Class D that much?”

Akito resentfully said, aware now that he’s not the only one affected by this. But Keisei began to consider this tailing problem from a different angle. “No, that may not be the case. You’ve heard the recent rumors about there being a mastermind behind Class D too, right? I didn’t give it much thought until now but that may be the reason why Ryuuen’s tailing us. Ayanokouji, what exactly did Shiina ask you anyways?”

“You’re exactly right, Keisei. She probably thought I’d be an easy target for conversation since I was alone. She talked about a variety of different topics too but she questioned me quite a bit about the mastermind and such.”

“I-I see, so that’s how it is. So it wasn’t a date or anything.” Airi pats herself on the chest in relief after learning it’s completely unrelated to that.

“But I didn’t have a clue so I couldn’t really answer no matter how many times she asked me. To be honest, it was really tough.”

“Still, you seemed to be having fun though?”

“I can’t just openly act displeased now, can I? She is still a colleague, for the record.” Haruka still seems suspicious of me but Keisei immediately changed the topic. “Leaving aside the romance that Haruka’s talking about, the things Class C’s been saying are worrying. I do feel bad about eavesdropping but it looks like Sudou also got caught up in it and asked Horikita for advice.” Looks like he overheard the conversation with Sudou this morning.

“What about you? Are you okay, Keisei?” Keisei seemed contemplative in response to Akito’s concern. “So far nothing’s happened yet. Directly, that is. But I’d be lying if I said there’s nothing I’m worried about.” As though reminiscing, Keisei told us about what’s been on his mind. “These days, I’ve been crossing paths with Class C students more than usual. I didn’t pay it any heed but they were all Ryuuen’s lackeys. It may be that I’m also being targeted.” The probability of that being the case is likely extremely high.

“I see...but they haven’t done anything to me though?” She reservedly raised her hand as though she doesn’t recall anything. “Same.” Haruka also raised her hand like Airi did. One wouldn’t normally think they’re being tailed. All the more so because none of it is conspicuous. “Maybe we just haven’t realized it like Keisei and someone might actually be tailing us.”

“Ehh~ That’s what you’d call a stalker, right? Creepy.”

Naturally, having a boy target a girl like this would lead to various problems. In this case, Ryuuen may be making use of girls if he wants to perfect his strategy. “Being tailed, huh? That may be the case...” Hearing that, Akito covered his mouth with his hand and said as though he had remembered something. “The time I finish with my club activities and meet with you guys is often late, right?”

“Yeah. Usually around after 6 or 7?”

“I’ve been feeling there were more Class C students around that would be normal. The other day when we met up at Keyaki Mall, Komiya was there. He’s here now too.” Akito is the sharp one in our group, he’s got excellent observation skills.

Haruka tried to look around but Akito stopped her. “Stop it. We don’t know what they’re after, it’s better not to react.” I would’ve stopped her if Akito hadn’t done so first. It’s for the best if we avoid adding fuel to the flames as much as we can. “Creep.” Haruka spitefully said while looking in the direction Komiya’s in without even trying to hide it. “So it’s really true? That Class D has a hidden mastermind?” Perhaps Haruka wasn’t taking it seriously, it appears she still has her doubts.

“No use thinking about it, Haruka. Ryuuuen’s got no qualms about lying. There’s no telling whether we’ve got someone like that or not.” Akito said while denying the very premise of it. However, it looks like Keisei’s thinking about it from a different angle. “I’m sure Ryuuuen’s thought it out. He’s having us tailed precisely because he believes there’s someone like that. But if so, then who could it be?”

“Hmm? You think there’s someone like that?”

“If not, then none of their actions would make sense.” Akito didn’t seem too convinced.

“That’s assuming there’s any meaning to the things Ryuuuen thinks about.” Perhaps because of their entanglements up until now, Akito seems doubtful of that. “What do you think, Kiyopon?” The question I expected to come flying at me, did come flying at me. “Regardless of whether or not a person like that exists, that’s probably the reason why they’re tailing us.” After hearing all of our opinions, Haruka crossed her arms and spoke.

“So we’re talking about someone who isn’t Horikita-san and whose actions have gotten us through the exams so far, right? Someone like Yukimur~ perhaps? He’s smart and as a matter of fact, he always tops our tests.”

“I did no such thing. I was only being swept along during the island exam and the zodiac exam.” Keisei sighs as though the topic is something pathetic. “Then perhaps Kouenji-kun? You know how his personality is but he’s top class when it comes to brains and brawn.”

“No way, Haruka. His personality is just like what you said. Do you really think he’s the type of person who’d make a move for the class?”

His lack of teamwork is far beyond Horikita’s to the point it’s almost off the charts. “But maybe that’s just faked?”

“You’re saying that absurd personality of his is just a front?”

“Maybe his real personality is a calm, calculating schemer...no?” Everyone shook their heads at once. “No way. He’s just whimsical.” It’s precisely because they’ve known him for a long time now that they’re able to say with confidence that this is the sort of person Kouenji is.

“Even leaving aside the personality issue, Kouenji being the mastermind is still very unlikely.” Keisei added that as though he has proof of that. “He retired on the first day of the island exam. In other words, he wouldn’t have been able to assess the situation one bit. If there’s a mastermind besides Horikita during the island exam that it wouldn’t add up for him.”

“Ahh—I see. You’re rather persuasive, Yukimura~”. “But this is just pure guesswork. And based on the premise that there is a mastermind like Ryuuen theorized. Besides, it’s only if the mastermind made a move in every exam so far. Even if they exist, they may not have gotten involved during the island exam. It’s all guesswork, of course.”

“I see. That does sound right.”

“But I do think there’s a mastermind in our class.”

“Why do you think so, Keisei?” Keisei continues speaking in response to the doubtful Akito. “Just a hunch. If I had to say then it would be because Class D’s been making much progress so far, I suppose.”

“But how could Ryuuen-kun tell that the mastermind isn’t Horikita-san?” Since no one knows the reason for that, the conversation stalled for a moment. “Maybe it’s Hirata-kun? If I recall, he got some advice from Horikita-san back during the island exam.”

“Maybe it’s actually Hirata issuing orders behind the scenes, you mean?”

“I don’t really think he’s that kind of guy though but I can’t rule it out either.” Ultimately, it was Hirata who became the prime suspect. “But I’m sure Hirata’s also been marked by Ryuuken.”

“That sounds tough...maybe about 10 people or so have been marked?” Normally speaking, surveillance at the hands of that many people would leave you with no room to rest. Just like how Ishizaki’s the one keeping an eye on Akito, Hirata is probably also being marked by someone else. But Hirata’s policy is that of non-intervention.

I imagine he’d be considerate even of enemies that need to be defeated. And I haven’t had much contact with Hirata these days. It is a fact that freedom of movement is limited while Ryuuken’s in the middle of his investigation. No point in giving them what they want. “U-Um, Kiyotaka-kun.” After hearing everyone out, Airi reservedly started speaking. “Hmm?”

“Please don’t get angry but...could it be that the mastermind is actually Kiyotaka-kun?” At those words, the remaining three simultaneously turned to look at me.

“Why do you think so?”

“I-I mean, umm...Kiyotaka-kun’s always calm and smart...and also dependable...also, I thought you’ve been giving Horikita-san a lot of advice, so...”

“Were Kiyopon’s test scores any good?”

“If I recall, they were neither good nor bad.” Keisei pushes up his glasses. I suppose it’s just in her nature, that remark of Airi’s probably has no malevolent intent behind it since she herself doesn’t know about the hidden affairs of the class.

“S-Sorry. I just, somehow, thought that...that maybe because of the advice you gave without realizing, Ryuuken-kun may be targeting you and I felt sad

about that..."

"Unfortunately, I'm the one always receiving advice from Horikita."

"Well, I mean, Kiyopon does have a mysterious side to him. Adding the fact that he's close to Horikita-san too, it wouldn't be out of place for him to seem suspicious."

"That...might be the case. Maybe that's also why Shiina directly confronted him." Akito, who has denied the existence of a mastermind so far, reached that conclusion. "There's certainly reason to be suspicious of Ayanokouji. Even if there is no mastermind, just by being close to Horikita, it may give rise to doubts that there is a mastermind, right?"

"If so, that's disastrous for you, Kiyopon."

"...you can say that again."

"A thorough marking by Ryuuen based on a misunderstanding, huh? It's annoying just thinking about it. If there's anything troubling you, feel free to consult us, ok?" Akito said so while putting a hand on my shoulder. "Yeah. I'll do that." But there's no way this surveillance is going to continue on forever. When there's a good opportunity to do so, Ryuuen will definitely attack.

PART 5

The next day, after school, I sighed discreetly while relaxing my stiff shoulders. The reason my shoulders are stiff would be the actions of a certain classmate of mine whose actions I don't quite comprehend. An unexpected visitor then came over to me without knowing a smidgen of my worries. Her skirt swaying slightly in the breeze, she stops in front of me. "Say, Ayanokouji-kun, are you free today?" The girl speaking to me is Satou from

Class D. “If you’re okay with it, why don’t we have tea together on the way back?” She said so while twirling her hair like it’s pasta with a finger of her left hand.

How should I put it...a rather bold, aggressive student is how I would have to describe her. This student, Satou, is acting almost like she’s confessed to me before. In other words, almost like an invitation to a date. The dweller beside me, Horikita, paid no heed and after packing her belongings, left the classroom. But I can somehow sense the members of the Ayanokouji Group observing the situation.

Why is a popular girl like Satou talking with Ayanokouji? Is probably what they’re thinking. Haruka, in particular, is interested in the circumstances of the other girls. “Yeah—” I don’t have any plans in mind for today. Our group assemblies aren’t mandatory either so that’s good too. The stares from the group members are worrying but that’s still trivial. “Was it bad timing?” Since I didn’t give an affirmative reply right away, Satou anxiously asked me.

“Sorry, Satou. Today’s no good.” I hesitated a bit but in the end, I turned her down. The reason for that is because my shoulders are feeling stiff. From morning until the end of school, I’ve been feeling unpleasant the whole day at the stare I received from time to time. Even now as I’m talking with Satou, that stare remains affixed on me. Chabashira-sensei stayed behind in the classroom after school ended. She’s pretending to fill out paperwork but it’s obvious she’s been staring at me from time to time. Almost as though she wants to approach me.

“I-I see. See you later then, Ayanokouji-kun.” I feel bad for Satou’s disappointment but it’s just bad luck. As though to see Satou off, I walked out into the corridor to go back. And with this, the problem will be resolved...or rather, an immediate danger drew close right off the bat. Almost simultaneously, Chabashira-sensei left the classroom and approached me. As I suspected, she must have some business with me. Looks like I made the right choice turning Satou down. I avoided the conspicuous corridor and

headed over towards a staircase that leads to the entrance in a roundabout fashion. "...Ayanokouji."

Since the crowd has thinned, Chabashira closed the distance and called out to me. "Do you have business with me?"

"Yeah. Follow me. There's something I need to tell you."

"That's a tall order. I've got an appointment with Horikita now." I made up an excuse to get out of this situation. "I don't want to act carelessly as a teacher either, but circumstances are circumstances." Chabashira-sensei, who often doesn't show emotion, now has an unusually vulnerable expression on her face.

"I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Unfortunately for you, you don't have the right to refuse. It's an extremely urgent matter." I don't really want to follow her but I can't afford to disobey a teacher either, I suppose. What little resistance I put up proved futile, so I ended up following Chabashira-sensei. We left the student area and finally arrived at this place. "The reception office? What do you need to talk about that you brought me all the way here? It's still too early for career consultation, right?"

"You'll understand soon enough." I tried making a joke but it doesn't appear like she's going to answer a student's question. But rather than what's beyond the door, I'm more curious about Chabashira-sensei. Forget calmness, she seems almost agitated. Even if the person behind that door is the person I think it is, her acting strange this blatantly is still strange. It'd be a different story if it's a teacher who's usually like this but Chabashira-sensei doesn't belong in that category. And without even realizing the doubts I'm harboring, Chabashira-sensei knocked on the door to the room.

"Headmaster. I've brought Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun." Headmaster, huh? It should be someone a student like me would have no reason to interact with from enrollment until graduation. "Please enter." I heard a gentle voice, but a dignified one befitting his age. And Chabashira-sensei opened the door to the

reception office. A man roughly in his 60s sat on a sofa. I've seen him several times both at the entrance ceremony and the end of semester ceremony but this man is, without a doubt, this school's headmaster. But his expression is not a laid back one but rather, I could see beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

And there's one more person opposite him. I'm sure of it now. Of why I was called all the way out here.

"Now then, the two of you can have your conversation...you don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not."

"I'll be taking my leave so please feel free to take your time. If you'll excuse me." The man sitting opposite the headmaster is in his 40s. Despite the fact that he's clearly twice this man's age, the headmaster acted in an extremely and thoroughly polite manner and left his territory as though he were fleeing.

"Then I'll also excuse myself..." Chabashira-sensei also bowed before the man and left alongside the headmaster. I didn't overlook the fact that in the last look she gave me, she seemed worried. As the door closed, the only sound I can hear is the faint sound of the heating system. As I stood still without saying anything, the man quietly said.

"How about you sit down. I'm meeting up with you of my own accord after all."

It's been one ye-, no.....one and a half years since I've heard this man's voice.

His way of speaking and tone hasn't changed at all.

Not that I specifically wanted him to anyway.

"I'm not planning on holding a long conversation that requires me to sit down, I have planned on meeting some friends later."

“Friends? Don’t make me laugh. You aren’t capable of such things.”

He hasn’t even seen how I live, yet still judges his statement to be true.

Believing he is absolutely right, that’s typical of him.

“Whether we talk together now or not will amount to nothing.”

“So I can assume that I got a favourable answer? If that’s so, there’s no need to talk anymore. I’m also busy and just got some time in-between to come after all.”

He didn’t pay me any attention while arriving at his conclusion.

“I don’t know what the answer you want is.”

“I have prepared the papers for you to drop out. I was talking about it with the headmaster earlier. You just have to say “yes”, then we can be done with it.”



He saw my intention to gloss it over and went directly to the main topic.

“I see no reason why I should.”

“That may be so for you, but I do have some on my own”

He looked at me for the first time.

That sharp glance hasn’t withered, in fact, it has seemingly increased with his age.

Pupils like sharpened blade edges, like he could see thorough into the core. Many people have probably felt being assaulted by them. I took them right on.

“You mean a parent, for now, plans on twisting the child’s wishes on his own accord?”

“Parent you say? You have never recognized me as a parent.”

“Indeed.”

It’s suspicious whether this man has ever considered my his child in the first place. It’s likely we only recognized ourselves as father and son on paper only. Doesn’t matter whether there is a blood relation or not.

“The point is, you were acting on your own accord. I ordered you to remain on standby.”

He threw out, forgetting to urge me to sit. Then he continued.

“You defied my orders and entered this school. I’m ordering you to drop out immediately as a matter of fact.”

“Your orders were only valid inside the White Room only. Right now, I don’t need to listen to them anymore.”

It was simple logic. But of course he wouldn't be satisfied with that.

"You have become quite talkative since last time I saw you. Influenced by this worthless school I see."

Resting his cheek on his hand, the man looked at me like watching excrement.

"Anyway, let me hear your reply to my last question."

"The meaningless one about you not requiring to listen to me anymore? You are my property. The owner has every right to use it as he fits. I don't need to tell you this. Whether you live or die is for me to decide."

To honestly being able say that in this country in which law rule prevails, what a wicked person.

"No matter how much you are stuck on it, I don't plan on leaving this school."

Doesn't matter what I say, we are just going in circles.

He hates wasting time on useless talk so he should know this. Then what is next? Of course he will strike his next card.

"Aren't you curious what became of Matsuo who told you about this school and gave you the idea to enroll?"

"Not really."

That's a name I remember, his face pops up in my mind.

"He was managing you as a butler for a year. In the end, he went against his employer's orders."

He was talking non-stop, then suddenly stopped. By doing this, he could carve the contents and make the listener conscious of the grave matter this conversation contained. Using a heavy tone and a deep glance, the listener

would assume the conversation was about to go in a negative direction, wondering how bad it may have went.

“Teach you how flee from me, about this school’s existence, and then ignoring me, your real parent’s intentions by sending the papers for your enrollment. Truly a foolish thing to do.”

He picked up the teacup the school prepared for him and took a slurp.

“That is an inexcusable, unforgivable act. Of course he had to be punished.”

It was not a threat, he was just stating the facts without mixing in his feelings on the matter.

“You may have imagined it already. He was fired by me.”

“Since you are his employer, that’s a valid reason.”

The man who was my butler was close to 60 years old. He was outstandingly good at looking after people, and was easy to like. A man well liked by all children. He married young, but was not blessed with children. He got his first child when he was over 40 years old, but he sadly lost his wife in exchange. His child was about the same age as me. I remember him bragging about his son all the time. I have never met his son, but Matsuo told be he was studying really hard as to repay his father. The smile he had is still burnt inside my memories.

“You must have known about him. Matsuo’s beloved son.”

He must’ve seen me remembering about them, before he added.

“As you enrolled into this school, Matsuo’s son also managed to pass the difficult entrance exam and enrolled into a famous private high school. He surely worked really hard.”

He added a pause, then continued.

“But, he has now been expelled.”

His words were simple, the meaning clear.

He was avoiding to say it directly, but he had made sure the school retracted his son's enrollment to punish him.

Because this man had power to do so.

"And so? Did a man such as you only end it with this? So kind you are."

"His son is a strong child. Even after expulsion from his desired school, he didn't falter. He began enrollment into other schools. But I played my hand with them all. I stopped all his attempt at entering high school and made him give up. Same for Matsuo. Spreading his bad reputation resulted in him not finding any new work. The result, his son lost his course and became unemployed.

It was a speech about how my acts had resulted in Matsuo and his son losing everything. A made-up story it is not, but the truth. If he only meant to report about this petty thing, it was a letdown.

"You are probably not surprised at this point. Since they went against their employer's orders, some form of compensation must be made. But it seems he didn't expect one to such a degree. He was responsible, kind man from the very beginning. Losing his wife early, raising his son alone, grieving over that his careless actions had led to him robbing his son of his future. He found only one way to save his son. For reparations he pleaded me to not touch his son anymore, then last month he burned himself to death."

This was the point he wanted to say after his long speak. That my selfish actions was connected to the tragedy of others.

"His son is now working part-time without any guarantee to if he can survive to the next day. No dreams. no hope."

"His family falling into ruins is all your fault. His son must hate you."

“No forgiveness even after death.”

As I was about to ask “And then”, the corners of his mouth curved slightly.

“The man who took care of you, the man who saved you has died and you don’t seem to be paying any attention. Matsuo would have turned in his grave seeing your attitude. The one he bet his own life.”

Right or wrong, the reason for Matsuo and his son’s fall to ruins lies with this man. There is no need to feel remorse for dead people. But this man wasn’t trying to stir my feelings of guilt. Nor did he want me to show empathy. He just wanted to state it. That we would show no mercy to those who enraged him. Nothing more than that.

“For the first, I don’t have any evidence that what you told me is true.”

“Matsuo’s report of death has been confirmed. If necessary, I will bring you his records.”

So ask me anytime, he strongly implied.

“If he really is dead, then all the more the reason for me not to leave this school. As Matsuo helped me enroll despite knowing the consequences, I have to succeed his will.”

A joke of a reply to bullshit like this.

“You sure have changed, Kiyotaka.”

I can understand why he wanted to say that. I had always followed his... No, more precisely, the White Room’s orders. That was the whole world to me. His greatest failure was probably this blank unknown one year period of mine.

“What happened to you during this one year? What made you decide for this school in the first place?”

And since he already knew, he pursued the topic.

“Certainly, you have provided us with the best education possible. You may have used methods which the public won’t ever acknowledge, but still, I won’t reject the White Room itself. Which is why I’m not planning on speaking about the past to anyone, nor try to put you in a difficult position. However, you are excessively chasing an ideal. The result of that is me, that’s all.”

I am a first year high schooler. 16 years old. However, my knowledge far exceeds the amount learned in a lifetime. I realised it, was made to realise it. That humans have an endless amount of curiosity.

“You taught us a lot of things. Not only the usual arts and sciences, martial arts and self-defence, wisdom and much more. It is because of that I wanted to learn about the “world” you threw away.”

“Does the conclusion, the answer to that have anything to do with why you ran away?”

“Will I be able to learn the same things at this school as staying in the White Room? What freedom is, how it feels to not be bound by anything. I couldn’t have learned that in that place.”

This is a fact even he can’t deny. The White Room was perhaps the most efficient place in the whole world to raise a human, but you couldn’t learn everything. It was an institution that threw away anything unnecessary to the extremes.

“Matsuo told me, the only place in Japan where you couldn’t reach was this school.”

If I didn’t choose this school instead of waiting in standby as per orders, or if I had made a different decision, I would most likely have been returned back to the White Room.”

Thus I strongly reject withdrawing from the school.

“There are some parts I can’t understand, but it seems I just have to accept that’s how the situation is. Now I see how temporarily shutting down the institution that time before the completion of the plan was a mistake. To think just one year could set back a plan which had been ongoing for over 16 years. And annoyingly you managed to escape to this school away from my reach.”

I know that this temporary shutdown was a heartbreakingly memory to him. That is why he so strongly wanted me back. But to make contact after half a year, there must be something else happening behind my back. Is there someone big behind this school?

“I now understand why you came here, but don’t think this is the end of it. As with Matsuo’s son, I can make you quit this school by force you know.”

“I don’t believe you can interfere with this school as you are right now since it’s backed by the government.”

“What makes you think so? That’s a statement without any proofs to back it up.”

“The first one, the bodyguards you always surround yourself with are nowhere to be seen. You are making grudges all around so you shouldn’t be so willing to separate from them. But they are not in this room nor in the hallway as far as I can see.”

The man grabbed the cup and drank the now lukewarm tea.

“Why should I need bodyguards just to visit a high school?”

“That’s sloppy considering you always have them guard when you go to the toilet. It seems to me you couldn’t take them with you even if you wanted to. The authorities behind this school didn’t permit it, is what I think.”

And if he didn’t adhere, he wouldn’t be allowed to enter.”

“You are still lacking evidence.”

“Next, If you had the power to make me quit, you would have done so before even counting to 3. But you didn’t do that, instead going out of your way to talk to me face to face and convince me to quit. Something is weird.”

For Matsuo’s son, he didn’t need to meet personally, he simply brought down the judgment I believe.

“And there’s another thing. If you made your move in an enemy territory like this school and it becomes public, your ambitions... your comeback would forever be a faint dream, isn’t that so?”

“...Is that what Matsuo put inside your head? So even after death he still pesters me.”

“I can’t know that just from his mumblings.”

I didn’t hear anything detailed from him in the first place, but I can infer the details on my own. This man cannot be stopped halfheartedly, and Matsuo should have known this too.

“Leaving aside the shutdown and its influence, I noticed one more problem. No matter how perfect the discipline is, the so fitting rebellion period will occur in all humans.”

A mere 15 years of education cannot possibly win over the DNA, carved from ancient times.

“Let’s put why an individual as you has gone off the paved road as the premise. You know fully well that there is no meaning behind learning about these unnecessary things so why?”

“The satiable curiosity, and to decide my own path. That’s all.”

“Nonsense. There is no other path in life other than the one I planned for you. You are the one that one day will exceed myself and rule Japan. Why can’t you realise that?”

“That’s just your own fabricated tale.”

“Seems I can’t get through you after all.”

“Guess we have the same opinion.”

No matter how far, we are always in parallel. We can never compromise on our understanding.

“The White Room has been restarted. This time, it will be perfect. I have also made preparations to make up for lost time.”

“In that case you should have several successors who will succeed your will. Why bother with me?”

“Certainly, it is as you say, but there is nobody with the same talent as you yet.”

“You cannot lie even to your children, is what you want to say?”

“You think such a worthless lie would reverberate with you?”

That’s true.

“This is my last words, Kiyotaka. Consider your answer carefully before answering. What do you wish for? Leaving this school of your own free will or letting your parent forcibly make you leave?”

Seems he really wants to drag me back no matter what. I don’t know what cards we will use to that sake, but it’s simply not worth listening to.

“...I have no plans to return.”

As if slicing through the silence, I quickly gave him my conclusion.

“I don’t know whether there is salvation for you or not, but I have no plans to give up learning. The methods may be different, but it’s true that this school is raising talents. That’s where my expectations are.”

“What gibberish. You don’t understand what kind of place this school is. This is nothing more than a shack for the mobs. There should be some in your own class I’m sure. Lowlifes without any chance for salvation.”

“Lowlifes? That’s not true. This is a place where I can find out whether people are equal or not. It’s a pretty interesting policy I think.”

“So you think even worthless people can grow up to stand in the same ring as geniuses?”

“That’s my wish.”

“How much are you going to stray away from my policies?”

“We should end this conversation, you know this won’t go anywhere.”

As I was showing him my will to finish up, a knocking sound reverberated inside the reception room.

“Excuse me.”

After the door was opened, a man, seemingly in the 40s, appeared from the door. His expression became somewhat wary as he noticed the unexpected visitor.

“It has been a long time, Ayanokouji-sensei.”

The man bowed deeply. The scene was like that of a subordinate and his boss.

“...Sakayanagi. What a nostalgic face. It’s been 7, 8 years I presume.”

“I guess it has been that long since I succeeded my father’s position as the board chairman. Time sure does fly.”

Sakayanagi? I got a little sense of incongruity from the name the board chairman presented himself as.

It can't be helped that I associated that name with Sakayanagi Arisu from Class A.

“You must be Ayanokouji-sensei’s... Kiyotaka-kun I assume? It is nice to meet you.”

As he was talking to the standing me, he tilted his head slightly to the side.

“Thanks for everything. We are done speaking so I’m excusing myself.”

“Ah, Could you wait for a bit? I just want to talk a bit to both of you.”

I couldn’t possibly refuse that from the third person, at least not from the board chairman of this school.

“Well then, have a seat.”

I took my seat following his invitation. The board chairman then sat down beside me.

“I have heard from the principal. It seems you want to make him withdraw from the school?”

If the board chairman yielded in authority, I would perhaps be cornered.

“That’s right. Since his parent is stating so, you should promptly set it into action.”

I wonder how the board chairman Sakayanagi would return those words. Having his worries elsewhere, Sakayanagi met the man’s eyes and replied.

“You are mistaken. True, the parents have much to say regarding their child. If the parents strongly desires for it, there are cases where we don’t have to consider the student’s own wishes. Still, that is by considering all facts and reasons. As an example, if they were subjected to vicious bullying etc, it would be worth considering. Does this hold true to you, Kiyotaka-kun?”

“Not at all.”

“What a farce. That’s not my problem. I just want him to quit the school he enrolled at without my permission.”

“Going to high school isn’t mandatory. Which school to enroll at is up to the student. Naturally, if the parents paid the expenses like tuition or similar, it would be another story. This school has all the expenses covered by the government so money and the materials are not a problem. Thus we will put the students’ autonomy as our first priority.”

It was expected but I felt grateful for those words.

And at the same time, I understood. Matsuo once said ‘this school will allow you to escape the White Room’. He made that declaration because of this man’s existence. He’s conversing with my father without the slightest hint of fear. And it’s also proving effective. Completely unlike the headmaster who bowed immediately before authority, this man seemed dependable. “You’ve also changed. What happened to the you who used to agree with me?”

“Even now, I admire you, Ayanokouji-sensei. But it’s precisely because I agree with the ideals of this school that my father founded that I intend to succeed him. I’m sure you know that best, Ayanokouji-sensei? None of the policies have changed since my father’s time.”

“I’m not going to reject your way of doing things. You’re free to succeed your father’s will. But if you’re going to do that then why did you even allow Kiyotaka to enroll at this school?” That man seems to harbor some doubts and so he started interrogating Chairman Sakayanagi. “Why, you ask? After assessing the results of his interview and exams, I concluded that he qualifies for enrollment.”

“Don’t dodge the question. I am aware this school operates differently from an ordinary one. In the first place, Kiyotaka should not have even be a candidate for admission. I know the interviews and the exams are a farce.” At those words, the expression of Chairman Sakayanagi changed even though he had a pleasant smile on his face up until now. “...even though you’ve already retired from the frontlines, that’s very impressive, Ayanokouji-sensei. You’re well informed.”

“His recommendation to this school should have been submitted in secret. And the moment that was done, his admission to this school had already been decided. Put simply, without a recommendation, even the most excellent student would have been disqualified for entry. Am I wrong?” It does seem to be a fact that they’re talking about things a student like me would never hear otherwise.

“There’s no way Kiyotaka could’ve been a part of the selection. In other words, it’s strange that he wasn’t disqualified.”

“Yes. That’s correct. His name wasn’t on the list of students we intend to admit. Normally, when there’s an unforeseen application from a student who is not on the list, they are all rejected. As a camouflage for that, we’ve implemented the interviews and exams. But he’s the only one whose admission I approved of based on my own judgment. You may be here to take him back with you but for now, he’s a precious student entrusted to us. I have an obligation to protect the students of this school. Even if it’s your request, Sensei, there are things I must refuse. As long as he himself does not wish to quit.” Don’t fool around, that man spat those words out and turned away from Chairman Sakayanagi to face me.

However, Chairman Sakayanagi continued. “We will not, of course, disregard the parent’s opinion. If you wish for his expulsion then along with Kiyotaka-kun and the school, we will conduct a three way discussion until we reach a consensus.” Which is another way of saying no to expulsion. It’s safe to assume that man no longer has any cards up his sleeve here. “I certainly cannot force the impossible on your field. However, if that’s your answer then all I have to do is change my approach.”

“What are you planning on doing? If you intend on doing something extreme
—”

“I understand. I have no intention of putting pressure on you.” The fact that this man, who specializes in that aspect, is not going to do so shows that he cannot do so here. “There should be no problem if Kiyotaka’s expulsion occurs using the school’s own rules as its basis.”

“Yes, I can promise you that. I will not give him special treatment just because he’s your son, Sensei.”

“Then that’ll be all. I’m leaving.”

That man stood up from the sofa.

“When shall we meet again?”

“At the very least, we’ll never meet again here.”

“I’ll see you off then.”

“Unnecessary.” As that man refused to be sent off, I spoke to him.

“If you call yourself a parent, why not come visit this school a couple of times?”

“A place like this? Once is more than enough.” Leaving those words behind, that man left the reception office.

“Whew. As usual, whenever Sensei’s around it’s always tense, isn’t it? You must’ve had a tough time too, right?”

“No. Not really.” The only thing that came out was that it’s ‘as usual’. Since we’re now alone, Chairman Sakayanagi calmed down a bit and looked at me warmly. “You see, I’ve known you for a long time now. We’ve never spoken directly but I’ve always been watching over you from behind the glass. Sensei always praised you, you know?”

“Is that so? So that’s how it is.”

“What is?...what do you mean by that.”

“No. More importantly, Chairman Sakayanagi, about the student allocated to Class A—”

“You’re talking about Arisu? She’s my daughter.”

“So that’s how it is.”

“Ahh, but it’s not because she’s my daughter that she’s in Class A, ok? I play fair.”

“That’s not it. I just wanted to ask you.” And with this, the mystery behind how she knows me has been solved. It’s not strange if she’s this man’s daughter.

“I’m fine with only what you’re able to explain but—I’m curious about what that man said earlier.”

“Could it be about the story behind your admission?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah. Like Ayanokouji-sensei said, this school only admits middle school students nationwide who it has already conducted a preliminary survey of and have marked as being qualified. Every year, we work alongside the administrators of each middle school. And the result of that would be the students who have gathered here. The interviews and exams are only a formality. Even if you fool around during the interview or score zero on your exams, your admission has already been determined. Of course, students from all over the country apply for admission so the exams are there as an excuse to cull them.”

So even if you get 100% on your exam or ace the interview, you’d still be rejected. There’s no way a rejected student could discover the truth either. This is convincing enough. Students like Sudou, Ike and the others who aren’t academically the brightest as well as students like Hirata and Karuizawa who carry problems in their past were able to enroll because of it. Things like common sense and academic ability are secondary concerns for this school. “In your case, the moment I decided to admit you, whatever you do will no longer have any effect. Scoring 50% on all written exams won’t influence your chances of success or failure any either.”

This is truly a unique school. In all likelihood, this is the first school of its kind in Japan. “Both you and Ayanokouji-sensei must be wondering. Why this school, regulated by the government, does not admit students based on their overall capability. But that is something you will surely come to understand in the future. What the nurturing policies we hope to achieve are as well as the results of it.” Chairman Sakayanagi is brimming with confidence.

“...I ended up saying too much. But I can’t tell you any more than that. Because you’re a student enrolled here at this school and I’m the one running it after all.” The fact that he still told me all this must be because I’m in the special position of being targeted by that man. “As the person in charge of this school, I will protect its students as far as the rules allow. You understand what I’m getting at?” If I don’t follow the rules then he won’t be able to help me either. “Of course, I can imagine what that man will do from this point onwards as well.” His options are very limited if he wants to get me out of this school. “Then please excuse me.”

“Alright. Hang in there.” After he gave me that encouragement, I left the reception office. When I left the reception office, I saw Chabashira-sensei waiting a slight distance away for the conversation to be over. I gave her a bow and tried to walk past her but she started walking while matching my stride. “How was your confrontation with your father?”

“It’s pointless to try investigating so clumsily. I already understand everything.”

“...What do you mean by you have realized everything?”

“Chabashira-sensei. I’m saying that everything you’ve told me are basically lies.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You mean be trying to hide your unrest but it’s not very subtle.” The way she’s looking at me, her speech and the way she’s choosing her words. It’s only slightly off but still different from the usual her. She’s trying to hide her

emotions to the best of her ability but it doesn't look like she can hide her unrest entirely.



“That man never contacted you, Chabashira-sensei. Of course, he also didn’t force you to make me quit school.”

“No, your father asked me for help. In fact, just like what I told you, I’ve been constantly trying to get you expelled.” My father certainly is giving me pressure to drop out. But judging from his attitude, it’s clearly the first time he’s set foot in this school. Since I have no solid evidence I can’t offer a refutation either but him making contact with a teacher is just a laughable story. “Stop trying to deceive both of us. Chairman Sakayanagi has told me everything –he told my situation to you the instant my enrollment was decided.”

“...the chairman told you everything?” I laughed thinly.

At that very moment, Chabashira-sensei realized she had made a blunder.

“Ayanokouji, were you probing me.....?”

“Yes. The chairman never told me anything about Chabashira-sensei. But I was certain it was related to you, and now this has become very clear.” After seeing Chairman Sakayanagi, who knew about me scoring 50% on all tests, I became convinced of it.

“I’ll explain my reasoning now. First I applied for admission to this school and Chairman Sakayanagi, who knew me from way back, acted on his own. And the moment my admission was confirmed, my allocation to Class D was also confirmed. The reason why Class D and not another class is because you, Chabashira-sensei, are a teacher who didn’t show much interest in the class conflict. The class teachers I’ve seen so far have all shown a strong ambition to get their classes promoted, you see.” If I’m allocated to a class where I’d stand out, then the chances of me attracting attention would increase proportionately. “By the way, Chairman Sakayanagi also made a single miscalculation. It’s that the teacher of Class D who holds no love for her class and no drive is the one who secretly wants to rise up to Class A the most.”

“.....”

Chabashira-sensei was unable to reply at all and remained silent. Probably because she knew that my arguing back carelessly, she'd end up revealing it instead. That's why I didn't hold back and went all out with my words. In order to confirm one more thing. "You're stubbornly hung up on the idea of rising to Class A. But you had no such luck with the students you had so far. That's why you weren't able to bring those feelings to the fore and indifferently spent your days. Am I wrong?" Unlike before, Chabashira-sensei no longer even looked me in the eye. "That's just your theory, Ayanokouji."

Chabashira-sensei's words of denial no longer hold any power but rather, they sounded weak.

"By chance, the irregularity that is my existence showed up this year and the situation became different from your usual year. Although there are many students with problematic personalities, the cream of the crop did gather too. Horikita and Kouenji as well as Hirata and Kushida. They're all students who, if properly guided, can aim for the upper classes. That's why you'd end up having expectations. In that case, it wouldn't be strange if the ambition you kept bottled up came surging back out. It's very easy to tell if you think back on the words Hoshinomiya said to you not too long after enrollment."

Hoshinomiya, who was an old friend of hers, knew about her desire to rise to Class A. 'You're aiming to supplant them'. Those words of hers were very telling. "And now, no matter how rudely I act or what insolent words I speak, the only option you have here is to accept it all. The fact that the Chairman offered to protect me and considering how you want to use me as your weapon to aim for Class A, the only option you have available is to close your eyes to all the abuse going on here." Like I said, all Chabashira-sensei could do is to listen to all this.

"For someone like you who desires to reach Class A and being stuck with teaching Class D every year, this is a chance you cannot afford to lose. You even used the lie that my father made contact with you to try and make use of my existence after all. That's the reason you approached me and Horikita was only a pawn you used for that purpose. By the way, things aren't so simple."

I never had much ambition and held no interest in Class A in the first place. Not knowing how to control me, who never took much action, she ended up firing the first shot during our first special exam on that uninhabited island.

“If, by the time the special exams start, we’re still unable to hold a candle to the other classes then we’d never be able to catch up. That’s why you panicked and ended up using what the Chairman told you to keep secret. I suppose you could call it desperate measures.” After that, things went favorably for Class D to a certain degree. However, a miscalculation occurred. That’s my father making contact with this school at last. And today at this very moment, all truths and lies are laid bare.

“You probably intended to shut me down but on the contrary, you’re the one being shut down now.”

“...I see. The Chairman is probably giving you special consideration. Your abilities are beyond that of a 1st year high school student. You’re wiser beyond your years, is how it is, huh?” She took a breath, nodded and admitted it. “...I’ll confess. I don’t know your father.” The attitude she tried so hard to maintain up until now collapsed.

“However, what are you going to do about the fact that if I ever feel like it, I can actually get you expelled? I can say you committed a serious breach of the rules and inform the school of it. Expulsion is the thing you want to avoid the most, correct?” To think she came so far only to threaten me now.

“Regardless of the process, the result won’t change, is what you’re getting at.”

“Exactly.”

“How unfortunate, I’m already sure of it. That you can’t get me expelled.”

“...allow me to ask what led you to that conclusion?” I calmed myself down from that agitated tone. Of course, in the first place I wasn’t actually agitated at all. I had only acted agitated to draw out Chabashira-sensei’s true intentions.

“The current situation speaks for itself. Right now, Class D’s performed better than it has in most years. Horikita and the other students too, are slowly beginning to put their strengths to good use. Even if I no longer aid them, it’s not like they won’t rise to Class A anymore.” So far, Class D’s catching up to the upper classes and is on the brink of overtaking Class C. No, at this current moment, our positions have already been internally reversed.

But if an expulsion were to occur, the destination will naturally become distant. What it means is that Chabashira-sensei is stuck in a situation where she cannot do anything. “Even after I’ve stepped off the stage, the fight will continue as long as Chabashira-sensei holds out hope.” It’s impossible for people to discard their hopes with their own hands. “And with that, I shall have you release me.”

“Now that you know everything, are you going to stop aiming for Class A?” Of course I’m going to stop. The teacher who tried to use me to get to Class A by pretending to be affiliated with my father will no longer hold any sway. In other words, it’s no longer necessary. “At the very least, I think my turn’s up.” But I didn’t deny it entirely.

People will keep going as long as there’s still hope. Even if they know the possibility of it is close to zero they will still want to believe in that possibility. Chabashira-sensei stopped walking. “For now, please just watch obediently. If you continue to approach me based on your personal feelings any more than you already have, it’ll just be a hindrance to the students.” I emphasized that. “If I still refuse to release you despite it being reckless, what will you do?”

“Then you’ll die holding onto those ambitions of yours, is what that choice would lead to. Not a very wise choice to make.”

“Allow me to change the question then. Don’t you think there’s no guarantee I won’t drag you down with me if I ever lose hope?”

“Yes, there’s the possibility that the class points will plummet in the future. If so, you’ll lose all hope. In that case, I don’t mind. If you’re going to attack

then, please feel free.” She wouldn’t stop just because I asked her to so let her do whatever she wants.

“But I’d also like to remind you that your position as teacher isn’t a guaranteed one either.” That’s just a threat but at the very least, it would affect Chabashira-sensei, who knows the details, to a certain degree. Looks like she no longer has anything left to say to me as I walked off. There’s nothing happy about my reunion with my father but I did gain a lot today.

I no longer need to help out in aiming for Class A, is what it means. Whatever Ryuuen does from now on, I no longer need to get involved for Class D. On top of that, I won’t suffer any backlash no matter what happens to Karuizawa. Of course, if Karuizawa either gets caught or decides to betray me then my identity would be revealed but that’s all. Even if Ryuuen decides to come after me, as long as I don’t do anything for the sake of Class D from now on, it’ll just end with a close, ambiguous decision.

PART 6

A tree-lined street at sunset. I lifted my head up and exhaled. White smoke trailed up into the sky and disappeared. “Cold.” Every time I exhale from my mouth or my nose, white vapor would come out, disappear and come out again, interestingly enough. It’s easy to forget because there are extreme temperature fluctuations during the day but it’s already winter. Last year around this time, I’ve always been indoors after all.....

A girl I didn’t know who looked that she was feeling very cold, passed me. She was holding a phone and she seemed happy talking to someone. “Really, since Miyabi became the student council president, our relationship has become worse. Ahaha, I’m joking, joking. It’s not like I’m angry, but be prepared to treat me to a lot of things.” Her thighs that were exposed in this cold weather seemed to be very cold. From her shoulder length hair drifted to me the fragrance of shampoo. “The student council? Sorry, I’ll pass. I’m not

interested in those things. And Miyabi still hasn't settled things with the former student council president, right? Eh, why are you suddenly confessing to me? I know you've already put your hands in a lot of girls." I didn't intend to eavesdrop, but speaking so loudly even if I was unwilling I would still hear the contents. From the content of the conversation I could speculate she was probably a 2nd year girl.

"But... if you win against President Horikita, then I will think about it. Then I'll see you later."

When the girl finished the call, she exhaled white breath. Then she stopped and returned her phone to her pocket. "That Miyabi guy, getting full of himself. However, President Horikita really is useless. I was expecting him to stop Miyabi. In the end, the game will end with Miyabi's victory." Even though she was talking so happily just until now, she immediately toned down when the call ended. It was unclear whether she had noticed me when she passed past me, she just left like this. "Uwatto!?" However, a minor incident happened. She probably got entangled, and on the way to the branches of each years dormitory she fell gorgeously.

"It hurts ..." She immediately stood up and then looked around with a slightly red face. And then it seemed she noticed my existence for the first time walking behind her. She forced a smile. Slightly embarrassed. She looked as if she wasn't injured. The girl ran away and disappeared in the direction of the 2nd year students' dorm. "So she was really a 2nd year student."

Apparently here at this school, you don't get much of a chance to intermingle with other school years outside of the student council or club activities. That's why I never had a chance to familiarize myself with their faces either. "Girls must feel cold too." Occasionally in our classroom, there are students who'd even say they want to jerseys beneath their skirts. I think it should be fine even if they do so but looks like it's prohibited by the school's regulations. Girls sure have it hard too.

The first ‘winter’ I experienced. It’s this cold and somewhere deep down inside, I never thought I’d be able to see this view. There’s a song about a dog that saw snow and excitedly ran about. I can empathize. If it ever snows, I wonder if I’ll be just as excited. I exhaled and recalled the events that transpired today. Meeting with my father, the existence of Chairman Sakayanagi and that the policies of the school don’t mean anything. I also achieved much in seeing through Chabashira-sensei’s lie.

Because with just this alone, I’ll be able to make significant progress forward. “...shall I put an end to it?” So far I’ve mostly kept it behind the scenes but the way the exam results are announced, the more Class D continues to prosper, there’ll be no avoiding malevolent attention. Inevitably, the surveillance would intensify and you’d be able to investigate who it is that’s at the center of it all. As a matter of fact, although I set up Horikita as that person in the center, Ryuuen realized that it’s faked. Sakayanagi also knows my past and it’s only a matter of time before Ichinose starts doubting it as well.

If I want to turn back, now’s my only chance. Of course, hasty decisions will lead to ruin so I’ll need to consider both options of advancing and retreating. And with that, the problem now is how to deal with Ryuuen. I retrieved my phone from my pocket and manually typed in the address. And then I sent a message to a certain person. Asking them to call me when they’re able to. When I did, the message was immediately marked as ‘read’. Looks like that person usually doesn’t hang out with their friends but rather, goes back to the dorm early.

I then manually typed the 11-digit number and made the call. “Hello?” The person behind this languid voice is Karuizawa Kei from Class D of the 1st years.

She doesn’t know it yet but she’s one of the individuals marked by Ryuuen. She’s someone who knows that I’m the one handling Class D behind the scenes, even more than Horikita does. Of course, she doesn’t know much about just how deeply I’m involved and what I’ve done in detail though. If

there's anything that could be said about me at the moment, it would be that Karuizawa probably sees me as an extremely eerie person.

"I was wondering what you were up to."

"You're kidding, right? There's no way you'd call without a reason." I had thought I'd make small talk first but Karuizawa didn't get it. "Don't you ever feel like enjoying our conversation more?"

"It's impossible if you yourself don't feel like enjoying it, right?"

"...I suppose you're spot on."

She's not the leader of the Class D girls for nothing. She understand people very well. "Did Manabe and the others make any sort of contact with you?"

"No. That's not a problem right now...did you call me to make sure?" Rather than surprise, an exasperated reaction was what I got. "It's been a while since then but nothing so far, huh? Looks like there's no need to worry about that anymore."

"That'd be for the best but there's no telling what'll happen when, right?"

Looking at it from Karuizawa's perspective, she wouldn't truly feel safe until graduation. The wind blew and coldly struck my face. "You're still outdoors." Perhaps it's because she heard the sound of the wind over the phone, Karuizawa said that. "I'm on my way back. You're pretty fast today yourself. You're usually late."

"Even I have days when I want to go back early." A prickly response came back.

"Ahh."

I found something and my voice leaked out. "What?" Karuizawa reacted, thinking that was directed at her. "No, it's nothing." At the point where the road branches, a red amulet had fallen to the ground where that senior student

fell earlier. I wonder if it's something that senior student dropped. It may have been better to just leave it there but since snow will be falling today according to the forecast, it'll get all wet if I leave it be.

Since there's no sign that she noticed and came back for it, I suppose I'll just hand it over to the dormitory's administrator. "Hey, there's something I wanted to check with you no matter what. We're already talking so can I ask?"

"What do you want to check?" Picking up the amulet, I resumed my conversation with Karuizawa while walking towards the dormitory of the 2nd years. "You're smart and all so why don't you let others know about it, or rather, why aren't you telling them? Class D's full of idiots so if you come forward like Yousuke-kun, you'd be able to issue orders, no?" It's not hard to imagine why she'd ask something like that.

"I'm smart? What's your basis for thinking that?"

"What...?"

"My test scores are just average. I've never said anything outstandingly useful in class either. There's nothing for you to base that evaluation off of, right?"

"That's not what I'm getting at." Of course, I'm aware what Karuizawa's trying to get at. So far, I've asked Karuizawa for her cooperation in many behind the scenes activities. For instance, sabotaging the peeping as well as the matter with Kushida during Paper Shuffle.

It's not strange that all in all, she'd think it's a mystery. "Things like that, if you'd only made them stand out earlier, your evaluation in class would've risen, right? Far from it, you might even end up attracting attention from the school. Just like you did during the sports festival."

Even though it's something that has nothing to do with her, Karuizawa excitedly said that. "You know I'm not the type who desires that sort of thing, don't you?"

“Then why are you doing all this? If you wanted it, you could’ve not done anything from the start.”

“That’s a good analysis.”

It’s not like I’m doing all this because I want to either. “I never had any intention of doing anything in the first place but since a reason came up, I had no choice but to lend Class D a hand.” This is something I’d normally never speak of but today’s special. I feel good. “I feel like it’s somehow a waste though.”

“I have no intention of doing anything up front. I never have and don’t intend on ever doing so either.” This alone is something I need to emphasize to Karuizawa.

If Class D encounters a problem in the future, it would be problematic if she ends up depending on me. “It’s you, isn’t it? The one whose blood Ryuuen is out for.” Not just Sudou and Akito, the surveillance is intensifying each day and those rumors have long since gone beyond just Class D. That Ryuuen got defeated by someone from Class D and is now out for revenge. The number of students talking about it has gone up. Karuizawa probably didn’t need any time to realize it’s me.

“The main reason I called you today, Karuizawa, is to apologize to you.”

“Apologize?”

“Since before I had my own reasons I was helping D Class climb to the top. But that reason has just disappeared.”

“So are you just going to lay low now?”

“Yeah, I’m going to leave it to Horikita and Hirata to carry the class. I don’t want to get involved with Ryuuen and get exposed. You were a great help to me at the karaoke and a lot of other things. I’ve caused you a lot of trouble.”

“So we’re finally going to stop doing this and I’ll be free?”

“Yeah. That’s how it is”

Until now Karuizawa has served me without hesitation beyond my imagination, that’s why I can now cut her off without hesitation too.

“This will be the last time I contact you”

I clearly said that to her. “Eh?” However, Karuizawa gave a delayed response. “I’m sorry...I didn’t catch that.” Is she going to say she didn’t catch that even though the wind isn’t blowing right now? “This will be the last time I contact you.” I said the same thing clearly again. This time she should have heard me clearly.

“It’s the natural course of action since there’s nothing I need to ask you to do anymore. I mean, no one knows you and I are connected in the first place, Karuizawa. If we continue to make contact meaninglessly, it would just seem suspicious.”

“Well...that’s true...I guess.” Karuizawa couldn’t formulate a proper response. Karuizawa seemed confused but I kept talking to her. “Of course if anything happens to you, I will still protect you. That promise I intend to keep to the end. If you have an emergency situation, I will give you the address to contact me at. But everything other than emergencies, please delete all our chats until now so as to not leave evidence. I’ve already deleted all your messages and contact number on my end.”

“Wait a moment...why are you saying all of this so suddenly?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because...it’s too cold...even for you...”

“There’s no cold or anything about it, that’s just the extent of our relationship.” I protected her from Manabe and her group and if not for that we would never have even known each other like this. The difference between a gloomy student and a popular girl is like that of the heavens and the earth. “You also hated being used by me, right?”

“That’s true, but.....”

Karuizawa kept stumbling on her words. And what’s more, her silences grew longer. “I’ve said all I wanted to say. Do you have anything you’d like to say to me?” I shouldn’t drag this out. I pressed the confused Karuizawa to say something. “...alright.” A tense reply that’s far from convinced but a reply is a reply. But perhaps she’s finally realized there’s nothing she can do about it, as she continued speaking. “Is this the last time I can talk to Kiyotaka like this?”

“Do you dislike that?”

“Of course not.”

“Then there’s no problem.” I indifferently and silently continued. I never let the slightest bit of emotion in. There’s no way it would be there either. “Then I’m ending the call...” Karuizawa also probably felt that strongly over the phone. As I ended the call, I said this. “See you.”

“ahh.....”

Karuizawa said something at the very end but didn’t follow up on that. I wanted a few seconds then I cut the call. Then I erased the call history and put the phone back in my pocket. Karuizawa must have felt at peace being with me like a parasite. And if I were to suddenly go away, her heart will be strongly shaken. Anxiety and loneliness will gradually build up inside her day to day. And if Ryuuen were to target her while she’s at her weakest. I’m sure Karuizawa Kei’s heart will collapse completely. “I guess this means I can return to the trajectory I started on when I first came to this school.” I no longer care about Horikita, Karuizawa, Ryuuen or Sakayanagi. I will no longer actively participate in exams anymore too. If there’s a problem, it’s not mine. But if there are problems, ‘cooperators’ are still necessary.

I entrusted the administrator of the dormitory with the amulet that appears to be that 2nd year’s personal belonging, then returned to my dormitory room.

PART 7

I removed the wet sheet that had absorbed the garbage starting from the top and threw it in the trash. When I sat down on my bed after washing my hands, the sound of a spring reverberated faintly. Since the end of the year is at hand, I decided to clean my room over the weekends. I never had anything in this room in the first place so half a day was all it took to wrap it up. “A clean room is such a nice thing to have.” I wonder if I’ve succeeded in bringing back that shine the room had when I first set foot in it. I switched the kettle on and sought a brief respite. I’m slightly hesitant about using the newly polished, glittering cup but there’s no way around it.

I took out my phone and tried accessing the school app. Class points and personal balances and the such are displayed there and I stared at them aimlessly. Deciding that I’ll do so until the water boils, I tried sorting out my own future in that time. Let’s start from the very beginning. Why I even enrolled at this school in the first place? It’s so that I won’t have to return to the place I came from. It’s not like I particularly dislike my life in the White Room or anything. In terms of human rights, it’s a very problematic place but at the very least, it’s true that the best education you can possibly receive lies there.

Thanks to that, I was able to form my own unique personality and acquire a convenient skillset. However, I felt an indescribable discontent at being hailed as the ultimate masterpiece by my father. Even if I am the ultimate human being...is that really something I should be overjoyed about? It’s precisely because I’ve always lived my life believing there’s something that needs to be learned that studying became meaningful. But what happens when there’s nothing left to learn? That would be excruciatingly boring.

But I suppose I couldn’t care less about that. I should think about what I plan on doing next. I knew my father would make contact with me one day. That was something I had already known from the moment Chabashira-sensei threatened me with expulsion during the summer. Of course, even back then,

I had my doubts. Because if my father does make contact with me, the matter of Chabashira-sensei protecting me or not goes right out the window. He's not the sort of man a mere class teacher would be able to deal with. But, knowing my father, I couldn't entirely rule it out as a lie either. Due to that, I put up a cooperative front and executed several strategies in the name of rising to Class A. I started hearing the sound of water boiling in the kettle.

However, by coming this far I was able to determine that Chabashira-sensei's claims are based on a lie. Strangely enough, it was because my father made his presence known. The most important thing here is not the fact that she has no connection to my father. It's that I was able to determine that her threat of 'expelling me unless I give it my all' is a lie. Chabashira Sae carries a deep trauma from her past and wishes to rise to Class A. Just like Horikita and Keisei. No, she's probably more obsessed with Class A than either of them.

A person like that won't have the courage to expel someone from their class. No, at first I had considered the possibility of her performing a suicide run because until after the island exam, Class D was in an extremely disadvantageous position. It wasn't a situation where one could cling onto hope in. She probably felt like doing that if she couldn't make use of me. That is why I was able to see through the lies weaved into those words of truth. Now that the cat's out of the bag, her ability to issue orders to me is rapidly fading away.

It doesn't matter if it's Class A or Class D, as long as I only aim to achieve 3 years of an ordinary school life then involving myself any deeper with the class than this is just a bother.

As a matter of fact, people like Ichinose and Sakayanagi are already beginning to develop an interest in me. However, if I can successfully fade out now then they should lose interest in me right away. If there's a problem left then that would have to be Ryuuken. If he gets all the way to me then he may use that fact as a means of stirring up our surroundings. That is why it's best to avoid having my identity revealed. But that's probably no longer possible. Even if I end my relationship with Karuizawa Kei, that invisible 'thread' between us remains.

If left to his own devices, Ryuuen will definitely grab hold of that thread one day. A week later? Or perhaps a month later? Or maybe a year later? That uncertain ‘someday’ is a problem for me. As the water began boiling and the notification sound rang out, the kettle turned itself off automatically. “...I suppose I’ll have some tea.” Since I used to have many visitors, my cabinets are overflowing with tea bags. Coffee and black tea as well as green tea. I have a wide variety of them. I placed the black tea bag in the cup just as a call for me came from the 1st floor. “The 1st floor?”

If they’re a classmate of mine then they would’ve simply rung my doorbell directly. No helping it. I went to check on it and there I saw an unexpected face. I could’ve pretended to be out but I’d like to keep things honest here. Because the man I was considering going out to meet came all the way here himself after all. “I’d like to borrow a bit of your time. Or should I come back later?”

“...not really. Now’s as good a time as any.” To think this sort of uncommon visitor would come. The one I could see through the monitor is Horikita’s brother, who had been student council president until a while ago.

I unlocked the automatic lock and welcomed him into the dormitory. Meanwhile, I poured the boiling water into the cup with the tea bag in it. Not too long after that, the doorbell rang. “I’d rather not talk standing so please come in.”

“Likewise.” If Horikita sees this, she’d definitely complain about it. Also, I’d like to avoid being seen with the former student council president by other students as much as possible. I invited the older Horikita into my room.

Upon entering the room, the older Horikita noticed the presence of the black tea immediately. “I was just thinking about drinking some.”

“For a 1st year, you sure tidy up after yourself.”

“I just don’t have any personal belongings.” There’s no need to go out of my way to tell him I just tidied it up today. Unfortunately though, by looking at

the wet sheets faintly sticking out of the trash, he'd be able to tell that I cleaned the room either today or yesterday.

“Coming all the way over to the 1st year dorm. Do you have business with me, former student council president?”

“The second semester will end next week. I don't have much time left at this school.” The actual time he'll be attending school, after subtracting the weekends, will amount to roughly two more months. It'll pass in the blink of an eye. “There's something I want to inform you of before I leave this school. It's about Nagumo Miyabi.” Nagumo Miyabi. I don't think I need an explanation but he's the current student council president from Class A of the 2nd years. I only know him from the sports festival and the welcome ceremony for the newcomers but he seems like a rather dark person to me.

But regardless of what Nagumo may be, that has nothing to do with me.

“I doubt you have anything to say to a mere 1st year student like me. I'm not part of the student council either like Ichinose is.” I explained that but the older Horikita continued without paying me any mind. “I had no intention of discussing this with anyone else either but the circumstances have changed a bit.” The circumstances have changed, huh?

“I maintained the traditions this school was founded on because I believed in the rules of the system and felt that this is the correct path. However, Nagumo is trying to overturn it all. In all probability, next year you'll be faced with an unprecedented amount of expulsions.” He has yet to act openly as part of the student council but I suppose it's only a matter of time. “When Nagumo was still a 1st year, you were already the student council president, weren't you? If so, aren't you the one responsible for recruiting him?”

“That may be the case.” The older Horikita accepted it without any denial.

“After joining the student council, I made a single mistake. That would be my repeated failures in training my successor. The only one who I noticed any talent in was Nagumo but he ended up developing ideals different from my own. The other 2nd years too are all under Nagumo's control.”

“That’s strange, I can understand Nagumo controlling 2nd year’s Class A but the other classes should be his enemies, right?”

“He’s already conquered the entire school year.” I don’t know what strategies he’s been executing but looks like he really is doing something that absurd.

“This year, among the 1st years, two applied for a position at the student council. Katsuragi and Ichinose. Both of them are promising, talented students but I ended up not letting them join. It’s precisely because their talents are so pure that I feared Nagumo would end up influencing them. But Nagumo gathered information behind the scenes and made contact with Ichinose and as a result, he forcibly invited Ichinose into the student council.”

“What are you planning by telling me all this?”

“If you don’t want to stand out then use Suzune. Just like you’ve done in your exams so far, manipulate Suzune from behind the scenes. I will be the bridge between you and the student council.”

“That’s a rather unreasonable request. If you’re in the council, your sister would gladly join but now that you’ve stepped down, your sister no longer holds any interest in the council. Besides, regardless of whether your sister joins the council or not, I won’t do anything.” After a brief interval, I sipped some tea.

“That tradition you and your predecessors have protected. Any change to it would just either be the times changing or fate, wouldn’t you say?” I don’t even need to say that. This man should already understand that. “That’s right. You may be spot on.” There are still things I don’t understand from this conversation but there are also things I’ve begun to comprehend. As a student enrolled here, the older Horikita wishes to stop the actions of the student council that will be occurring next year. As such, he thinks he’ll be able to make use of me conveniently. That’s why he chased me all the way over to the 1st year dormitory. “Looks like I’ve disturbed you.”

Even though he knows he won’t be able to entice me without any tools of his own. It may just be that he no longer has room to care about things like that.

“For the record, do you mind giving me your contact number?”

“What?” I unplugged my phone from the charger and took it in hand. “I’d like some time to think about putting your sister in the student council and manipulating her from behind.”

“So you’ll consider it?”

“So you came expecting me to turn you down. I’ll look bad if I don’t at least think it through.” By showing him this unexpectedly positive reaction, the older Horikita felt disbelief. However, he did tell me his contact number without any hesitation. It’s probably proof that he’s just that wary of Nagumo Miyabi’s student council. “If I ever consider cooperating with you, I’ll contact you.”

“I’ll be waiting without any expectations.” In the end, the older Horikita never sat down and never took a sip of the tea before leaving my room.

“I don’t think there’s a need to be so hung up over the student council though.”

It’s pointless worrying about a person who’s about to graduate in a few months but I still felt some concern.

PART 8

Late at night on Saturday, news that falling snow has been observed in this region for the first time circulated. It appears the snow that had only fallen slightly melted away in the morning but remnants of it remained behind as a puddle of water on the concrete. Furthermore, despite the fact that it had snowed on the previous day, the highest temperature for the day was only 24 degrees Celsius, roughly the temperature of a summer day. This sort of

weather would allow you to go out with short sleeves without it being a problem.

“The second semester’s finally over next week, huh? I really don’t have much time awareness.” On Sunday, I went to check on Akito in the morning while he’s in the middle of his club activities. And on the way back, I invited Akito and together with the Ayanokouji Group, we hung out at Keyaki Mall until evening. We went shopping randomly, talked idly at the cafe. Then we had lunch and had fun at the karaoke. It was a day where I had fun doing what ordinary students usually do. “By the way...ahem. Ahh—my throat hurts.”

“Five consecutive songs is overkill, Yukimura. But you were surprisingly good though.”

“...the reason my throat’s hurting is because of the punishment game though.” Pointing out the reason for his sore throat, Keisei glared at Haruka bitterly. The karaoke menu offers a variety of foods but some of them were always meant to be eaten in a punishment game. It’s easy to spot them when out of six takoyaki variations, only one of them is spicy. It’s a game where the one who draws it has to eat the entire spicy takoyaki and then sing immediately afterward. But the rule is that you aren’t allowed to drink water until after you’ve sung. I don’t know the meaning behind it but since we had fun, I suppose it’s fulfilled its purpose as a game.

But I do suppose it’s far too harsh to be called a game. Calling it a ‘punishment game’ would be more appropriate. Since Keisei continued to draw the spicy takoyaki, we found it interesting and tried to see just how many he’d continue to draw consecutively. The result was five times. That number sounds like nothing out of the ordinary but the probability of that happening is actually 1 out of 7776. “Such misfortune...”

“On the contrary, aren’t you in luck? You managed to spend all your misfortunes for the year in one go. Surely you’ve got plenty of good things waiting for you this year.”

“No such thing, this year’s ending in roughly two weeks...you said it on

purpose, Haruka.” Haruka laughs herself silly but she still apologized to the unhappy Keisei. “Sorry, sorry. Was it that bad?”

“I thought I was breathing fire for a moment there...even spicy’s got to have a limit.” Keisei stuck out his tongue, perhaps he’s still feeling the spice.

“By the way, I also had it real bad since I tried protect him by drawing the last one.” The one who prevented Keisei from getting six consecutive draws was Akito. “Then let’s do it again next time we go to the karaoke.” At this proposal, the three of them including Airi looked appalled. “I’m fine with that, but you’ll have to eat it properly too if you get it.”

“Ok, ok. There’s no way the one proposing it is going to chicken out.” She’s clearly not afraid to draw the spicy one. Of course, I’m sure she also doesn’t think there’s no way she’d end up drawing it either.

“Looks like you’ve got a fair bit of confidence in handling difficult things.” I tried getting to the root of the confidence Haruka kept displaying. “Ahh, cat’s out of the bag?”

“You weren’t even trying to hide it though...”

“I can even handle super spicy ramen easily. On the contrary, that’s how I like it, I guess?” I feel like the punishment game doesn’t even apply to her anymore though..... “I wonder if I can eat it all...”

Airi said so, having felt anxious ever since before the game started. “It’s fine, it’s fine. If it’s ever too much, you can just spit it out. The boys probably don’t want to force Airi through something unreasonable either.” That’s exactly right. Neither Akito or Keisei will insist on that unreasonable request either. “This also applies for Yukimur~ but Airi’s a great singer. Is this really your first time at the karaoke?”

“Y-Yeah. It was really embarrassing though.....”

“If you had a little more power behind your voice it would’ve been perfect.” Despite her bashfulness, Airi gave it her all.

“Then shall we head back?”

PART 9

We were on our way back from that fulfilling karaoke session. It's still not 5 o'clock in the evening yet the sun had already begun to set. “The whole day was pretty warm so there are a lot of people wearing light clothing, aren't there?”



“You could even go with short sleeves during the afternoon. So I guess that’s understandable.” Today’s pretty warm and everyone’s wearing light clothing after all. But it’ll probably turn chilly in around an hour. “I don’t handle the cold very well.” Looking up at the sky, Haruka said so gloomily. If at all possible, I’d like the weather to remain the way it was today. “I don’t handle it well either.....”

“For me, the cold’s a bit better because that’d mean I won’t sweat as much during club activities.” Among us, Akito’s probably the only one who’d prefer the winter. “Looks like it’ll be cold again starting tomorrow.”

“I see. That means I’ll have to make various preparations. Seems like my expenses are going to go up.” The closer we get to year’s end, it basically seems like it’ll start snowing more and more. Because we were chatting, our group’s pace slowed down and we could hear a voice from behind us.

“Thank you for accompanying me today, Sakayanagi-san.”

“No, no. The pleasure’s all mine.” That little back-and-forth. When I turned around, I spotted an unusual duo: Ichinose and Sakayanagi. Noticing our group, Ichinose raised her hand and hailed us. Sakayanagi didn’t look at me in particular but rather, simply acknowledged our group as a whole. Despite doing something akin to declaring war on me, she’s yet to show any sign of making a move since the sports festival. However, no matter what happens, Sakayanagi’s wish won’t come true in the future either. “That’s a rather unusual group, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“...really?” That’s my line no matter how you look at it. Class A and Class B. To think the leaders of opposing classes would be together on a weekend.

“The way I see it, you’re mostly with Horikita-san so this all looks a bit new to me.” Ichinose said so while looking around at the group members.

“Speaking of which, you beat Class C in the exam the other day, didn’t you? Congratulations.” The results of Paper Shuffle are released to all classes.

Of course, that also applies for the results of the confrontation between Class A and Class B too. “We lost though—”

“There was only a two point difference between us. I think we were evenly matched.” In response to those results, Sakayanagi added that. The two upper classes had a magnificent showdown but it appears Class B couldn’t quite catch up to Class A and so Class A monopolized the top spot for themselves. They definitely widened the gap.

“The fact that Class D won would mean you may become Class C starting from the third semester.”

“We also need to be on our guard, or Class B might also get overtaken.”

“Of course, we fully intend on overtaking you.” In response to Ichinose’s joking laughter, Keisei interjected seriously. “And eventually, we will become Class A”. When Keisei said those words, Sakayanagi closed her eyes and laughed faintly.

Keisei didn’t think much of that behavior but we’re still Class D right now. He should know that acting tough here is a pointless thing to do. However, I should say that the lineup’s not very good because none of us are particularly friendly with Ichinose. On top of that, since we aren’t the type to make small talk or forced smiles, the conversation ended up coming to a halt. Ichinose came to realize that they’re not welcome here. “Ahaha, might we be disturbing you? See you all later.”

“Please excuse us.”

Sakayanagi, without ever once speaking to me or making eye contact with me, followed Ichinose and left. Looks like she won’t mess up and drop any hints here. “They’re rivals, aren’t they? Those two, I mean.”

“Leaving aside whether that’s the appropriate way to describe them, there’s no doubt that they’re enemies.” Keisei suspiciously pushed his glasses up and stared at their backs. “As expected of Ichinose, wouldn’t you say?” It’s already a well-known fact that Ichinose is someone who can make friends with any student.

“How should I put it, Ichinose-san really is something else.....” Airi muttered. “As a fellow woman, I don’t like her.”

“Haruka, do you hate Ichinose?”

“I don’t particularly hate her. I don’t like her either, of course. It’s just, how should I put it, she’s way too perfect at everything and way too ideal. There’s no charm in that unless there’s a couple of weaknesses here and there, don’t you think? I suppose I should say I hope she’s actually rotten on the inside.....”

“You do have a point. Having no weaknesses at all makes her seem creepy on the contrary. But I think hoping she’s actually rotten on the inside is going a bit too far though.” Akito nodded, as though he agreed with the points Haruka made. “That’s true but what I’m saying is that being perfect and flawless is lame. Even in manga.” Putting her hands inside her pocket, Haruka stared at Ichinose’s back.

“I.....might actually want a person like that to actually exist. Because if Ichinose-san is really a bad person like Haruka-chan said just now, no one would believe it.” As though she’d rather not have that be true, Airi seemed anxious. “I suppose so. There’s probably an unbelievably perfect and kind person somewhere out there in the world. We may just not be aware that they’re close by.” Haruka added that as a follow up.

“We’re going to be Class C soon. When that happens, Ichinose will become our next enemy. And when that happens, she’ll become an enemy we must defeat no matter what. I think it’s best to not defend her too much.”

Keisei’s right. If Ichinose is an upstanding person, that would just make the fight that much harder for us. If you’re someone who’s openly evil, like Ryuuken, then no one would bother feeling anything unnecessary for you. However, in Ichinose’s case, I wonder if our class can go against her without holding back. “...many difficulties lie ahead, huh?” If we get promoted to the upper classes, we’ll inevitably have to face that fight. We will also probably get attacked from behind by Ryuuken and the others, who would attempt to catch back up.

It's still uncertain what will happen to the cooperative relationship between Horikita and Ichinose in the future either. Ideally speaking, we'd keep our alliance with Ichinose and the others and then lay siege to Class A. And then we'll end the alliance when our class and Ichinose have risen up to Class B and Class A respectively. Of course, I doubt things will be that simple.

CHAPTER 3:

ABSURDITY

INTRODUCTION

A certain day prior to the onset of our winter vacation. A massive typhoon fell upon Class D. It happened right after Chabashira-sensei gave the signal that class was over. The doors to our classroom opened and Class C students, including Ryuuen, showed up at Class D. The class was in uproar over this unexpected visit. Chabashira-sensei glanced at them briefly but then immediately left the classroom. It would be a different story if a brawl were about to break out but there's nothing wrong with students from a different class paying a visit.

Having kept an eye on Class D through utilizing such roundabout measures, and still without having obtained the answers they sought, Ryuuen and the others have finally shown themselves. Or perhaps a strategy beyond my comprehension is in effect behind the scenes? Regardless, there's no denying the fact that they've opted to go with a frontal attack strategy. Horikita, who was about to leave, stopped and glanced at the Class C students. The ones who showed up were Ryuuen, Ishizaki and Yamada Albert. Also Komiya and Kondou. It's understandable that the class would be tense with all these fighters gathering.

“What the hell? This is Class D”. The first one to react to Ryuuen was Sudou. His tendency to pick fights may have been a factor but it may also be a purely self-defensive reaction to avoid being played like before. And most

importantly, he has to protect Horikita. Those feelings may have taken precedence. Sudou immediately stood up and approached Ryuuен. Seeing that, Hirata panicked and got between them as though fearing conflict. “Do you have some business with our class, Ryuuен-kun?” As Hirata, unable to understand the situation, asked him that, Ryuuен replied extravagantly.

“Is there a reason why I shouldn’t drop by a colleague’s class? It’s something that happens in every school, right? Going to a class that’s not your own to visit a friend. Why are you all so afraid?” The first words he spoke sounded so much like a provocation but Hirata calmly replied to that high-pressure attitude. “Normally speaking, yes. But don’t you think the circumstances in this school are somewhat different? At the very least, you’ve never visited Class D before.” Hirata tried to smooth things over by treating this as an emergency at most. “We’ve just been estranged until now. I thought now’s as good a time as any to act more aggressively.” He placed a hand on the desk of a nearby girl and grinned, showing off his white teeth.

“You guys sure did well during the Paper Shuffle exam. Thanks to that, Class C lost. The outcome hasn’t been decided yet, of course, but you guys may become Class C starting from the third semester. Quite impressive.”

“Heh. That just means you’re an incompetent ape of a boss, right? Fall down to Class D”. Hirata panickedly restrains Sudou when he took a potshot from the side. “We put in effort to make steady progress.”

“Effort, huh? Sudou, who seems completely unfamiliar with the concept, still seems to be around so that’s puzzling. I thought he’d be the first to drop out.”

“So you’ve finally remembered my name?” They met eyes and glared at one another. Several of our classmates who were about to head back also froze up at this situation. “Could you tell us what you’re really after?” From Hirata’s perspective, he wants to figure this out as quickly as possible so he’d want to avoid being continuously caught up in Ryuuен’s pace. However, it’s better to assume he’s deliberately acting that way. “I’m giving you Class D guys a thorough warning right now.”

“Warning? What do you mean?”

“I have no intention of explaining it to someone who doesn’t get it. Or are you merely pretending to not understand?” At first glance, that seems like a taunt meant for Hirata but that’s not really what it is. Ryuuen was barely looking at Hirata, he had been looking around at the whole class. If those words weren’t meant for Hirata then perhaps they’re meant for either Keisei or me, or perhaps Akito and the others. But he was mostly just lightly looking around. Ultimately, it was an unexpected person who caught Ryuuen’s attention.

That person did not even realize he was being stared at, or more like, he did not care in the least and made preparations to leave. And then he moved to leave the classroom. Even when no one else could move in the presence of Ryuuen, he acted like it was just another average day. Laughing faintly, Ryuuen looked back at his men slightly behind him and gave them the signal as they left the classroom immediately. Apparently that student is their target. As Ryuuen and the others closed the door behind them, the tense atmosphere dissipated and our classmates once again went into an uproar.

“Hey, hey, that Ryuuen guy looked like he was about to do something unbelievable! It’s like I can’t believe it, right!?”

“More like, they’re probably going to do something to Kouenji, aren’t they!?” That’s right. The one Ryuuen was after is Kouenji Rokusuke, the maverick of Class D. And with Ike and Yamauchi at the center of it all, various theories began playing out. But these days, Kushida’s really keeping a low profile. I know it stems from her defeat against Horikita in their confrontation but she’s stopped taking an active role.

Of course, it’s not like she just went entirely silent. Even now, she’s talking about Ryuuen with the other girls but she did not get herself involved one bit. And Horikita is Horikita, she didn’t say a thing about Kushida to me.

“Isn’t this bad? What happened just now.” Horikita asked me that while I thought about something unrelated to Ryuuen. Even for Horikita, who wishes to avoid any involvement with Class C to the utmost of her ability, it appears

to be an urgent matter. “Maybe.” It looked like Ryuuen had business with Kouenji but that’s also puzzling.

Kouenji does give off a mysterious vibe. However, even from the outside, it shouldn’t look like Kouenji’s making a move inside Class D. There’s probably a reason behind why he’s blatantly going after Kouenji while keeping an eye on a great many people. “Kiyotaka, why don’t we go check the situation out?” Akito’s the one who said that. “That just now was way too many people. Maybe they’re planning on doing something.”

“Suppose so...even though there are people around that’s still not an absolute guarantee.”

If, on the off-chance that Kouenji got assaulted, Class D may end up shouldering the responsibility for not having prevented it. And getting penalized by the school isn’t the only problem. You’d end up regretting not being there to help. When I stepped out into the corridor with Akito, Keisei also tagged along. “I’ll go too. The fewer people, the more dangerous it is.” After a slight delay, Horikita also followed and Sudou also tagged along in pursuit. Hirata also came out of the classroom wearing a worried expression.

Apparently today’s going to be a stormy day. I asked Keisei and Akito to wait then spoke to Hirata. “Hirata, shouldn’t you stay back? If more energetic students like Ike and Yamauchi end up following us, it may end up causing a bigger ruckus.”

“...you’re right. But, I wonder if Kouenji-kun will be fine.....”

“Horikita’s heading there too. Keisei and Akito are with me too. Worst case scenario, if violence is about to break out, I’ll contact you.”

“Keisei-kun? Alright, I got it. Please do make sure not to go overboard.” Hirata felt puzzled at the name ‘Keisei’ but did not pursue the matter.

Hirata immediately went back into the restless classroom of Class D. “That was the right call, Kiyotaka. The more people, the more troublesome it’ll be. Besides, in Hirata’s case, he’s more suited towards calming the class down.”

Keisei nodded as though he's sure of it, perhaps he's the type of person to go against the flow. Now the problem is where Kouenji went off to. Inside the school building, even Ryuuuen and his men can't act carelessly. If they're going to attack, it'll be after he goes outdoors but I can't imagine where Kouenji would go. "What does Kouenji usually do after school?"

"...not a clue."

"I don't know either." Both Akito and Keisei tilted their heads as though they haven't the faintest clue. "Is there no one familiar with Kouenji's behavioral patterns?" None of our classmates have spoken to him at length. "He mostly heads straight back to the dorm."

"How can you tell?"

"I spot him heading back quite often. Either way, it'll be problematic if he leaves the school building. First of all, we should head to the entrance."

Saying that, we headed towards the entrance. If his shoes are still there then it would mean he's still inside the school building, and in that case we'll be able to buy time. To not fall behind, we kept up our pace. "Something serious like actual conflict might break out." Sudou said that to Horikita while clenching his fist.

"Quit your joking. Mass violence between Class D and Class C is no laughing matter. More importantly, why did you follow me?"

"Isn't it obvious? Because I'm worried about Suzune. I've heard rumors that Ryuuuen will attack even women."

"I'm not so fragile so as to need your protection."

"Don't say that." Horikita did not change her bullish stance of being able to protect herself. Since she's proficient at martial arts, she doesn't need a man. Sudou's show of masculinity is also in vain.

But Sudou is Sudou after all so he probably doesn't even entertain the idea of Horikita being strong one bit. "Besides, this may be unnecessary but there's

one more thing I have to add. How about focusing those worries on your club activities?”

“It’s fine I’m telling you. There’s still time left until practice. Let’s look for Kouenji already.” Even as she tried to drive him away, Sudou still stuck to Horikita. “Good grief...it’s tough having to move around while carrying the seeds of trouble.” She gave him a stealth insult.

If Horikita were to get hurt while she’s alone, Sudou will definitely snap. If that happens, it’ll turn into a huge uproar that would make the previous one look like a joke. If the same people are to get into a fight again then neither the school nor the student council would show any mercy. In that sense, having Sudou tag along should be seen as the best option.

PART 1

Leaving the school, I headed down the tree-lined path that leads back to the dorm. Since school just ended not too long ago, there are barely any students in sight. However, there were several boys from Class C in sight. I didn’t spot her back in the classroom but it looks like Class C’s Ibuki is also with them. On top of that, I could see Kouenji’s back from afar as he headed back to the dorm alone. Apparently they’re serious about attacking Kouenji. As Ryuuen closed the distance, he gave orders to Ishizaki and had him block Kouenji’s way forward. “Looks like they’re here, just like Suzune thought they’d be. Let’s go stop them.” Spotting them, Sudou asked Horikita to issue her order.

“Let’s wait and see. We still don’t know what Ryuuen-kun’s after.” Just like Ryuuen himself said earlier, there’s no rule forbidding students from interacting with other classes and it’s common to do so. There’s nothing we stand to gain from interrupting them at this stage. While approaching them, we observed the situation. “Hey, hold it right there, Kouenji. Humor us a bit.”

“What is it with you lot? I don’t recall doing anything to make you hinder me like this.” Since Ishizaki’s in the way, I can’t see Kouenji’s face but the tone of his voice is as its always been.

“You don’t get to decide that.”

“Hmph. You’re certainly not the one to do so.” Kouenji looked around at Ryuuen’s Class C entourage. There isn’t a single trace of anxiety or panic reflected in his eyes. “You remember me, don’t you?” With both his hands in his pocket, Ryuuen moved to stand in front of Kouenji. “Of course I remember you. You’re Class C’s Delinquent-kun, aren’t you?”

“I’ve turned a blind eye to you back then but today you’re coming with me, you freak.”

“Apologies but I was quite busy that day.” He apologized while brushing his hair back. Didn’t look like much of an apology. “But I can’t pretend I didn’t hear that. By ‘freak’, are you perhaps referring to me?”

“Who else is that supposed to refer to?”

“That certainly is an incomprehensible statement to make but that’s all water under the bridge. Because I happen to be a tolerant person, you see. But I have a date after this so let’s wrap this up quickly, shall we?”

“That’s a shame. But you’re going to have to reschedule that.”

“So you won’t withdraw?”

“What’ll you do if we don’t?” Kouenji crossed his arms for a bit as though thinking it over but then immediately split them back up. “Then we’ll have to finish our business over there.” Kouenji pointed towards a rest area a slight distance away, perhaps having determined that there’s no escape from this or perhaps not wanting to block the way for others. “I couldn’t care less where it is.”

“Then you may follow me.” And with Kouenji leading them, they went over to the rest area by the side of the road. It’d be a different story if they were in the middle of a highway but if they’ve gone to an isolated area like that it’ll be difficult to keep an eye on them. “Looks like we should head over there too.” After hearing that, Sudou tried to charge over there but Horikita stopped him. “Avoid acting violent carelessly. You understand?”



“Y-Yeah.”

Sudou, having been warned anew, took the lead alongside Horikita and headed over to Ryuuen and his entourage. And a little after that, we also caught up to them. Horikita immediately started speaking to Ryuuen. “What are you planning on doing here, Ryuuen-kun? It’ll turn into a huge problem if this gets out of hand.”

“Kuku. So you got baited into coming here, huh?” He then laughed as though he knew someone would follow them from the very beginning. Then he slowly looked at each and every one of us. It’s true that he was targeting Kouenji but in all likelihood, this is also a trap meant to narrow down the number of people to find the one he’s looking for. If that isn’t so then there’s no reason for him to march into Class C with his lackeys in tow.

His aim is akin to smoking his target out. “Ayanokouji and Miyake, plus Yukimura, huh? Well, for safety I suppose.”

“I’m also here, Ryuuen.” Ryuuen ignored Sudou, who’s smashing his knuckles together. “What happened to Hirata?”

“No idea. You aren’t interested in him, right?”

“Oh please, that guy’s overflowing with justice so it wouldn’t even be strange for him to be here.”

“What I’m trying to say is that you shouldn’t assume everything will go the way you predict.”

“Well, that’s fine. For now, that is.” With Ryuuen’s signal, Ishizaki and the others surround Kouenji. Seeing that play out, Akito muttered without even attempting to hide his disgust. “It’s almost like he’s playing emperor. To order around his classmates with a signal like that.”

“Sorry, Miyake. But I grew up like this.”

Sticking his hands into his pockets, Ryuuen approached Kouenji. “Wait.”

“Wait? Wait for what? As you can see, we aren’t doing anything.”

For now, they have yet to lay a finger on Kouenji. “I don’t mind you messing around but in that case, my presence is not required, am I wrong?” Kouenji pointed that out to Ryuuen who not only got in his way but is now talking to someone else. Ryuuen ignored Horikita’s warning and turned to face Kouenji.

“Speaking of which, you get the leading role today, Kouenji. You owe me one after all.”

“Owe you one? I recall no such thing.”

“I missed out on some points no thanks to your actions in clearing the zodiac exam.” He’s well informed. I wonder where exactly he heard that one. “Ahh, you mean that liar game. I do apologize if I’ve gotten in your way.” Despite apologizing, Kouenji doesn’t appear to feel the least bit apologetic. He boldly took out a handheld mirror.

It’s probably an incomprehensible action for the Class C folks. When Class C looked at him suspiciously, Kouenji politely told them. “It’s a bit windy out here today. I’m merely making sure my nice, cool style is not disrupted.” He turned his face left and right several times over to check his own appearance. “Hmm...it’s slightly out of order and rather lacking in grace. Apologies but would you mind holding the mirror for a while?” Saying that, Kouenji presented the man standing in front of him, Ryuuen, with the handheld mirror. Ryuuen accepted the mirror with a smile on his face. “You may point that mirror towards me.”

Kouenji said so and retrieved a compact-sized hard wax kit from his bag before rubbing some of it on his fingers and using both his hands to style his hair. Taken back at this absurd sight, Class C couldn’t even interject. However, an intense sound reverberated the very next instant. It was Ryuuen who threw the handheld mirror he received from Kouenji to the ground. And with the usual smile on his face, he grabbed hold of Kouenji’s arm. “That

freak act, I wonder how long you can keep it up.” While still styling his hair with both his hands, Kouenji let out a sigh.

“You sure act like quite the delinquent. That handheld mirror is rather expensive, you know?”

“My bad, hands slipped.”

“Fufu. Then it can’t be helped. In that case, let go of my arm. I can’t style my hair properly like this. Of course, I’m a man who’d be just fine even with his hair out of order though.” In that tense situation, Ryuuuen slowly let go of Kouenji’s arm. This is a place where acting conspicuously carries far too much risk. But this is Ryuuuen’s usual modus operandi of hunting his enemies to his utmost limits. “Stop it already, Ryuuuen-kun.”

“Shut it, Suzune. Kouenji’s my playmate right now.”

“Aren’t you just onesidedly attacking him? He wants no part of this.” While picking up the shards of the handheld mirror, Horikita glared at Ryuuuen. “I’ll do it. Your hands might get hurt.”

“I don’t really mind. It would be more problematic if you get hurt since you have your club activities.” Saying that, Horikita turned down Sudou’s offer. “Don’t be stupid. I can’t just let a girl get hurt.”

Forcibly pushing Horikita aside, Sudou began to pick up the shards.

“I won’t treat you even if you get hurt.” Despite Horikita pointing that out, Sudou continued to pick up the shards without paying it any heed. “I was wondering what this ruckus is all about but this really is quite an interesting lineup.” And this incident didn’t end with just Class D and Class C. As though drawn to the conflict, Class A’s Sakayanagi and her entourage showed up. I spotted Kamuro Masumi among them but I don’t know the names of the remaining two boys, only their faces. “Sakayanagi, eh?...it’s almost as if she timed it just right.” She stopped, and lightly tapped her cane on the ground. We’ve certainly become quite the crowd.

Including Kouenji, there are six of us from Class D and five from Class C. And four from Class A. A total of fifteen people in the crowd. “My presence here is purely coincidental.”

“Don’t make me laugh.” It’s obvious, even to Ryuuen, that this is anything but a coincidence. “Still, to think Class C’s leading members and students of Class D would be here. Are you perhaps holding a discussion regarding your Christmas party?”

“Back off, I don’t have any business with you yet.”

“You don’t have to go that far, do you? If it’s a party you’re planning then the more the merrier, wouldn’t you say? So perhaps you’ll let me join?”

But Ryuuen showed no sign of playing along with Sakayanagi’s provocation. “If you’re staying then don’t get in my way.”

“Of course, I won’t do anything to embarrass the party’s organizer.”

Sakayanagi then took her distance and sat down on a bench placed at the rest area. And the three students from Class A surrounded her on all sides as though protecting her. Well, I suppose violence is unlikely to erupt in this situation but...there are no surveillance cameras in this area.

Still, if you look around you’ll see students on their way back. There’s no telling when how many people will pass by this place. It’s hard to imagine a fistfight will break out here. The person at the center of all this who had been smiling fearlessly so far, Kouenji Rokusuke, opened his mouth. “I don’t mind the crowd but shall we wrap this up already? If you don’t plan on doing so then I’ll be taking my leave.”

“Wait a minute, Kouenji. Ryuuen-san just said he won’t let you go this time.”

“My bad, things got in our way and our little talk stalled. Let’s get down to business.”

Kouenji smiled faintly. “I conclude from this situation that—you are obsessed with defeating either a person who is causing trouble for Class C or

a person who has formed an alliance with another class. Am I wrong?”

“Let’s see, any eyesore I don’t like is an enemy to defeat.”

“And a person from within Class D has appeared to hinder you. So you’re attempting to unravel this person’s identity.” Kouenji seems to understand the gist of it without even requiring an explanation from Ryuuen. Rather unexpected from the man who possesses zero awareness of anything he’s not personally interested in.

“That’s exactly right.”

“Then I’m sorry to disappoint but I have absolutely no interest in either the future of Class D or the future of any other class. I haven’t done anything noteworthy in the exams leading up to this point and I have no intention of doing so in the future either. Is it really fun to waste time on a person like that?”

“That’s funny, care to explain the zodiac exam then? Rumors have been spreading, you know?”

“Well, well, you’re quite the knowledgeable one.” During the zodiac exam, Kouenji had managed to brilliantly identify the VIP of the ‘Monkey’ group he was assigned to. But even if one realizes that Class D won from the results alone, it’s difficult to pinpoint the student.

He sure did his homework. Or perhaps he’s merely guessing at Kouenji having been assigned to the ‘Monkey’ group. He may have become certain of that after Kouenji did not deny his claim. “That’s just my own way of killing time. I couldn’t bring myself to attend all those boring meetings so I decided that ending it all would be the shortcut to freedom. That is all.” Kouenji took out his phone and switched it to camera mode so he could have a look at himself. Apparently he’s intending on using it as a makeshift handheld mirror. “Then that means we can’t rule out the possibility that you’ve played a role in the other exams too. In other words, there’s no guarantee that you aren’t the mastermind of Class D. Right?”

“That is correct but if that’s the conclusion you’ve drawn that it would simply mean you’re just a moron whose brains only amount to this much.” Ishizaki tried to initiate violence but Ryuuen laughed and stopped him. However, that brilliant comeback is admirable. If you keep insisting that an unrelated person is the mastermind then that makes you nothing but a moron. “Kuku, sure enough. If you are telling the truth then that’d mean you’re a completely harmless existence.”

“Yes. I like how you catch onto things quickly, Dragon Boy.” Sakayanagi broke into laughter at the mention of Dragon Boy. But Ryuuen ignored it and changed the topic entirely.

“Then what’ll you do if I told these guys to lynch you right here? As payback for the zodiac exam, for no reason at all. What’ll you do if I try to subdue you through meaningless violence?” Horikita tried to react to this disturbing situation but before she could do so, Kouenji laughed. “Now that’s a nonsensical question. You won’t choose that option here. Not much to be gained from using violence in a public place like this, right?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t particularly mind going on a rampage even in an inconvenient place like this. Benefits of such an act aside.”

“I see. Then allow me to give my answer. If you happen to choose that option, I will knock out all those who come at me in order to protect my own pride.”

“You’re saying you can do that on your own?”

“It’s harder for me to imagine why I can’t.” Having overheard that interesting back-and-forth, Sakayanagi smiled from afar. “Looks like we missed our mark. Doesn’t seem like Kouenji’s X. He’s insane in his own way. Seems like that’s all there is to him.”

“The most important thing is that we’ve cleared up this misunderstanding.”

“Let me ask you something though, Kouenji. Class D’s points are steadily going up. There’s definitely someone sharp behind all this. If that’s not you

then who the hell is it? Is it someone from this rabble who followed us here like a bunch of morons?” For the first time, Kouenji turned to look at us just once. But he sneered, shrugged his shoulders and immediately lost interest. “I don’t mind answering that question but—”

“A word, if I may?” Sakayanagi spoke while still seated on the bench as though to cut Kouenji off. “That’s an interesting topic you’re talking about. Something about a Class D student getting in Class C’s way? I’ve heard rumors that Dragon Boy-san is looking for that person but it would appear the rumors are true then?”

“I told you to shut up, Sakayanagi. And also, if you call me that again I’ll kill you, get it?”

“Fufu. Do you not like it? I think it’s a wonderful name though. My apologies though, it simply appeared as though something I cannot quite comprehend was happening.” A faint laughter followed. And Sakayanagi continued speaking without paying any heed to that. “Isn’t it just that your plan was torn apart by someone from Class D? This is one of the cornerstones of the conflict between classes at this school. Getting in the way of other classes isn’t strange either, is it? As a matter of fact, both you and I have fought exactly like that several times already. I don’t know who this person is but don’t you think hiding one’s identity while putting one’s strategies into motion is a brilliant way of fighting? Should you really be going out of your way to interrogate an unrelated student like this? To be honest, from my point of view this is just pathetic.”

“I’ll admit my plan was torn apart by X but that’s not the problem here. I’m just doing this to draw out that person sneaking around behind the scenes. That’s the sort of game this is.”

“I see. So is committing acts of extortion like this also part of your plan?”

“That’s right, I won’t shy away from violence if need be either. I enjoy my own way of doing things.”

“In that case, you’ll not only be acting pathetic but also revealing the extent of your incompetence though? I’ve heard quite a bit from Masumi-san and Hashimoto-kun. About your strategy on the uninhabited island how it was demolished. If you had properly done your research, you clearly should’ve known he’s an unrelated party. First things first, the one behind the events of the uninhabited island is Horikita Suzune-san I hear. I wonder whether or not this mystery person you’re searching for really even exists?” Sakayanagi’s sharp eyes and words attacked Ryuuken. “...you sure this isn’t just an excuse for why your plan failed...?” As though trying to follow up on Sakayanagi’s words, one of the students from Class A muttered that in a low voice.

“That’s going too far, Kitou. Surely even Ryuuken isn’t that stupid.” The one who followed up for Ryuuken like that’s Hashimoto, I believe his name was. But Ryuuken showed no sign of being agitated at Sakayanagi and her entourage’s provocations. Because that’s something Ryuuken understands best. “Joke’s on you, Sakayanagi. I manipulated Katsuragi into signing a contract.” Rather than refute that statement, he instead changed the topic. It’s almost as if he wants to say that it’s his turn to attack now. “Contract, you say? Yes, if I recall, it said ‘in exchange for Class C’s aid on the island, private points shall be paid as compensation’. To be more specific, there was the clause ‘20,000 points every month until graduation’, I believe.”

Sakayanagi also responded without any hesitation to that. “Huh? What’s that mean? What have you guys been doing behind the scenes? Are you fine with that!?” Sudou barked out his complaints. “There’s no problem rulewise. It’s something both our classes agreed on. We would receive the class points that would’ve been Class C’s and in exchange we compensate them...in other words, we’re just paying Class C back with private points.”

I knew Class A and Class C had allied during the island exam but I didn’t know what deal was struck between them. This certainly is a deal worth making. Using up all their points and leaving Class A with all 270 points that could be used on the island (minus the 30 points due to Sakayanagi’s absence) while demanding 20,000 private points in exchange. At first glance, it may seem like Class C won out but what’s important is the lead in class points at the end of the exam. Because what determines class ranking is, after

all, your class points. You can almost say private points are allocated to you as a bonus. As a result, Katsuragi may have lost points but if he hadn't, the outcome may have been the same if not far worse for Class A. What I mean by this is that the difference between class points is just that important. If they had gone about the island exam the normal way, then they would barely have any class points left over and the difference between them and Class B would have shrunk proportionately.

But why are they revealing all this at a time like this when they've kept it secret the whole time? It's probably something akin to Sakayanagi bullying Ryuuен. First Ryuuен mocked Sakayanagi and now this is Sakayanagi returning the favor, is probably how I should interpret this. "I'm not the one who'll get in trouble after revealing this, it's you guys. Other classes will know that we've been taking 20,000 points from you every month without exception."

"It'll spread soon enough if you ever felt like doing so. No point in worrying about it. In the first place, the one who conceived of the idea for a contract was Katsuragi-kun." Since she wasn't there on the island and therefore an unrelated party, Sakayanagi need not worry about it leaking.

No, there's the possibility that she instructed the class beforehand not to do anything unnecessary but considering how the two of them were locked in a struggle back then, perhaps she deliberately left them hanging. As a matter of fact, Katsuragi is now keeping a low profile while Sakayanagi dominates the class. "Fuck, then that means Class C's got guaranteed monthly allowances."

"Don't fall for it, Sudou-kun. It's all class points Class C should have received but chose to forego. It's not like they gained anything from it."

"Is that really so, Suzune? We may as well have gained 200 class points from that island exam, you know? On top of that, Class A's footing the bill for it plus it'll go on forever unless Class A happens to lose its standing."

"You're wrong. It's similar but what you're getting from them are private points. They're fundamentally different from class points." If his goal is Class A then he has indeed yet to gain anything. In that regard, you could say

Horikita's remark is correct. But the fact that roughly 800,000 points, money in other words, is flowing from Class A to Class C is a significant one. Even if Class C continues to lose class points and they end up with none, they are guaranteed minimum allowance at the very least. Despite being hounded by the Sakayanagi faction, the Katsuragi faction really gave them a free ride.

"Are you quite done talking? You lot seem to like butting heads a lot. I have no intention of denying you that but I'll have you stop bothering me any more than this. It would be very unpleasant to have any more time be wasted listening to your pointless opinions."

"Hold it right there, Kouenji. You haven't given me your answer yet." As though he just remembered it, Kouenji looked up towards the sky for a while.

"Something about a sharp person in Class D, was it? To be honest, I haven't given it any thought at all...either way, it would be best if I don't answer. You're hunting after that answer even at risk to yourself. It wouldn't be right to rob you of that pleasure. I'm simply enjoying my youth here at this school. That's all. If this school can get me all worked up then that would be a different story but I don't think I can expect that to happen. In that case, I'll fall in love with beautiful girls and we'll aim for greater heights. And I will continue to build upon my own beauty. That is all there is to it."

"So you're saying you won't participate in the class conflict?"

"I never have and never will. That's what I've been telling you from the start. From my point of view, both Class C and Class A might as well be the same. The people here right now all bore me."

"What the hell did you just say!? Ryuuen-san, this guy's been mocking us for a while now! Let's discipline him!" Having been slighted, Ishizaki raises his fist against Kouenji. But the one who acted to correct Kouenji's words before even Ryuuen could was Sakayanagi, who had done nothing but smile and tease so far. Looks like there's something about Kouenji's words she could not ignore.

"I cannot pretend I didn't hear that. Dragon Boy-san is one thing but—" Right after she said those words, Ryuuen swiftly closed the distance between

them and launched a kick without holding back. “Woah—!?” Hashimoto panicked and got in between Sakayanagi and Ryuuen and blocked the kick with his left arm. But because of the powerful impact, Hashimoto got blown away to the side and fell onto the concrete.

If Hashimoto had not come in between them, it’s very likely that Sakayanagi would actually get her face kicked. Both Hashimoto and that other male student named Kitou put on white gloves and assumed a fighting stance against Ryuuen. “Did I hit a nerve?”

“I told you I’d kill you if you called me that again.”

“Cut it out already. Your behavior just now is a huge problem.” Having witnessed the assault play out, Horikita gave him a warning but Sakayanagi was the one who stopped her.

“Was there a problem just now, Hashimoto-kun?”

“No. I just fell over on my own.” While patting the dirt off his clothes, Hashimoto slowly stood back up. “So he says, Horikita-san.”

“...you’re insane, both you and Ryuuen-kun.” Class A, under Sakayanagi’s leadership, did not voice a single complaint against this act of violence.

On the contrary, they were more than willing to throw down. “I must apologize, Ryuuen-kun. I’ve teased you a bit too much.” After apologizing, she looked towards Kouenji. “Going back to our initial topic, whatever do you mean by all the people here, including me, boring you?” For Sakayanagi, that remark made by Kouenji is more worrisome than Ryuuen who’s in front of her. Ryuuen too, having grown apathetic, took his distance from Sakayanagi. “I swear, this lot...”

Horikita’s agitation and exasperation are understandable. These people here all have a few quirks of their own. “Did you really not like what I had to say, Little Girl?” Heading over to the bench where Sakayanagi sat, Kouenji opened his palm and pointed at her. “Kuku. Little Girl, huh? I think it’s a wonderful name.” As though it were payback for Dragon Boy, Ryuuen

sneered. “Kouenji-san, was it? You’re mistaken in your use of English. I am not a little girl.”

“Fu. Fu. Fu. I am the one who gets to decide that. Not you. I have not made a mistake according to the rules of use. The usage of the word ‘girl’ is appropriate for your age and physique, which means I’ll be calling you just that.”

“That is precisely where you’re wrong. According to the rules of use, ‘little girl’ is what you would use to refer to elementary schoolgirls and no one else. This world doesn’t exist just for the sake of allowing you to do whatever you want in it.”

“It’s my policy to not go with common sense.” He brushed his hair back.

“...cut it out already, Kouenji.” Kitou took a step forward. He moved to take off his white gloves. At first I thought it was something he wore to protect against the cold but that doesn’t seem to be the case. “What’s with him? Think a demon’s going to pop out if he takes those gloves off?”

“What do you mean?” Because Sudou suddenly said the word ‘demon’ I ended up unexpectedly asking him about it.

“You don’t know? It’s from a manga that used to be popular back in the day. It’s that manga where they remove a white glove, a demon pops out and they fight against devils.” I’ve never heard of it before but then again, I’ve never read manga before either. “I have no business with Class A. Back off.”

“Please at least allow me to fix his tone.”

“Fufufu, it’s not exactly bad that you’re all fighting over me but unfortunately when it comes to men and women, I’m only interested in those older than I am.” Kouenji’s toying with the class representatives Sakayanagi and Ryuuen.

The very fact that common sense does not apply to him makes him the strongest one, in a certain sense of the word. ‘Insanity’ may also count as a

strength alongside violence and lies. “I’m glad I dealt with you today. Get lost already.” Even for Ryuuen, having to deal with Kouenji must be exhausting. Knowing that he won’t get any more information out of him, he urged Kouenji to leave.

“Alright then. See You.” Perhaps the typhoon turned out to be Kouenji rather than Ryuuen. The incident came to an end and silence fell upon us.

“Apparently sightseeing time is over. Shall we head back?”

“You’d better look forward to the third semester, Sakayanagi.”

“If you’re sure you’ve taken care of Class D then I’ll be your opponent anytime.”

Leaving those words behind, the Class A students left. “Shall we leave too, Horikita?”

“Yes...I can’t be bothered to deal with this anymore either.” Sudou picked up most of the shards and for now, we can say things have gone back to normal.
“But he seemed less interested in Kouenji than I expected...”

Horikita seems to have felt doubt regarding Ryuuen’s actions. On the other hand, that doubt also infected Class C. “...was it alright to just let him go?”

“If he were the one I’m looking for, I wouldn’t just let him leave.”

“He seemed plenty suspicious to me though. I can’t pin down his thoughts and there’s the possibility that his words are lies too, right?”

“Our mindsets don’t match. X thinks the same way I do. I can’t imagine Kouenji pulling the strings behind the scenes. In the first place, does he look like the type to team up with Horikita?”

“That is certainly hard to imagine. Then why did you target Kouenji?”

“Yo. What do you lot think about Kouenji?” After taking his eyes off of Kouenji, Ryuuen turned to look at us with an eerie smile. “You guys have

been muttering for a while now. I don't follow." Sudou, unable to understand Ryuuen's actions, glared at him while threatening him with a fist. "Idiots back off."

"The hell did you just say!?"

Horikita stopped Sudou with a glance. "Ryuuen-kun, you're acting out of line. It is a fact that this is rather hard to digest."

"Then that means I'm doing something right." Even though he's being reprimanded, Ryuuen paid it no attention. On the contrary, he seems to be enjoying the situation more and more. "I was able to narrow down the candidates quite a bit today, Suzune. Regarding that existence creeping behind you."

"I have no intention of listening to whatever you have to say. It's a waste of time just humoring you. More importantly, I'd like you to avoid approaching our classmates in the future."

"I'm free to choose whether to approach or to stay away. I'm not breaking any rule here." The person who's first to break the rules uses said rules as his shield. "But this game will end soon. I'm looking forward to the finale." Wrapping things up with that, Ryuuen looked at Sakayanagi and her entourage and then left. "He finally left. Let's go back. For now, we should get Hirata-kun up to speed."

"But what's with that Ryuuen guy? You think he wanted to try something?"

"I haven't a clue. I don't think there's anyone capable of understanding what he wants to do." Looks like preparations are complete on Ryuuen's end. Keenly aware of that, I saw Ryuuen off.

CHAPTER 4:

TIME FOR SETTLEMENT

INTRODUCTION

“This concludes our homeroom session. A reminder to act appropriately as a student of this school over the winter vacation and to not go overboard. That will be all.” Sakagami’s words are much appreciated no matter how meaningless they may be. I took out my phone. The day for me to attack has finally come. Today’s the closing ceremony for our second semester. All classes will end in the morning and we’ll be free from that point onwards. There will be no club activities either and the school itself is encouraging students to head back early. In other words, there will barely be any students left inside the school building.

“I’ve ruled out those I can rule out but there’s still around 10 possible candidates left over.” There are a few I’ve never even heard of before mixed in there too but I suppose there’s no helping that. Ideally I won’t have to use Karuizawa but as expected, I wasn’t able to track down X’s trail. “Well, I guess this just means I’ll get to enjoy myself more on the contrary.” To be honest I already have a mark in mind, but there’s no point in narrowing it down at this point. Rather, it would be far more exciting to confront X with zero preconceptions. I made a certain move after the Paper Shuffle. I utilized every last person in Class C that I could and gave them targets to keep an eye on.

But it's not like I'll be able to figure out X's identity from just keeping a tail on them. Taking into account the risk of another massive problem occurring, I did not make them tail the more fragile boys and girls. The ones to keep an eye on should only be, at most, delinquent types like Sudou or Miyake. Or someone conservative like Hirata who fears the occurrence of a problem above all else. But that alone tipped those Class D folks off to the threat my actions posed. In Sudou's case though, he was stupider than I had imagined so I was forced into provoking him directly. Anyway, the point is to make them constantly aware that I'm 'after them'.

That person's probably trembling in fear every day by now. From the fear of 'having their identity exposed'. So far, that person's hid behind Suzune and stubbornly kept hiding their identity. In other words, that person's terrified that the fact that they're Class D's shadow puppeteer will come to light. In that case, I'll keep hounding them and then I'll close in on them. There's no possible way they wouldn't feel fear at that. And one more thing, I even told them I'll be targeting Karuizawa yet they didn't make a move.

That person should have been on edge for the past two weeks or so. About how exactly I'm going to make contact with Karuizawa. Or about how I'm going to interrogate her. They probably made Karuizawa report to them daily to check if any events out of the ordinary have occurred. They'd be wondering what actions I'd take in the process of uncovering their identity. That must be, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the only thought running through their mind. It's far more tiring that it sounds and invites nothing but confusion. They'd be left unable to draw a rational conclusion about how close I've gotten. That doubt would shake them up.

And so—today's the best day to corner X since they would have already fallen into panic by now.

In the span of a few minutes, more than half the class have left. The clock in the classroom feels like it's going slower than usual. Students after leaving one after another. "Kuku..." I felt my heartbeat quicken. It's been many years since I last felt this sort of exhilaration. I recalled the question Ibuki asked me a few days back.

She asked me why I would go out of my way taking risks just to find X. Ibuki said that there's no point to it even if I find X. She's certainly right in that there's nothing beyond uncovering their identity. Oh, so it was you the whole time? She thinks that's how it's going to end. But that only holds true for normal people. I've been fighting against Class D this whole time by thinking up a variety of strategies. I'd know best that X possesses a mindset similar to my own. I've never before seen a person similar to me. That fascination has gotten me all worked up like this.

I wonder how I myself will change when I come face-to-face with X. I want to know what I'll desire then. I'll be able to see the X who's kept me entertained this whole time. That thought made my heart throb, almost like the feeling one feels when thinking of their first love. I'll do anything for this. The text I sent to X this morning has already been marked as read. There's no doubt it reached them. Now that they know what's going to go down today, I wonder what sort of strategy X has in mind. "Ryuuuen-kun." The one who called my name is Shiina Hiyori, who did so from beside me.

"What?"

"Everyone seems rather restless today." She said so while looking around. The students who stayed behind are all moving closer to me.

"What are you planning on doing after this?"

"I'm off to see the person who's kept me entertained for the last couple of months. Do you want to tag along?"

"No. I must decline. I don't quite see the fun in that....."

She then added as a afterthought. "Do you really have to hunt them down?"

"Huh?"

"...no, I suppose that's something Ryuuuen-kun gets to decide as the leader of this class." Hiyori then starts walking away. Perhaps because she's said her

piece. “I will be at the library. If you find yourself in any trouble, please contact me.”

“It’s not like you’ll be of any use.”

“I suppose so. Happy winter holidays.” Hiyori, without any timidity, said her piece at her own pace and left. Hiyori is sharp but she hates conflict. I thought I could manipulate her but as I suspected, she’s of no use to me as a pawn. Compared to her, the ones who’d obediently follow me around are far more usable. I finished making the preparations and had my pawns assemble.

“It’s time, Ryuu-en-san.” Ishizaki said so restlessly. “Make sure you enjoy this.” I handed Ishizaki a bag. Inside are the items we’ll be needing. Ibuki and Albert also stood up. Numbers aren’t important here. I’ll only bring along those I need. And those who can keep their mouths shut.

What I’m about to do is something out of place at a refined school like this one.

PART 1

There’s barely anyone left inside the school building thirty minutes after our homeroom ended given that our winter vacation’s just begun. Just like they did during our summer vacation, all the students left straight away. Barely anyone noticed us since they were all busy leaving. “So...where are we going? Just tell us what we’re going to do already.” I didn’t speak a word of our current plan to anyone, including Ibuki. Ibuki and the others only know that I had instructed Ishizaki’s group to keep an eye on Miyake and his ilk.

That’s why they had no idea why exactly I approached Kouenji. The reason I kept my silence on this is because I wanted to avoid spies within Class C getting involved like Manabe and her group did. There’s no doubt that person’s also doing everything they can to keep their identity hidden. And so

I kept quiet about my actual plan in order to corner X with certainty. “Are you curious, Ibuki?”

“You’re always dragging me around. And I’m always on edge because of your reckless actions.”

Ishizaki also followed suit and approached me. Perhaps he’s also curious about my true intentions. “You remember what I told you about Karuizawa, right? She’s the woman who started the chain of events leading up to Manabe and her group becoming spies.”

“You’re talking about that noisy woman from Class D, right? I know that much, at least.” Since Ibuki infiltrated Class D during the island exam, she probably knows best. “I’m calling Karuizawa out to the rooftop today. I got Karuizawa’s mail address from a woman who exchanged numbers with her. Of course, I made sure she knew I’m the one who sent her that mail.”

A woman who exchanged numbers with her...I didn’t go as far as to say that woman’s name. Because I decided there’s still no need for me to tell anyone about ‘Kushida’. “Huh? Rooftop? There’s no way Karuizawa would come if you’re the one calling.”

“She will definitely come. If she doesn’t, I told her I’d expose her past.” If the pathetic fact that she got bullied in the past were to come to light, it’ll cause a huge ruckus. If she understands that this could put her current social status at risk, then she has no choice but to accept the danger and come anyways. “Even if Karuizawa comes, do you think she’ll tell you X’s identity?”

“I suppose she wouldn’t do so normally.” X surely promised to protect Karuizawa from her enemies, including Manabe and her group. “I sent a mail to X too. I told them that I’d call Karuizawa out today and drag their identity out of her. That I’d use any means available to do that. By doing that, I’m not only threatening Karuizawa but also X at the same time.”

“But...that mail threat you sent reached Karuizawa, right? What are you going to do if she just reports that to the school? X may suggest she do just

that.” Are you thinking that far ahead? Ibuki glared at me as though trying to provoke me with that.

“She won’t do it. If she does it, then all I have to do is reveal Karuizawa’s past. No matter what she chooses to do, Karuizawa has no way of turning the tables on us.” The only countermeasure they can take is for either Karuizawa or X to directly confront me and persuade me to stop. “The worst case scenario would be X showing up instead of Karuizawa. But that’s also exciting in and of itself. To see what Karuizawa will do.”

“I don’t think the risk is worth it though.....”

“No such thing. Destroying Karuizawa means destroying one of X’s pawns. Because it looks like he’s been putting Karuizawa to good use in his crafty plans.”

“How can you tell? I get it that X threatened Manabe and her group to protect Karuizawa but...”

Even I only realized that Karuizawa’s a pawn not too long ago. I only got to that conclusion because I realized how baffling certain aspects of the Paper Shuffle were. “Kuku. Anyways, look forward to it. X aside, you’ll definitely get to see Karuizawa terrified at the prospect of her past being revealed.”

“If Karuizawa does show up on the rooftop like you said...what exactly are we going to do to her? Like I said earlier, what if we can’t drag X’s identity out of her?” Both Ibuki and Ishizaki seem to be worried about that but...

“According to Manabe and her group, Karuizawa got bullied rather severely in the past. People who have suffered severe trauma tend to lose all grip on their rationality when placed again in a similar situation. In that case, why don’t we just reproduce that sort of scenario for her? Let’s go all out and make her feel welcome. And we’ll keep pressuring her until she gives us X’s name.”

“No way...are we actually going to do something to Karuizawa? This is insane.”

“This is too much, Ryuuen-san. We already got into trouble during the case with Sudou so if we gang up to bully a girl...I mean, there are cameras on the rooftop and all!”

“I am fully aware of that. Which is why I’ve thought of a countermeasure for that.” I climbed the stairs leading up to the rooftop. Halfway through that, I looked back at Ibuki and Ishizaki who were a few steps behind me. “Feel free to run if you’re against it.”

“I-I won’t run. I’ll follow you, Ryuuen-san.”

“What about you, Ibuki?”

“I’ll go along with your strategy from this point onwards. But if I ever feel it’s getting dangerous, I’ll step down.” After all, she’s also been curious about X for a while now too. I had Ibuki and Ishizaki stand by at the door leading to the rooftop and took the bag from Ishizaki. I retrieved the tools I needed from inside the bag and handed it back to Ishizaki.

“This is...!?”

“Just wait.” I opened the door to the rooftop.

There aren’t that many schools where the rooftop is accessible all year round but there’s a reason for that here. Not only is there proper fencing installed here but there are also surveillance cameras set up. If anyone engages in problematic behavior here, it’ll definitely be recorded. Of course, students are keenly aware of this which is why they behave themselves on the rooftop. However, every year this rooftop fails to become a popular attraction. This school has its own cafes and malls as well as a variety of other popular attractions. I’m pretty much the only one who’d go out of their way to come here. But there’s a limit to the number of places where they can set up cameras. Above the door leading to the rooftop. That’s about it.

Because there aren’t many blind spots on the rooftop, one’s more than enough. But this means if that camera were to stop functioning, we’d be free of any surveillance. I stood directly underneath the surveillance camera and

looked straight into the lens of the camera. I then pointed a black spray can I had prepared beforehand at the surveillance camera and shot the spray at it. The camera on the rooftop is the same type of camera as the ones inside the school building. A vandal dome camera. A resilient polycarbonate lens cover and a steel body will protect it against acts of violence. But violence isn't the only way to disable a security camera. One spray can is more than enough.

The spray will adhere to the surface of the camera and obscure its field of vision. No matter how shock resistant the camera may be, you still won't be able to see anything through it. "Now there's nothing watching us." I had conducted research in advance regarding what sort of monitoring system that school has set up.

Out of the hundreds of cameras installed inside the school, only a few of those installed in vital locations display footage in real time. There's no way they could possibly wise up to this abnormal situation right away. I had already painted over a surveillance camera somewhere else a while ago and reported it to Sakagami myself and got penalized for it.

As a result, I had points deducted to pay for the cost of cleaning the camera and received a warning. I had asked then whether or not the footage is constantly being observed. Especially on a day like this where all the students have pretty much left. The school is bound to let its guard down. "Albert. You stand by a bit below us. Let Karuizawa pass when she comes. And if anyone unexpected...like teachers come, then call my phone right away." Albert nodded silently and went down the stairs.

I had him stand guard just in case so I'd be able to respond to any unforeseen developments. "So you painted over the cameras...isn't that grounds for punishment?"

"Just a prank. No big deal."

"I just hope Karuizawa will come like you said she would."

"She will come. It's a matter of life or death for her. She definitely won't leave it to chance."

Now we just have to wait until it's time.

PART 2

Around 2 PM. A little before the appointed time, the door to the rooftop opened and a lone student showed up. Our leading actress for the day showed up, her body stiff after bathing in the cold air. “Kuku. I knew you’d come, Karuizawa.” I turned off my phone and put it back inside my pocket. Ibuki and Ishizaki, looking slightly nervous, turned to face Karuizawa. “...the mail you sent me this morning. What do you mean by that?”

“Surely there’s no need to even ask at this point. It’s precisely because you understood what it means that you came here.” This is what was in the mail I sent to Karuizawa.

‘Manabe and her group told me all about your past. Come alone to the rooftop after school. If you tell anyone about this then the whole school will know about your past by tomorrow’.

Mentioning Manabe and her group ensured Karuizawa would understand the meaning behind this. She has no other choice but to understand. “I assume you kept quiet about this as promised? No, you had no other choice but to keep quiet. After all, you can’t afford to let anyone know about your past.” She may have panicked and informed X of her predicament since they’d already know of her past but I couldn’t care less about that. Like I told Ibuki and Ishizaki earlier, I’ve already sent X a mail. That today I’ll be delivering Karuizawa’s sentence. And that I’d uncover their identity. So it makes no difference whether or not Karuizawa asked them for help. “But to think you actually came alone.”

“You told me to come alone, didn’t you...?”

“Kuku. I suppose I did.” Then again, there’s no way that person would’ve shown up given that they went to such lengths to hide their identity. And Karuizawa cannot ask anyone other than X for help. Because if she does, her past would be revealed. And the same applies for X, who’s also kept their identity secret. In other words, their options are limited. “Look, I don’t know what this is all about...but it’s cold so I want to wrap this up quickly.” Karuizawa rubs her hands together. But there’s no point in pretending like she doesn’t know what the situation is.

“Then why did you come here? You could’ve just ignored me.”

“That’s—because I didn’t want unfounded rumors to start spreading around.” She’s doing her best to appear calm but it’s obvious she’s just bluffing. “Unfounded rumors? Everyone here knows about it though? That before your high school days, you used to be the victim of bullying.”

“.....” Even if she tries to hide it, a change in her behavior will occur when presented with the truth.

“It was a stroke of misfortune that Manabe and her group found out about it. If you want to blame someone, then blame yourself for failing to conduct yourself properly.”

“...what are you after? Are you saying you stand to gain something from threatening me?”

“What will you do if I told you I was just killing time?” Even though I have leverage over her, Karuizawa’s already lost any leverage she had. “If you do anything to me...I’ll immediately report it to the school.”

“Come now, you came here alone because that’s not an option, right? Without asking anyone for help.”

“...Ryuuen, is it really okay to act that arrogant? She may actually have a trick up her sleeve.” Ibuki seems to suspect something’s going on behind the scenes after she showed up here alone. “Karuizawa can’t do anything but rely on X. No need to be that cautious. Even if she records her conversation with

me or films it, she can't use it as her trump card. Because more than anything, she fears getting her past revealed. As long as we hold onto that, she cannot resist us at all."

"But—"

"That's enough, just keep quiet."

I already know what Ibuki's trying to say. Manabe and her group were threatened with evidence of their bullying of Karuizawa. They were forced to cease their bullying and give their word that they won't speak a word of it to anyone else. Then they were used. As though forced to strangle themselves, they were manipulated into leaking information on Class C. In other words, Ibuki's afraid that we may be threatened with evidence ourselves. But that won't happen.

'The past in which Karuizawa was bullied'.

As long as you know how to use that weapon, there's nothing to fear. In this case, cornering us means also cornering Karuizawa. But it is a fact that there is danger in this. A double-edged sword. If I just wanted to spread around Karuizawa's past, then there's no need to threaten her like this. By using the information I currently hold to stir things up, I will be able to obtain a certain degree of accomplishment. But if I reveal it, then that's it. I won't be able to use this double-edged sword anymore. Karuizawa would be destroyed but I won't get to X. What I want is to drag the person behind Karuizawa out of hiding.

Since I've made my move today, I have to uncover X's identity here. In order to do that, I need to figure out just how deep the connection between Karuizawa and X runs. "Let's stop beating around the bush. You want to be freed quickly right. Then tell me who's hiding behind you. If you do that, I'll keep quiet about your past."

"I don't know what you mean." But Karuizawa's clearly more agitated than ever. Karuizawa also knows that I'm looking for that person lurking in Class

D. Still, she probably didn't know that we've figured out her connection to that person.

"X saved you when you were being bullied by Manabe and her group, right?"

"H-Huh? That's not true."

"No point in hiding it now. I've got some evidence myself too."

"...evidence?" Apparently, X has been keeping Karuizawa in the dark more than I had expected. Slowly, I'll pressure Karuizawa bit by bit while allowing no room for error. "How do you think X was able to protect you from Manabe behind the scenes?"

"I don't know. I wasn't being bullied and even if you say stuff like X....."

"Ok, ok. If you won't admit it, I'll just go ahead and tell you my conclusion." Because if I don't, Karuizawa doesn't seem like she'll admit to anything. "X took advantage of Manabe's group's weakness. Telling them to behave themselves if they don't want the truth of their bullying to come to light. That's how they kept them quiet." Karuizawa just glared at me without saying anything. "Kuku, I see...so you do know how X shut down Manabe's group."

"I-I haven't even said anything."

"Not a word, no. But your eyes tell a different story." I then continued. "If that's all then that's to be expected. But X didn't stop there, they even made Manabe and her group betray me during the sports festival, you know? To turn spy for them and leak information. Of course, with the threat of having their bullying be exposed should they not."

"What are you saying? Seriously, I have no idea what you're going on about..."

"You're lying though? Looks like you're already aware of what went down during the sports festival." It can't be, but perhaps there's the possibility that

Karuizawa herself is unaware of X's identity? If they always used a free address to contact her and issued orders to her like that then... No, I don't imagine Karuizawa will obey the orders of someone who hides their face from her like that. If she really doesn't know, then it would've been better for Karuizawa to admit the truth to a certain degree then claim to have no knowledge of their identity. If she's going to deny everything then that in itself would be strange unless there's a reason behind it.

"The only thing I want to know is the identity of the X who attacked me. I couldn't care less about your past. Don't you think the smart thing to do here is to give me their identity?"

"My answer's the same no matter what you ask me. I don't know anything. And it's seriously cold out here..." She's wearing extremely light clothing. Perhaps because she doesn't intend on staying here for long. "Of course, it must be cold. Don't you want to wrap things up here and go back already?"

"I have nothing to say to you."

"I see. If you're going to cover for X then there's no helping it. I assume this means you're fine with your past being revealed?"

"....." Karuizawa's really stuck between a rock and a hard place. If I attack her, she has no choice but to keep quiet. No matter what she chooses to do, she'd end up making an enemy out of someone. You could go into depth regarding that but it's just a waste of time. "No point in thinking it over. This isn't a situation you can think your way out of. It's already clear your options are limited. And the correct option to choose here is to give me that person's name. That's all there is to it." By doing so, Karuizawa would be able to protect her secret at the very least. In this current situation, the only way she can save herself is to sacrifice X.

"...if, if there is actually someone behind me like you say, there's no guarantee that the name I tell you now is actually that person, right? Can you even confirm the truth?" Ishizaki interjected without permission, maybe because he's also worried about that. "There's no way we can confirm that, Ryuu-en-san. It's just like Karuizawa said....." Him interjecting now of all

times will only result in giving Karuizawa a way out. I ordered Ishizaki to shut up with a look. Ishizaki, realizing he's getting in my way, shut his mouth with an apologetic look.

"What will you do if I chose to reveal your past after finding out you lied to me later?"

"That—"

"The only way to save yourself is to tell me everything." I laughed, but Karuizawa looked at me with firm eyes and refuted that. "I'm not stupid. It doesn't matter if it's a lie or the truth, you'll eventually threaten me again. I'd rather not be your tool each and every time you need something done."

"Kuku. I suppose so. There's no guarantee that I won't use you the way X used Manabe's group. But if so, what will you do?"

"I won't say there's someone behind me and I won't say there's no one either. I won't randomly give you someone's name either. In other words, I won't tell you anything." Apparently Karuizawa's concluded that silence is the right answer. Not a bad option but hardly the best one. "And if I told you I'll expose your past if you don't say anything?"

"You think there's someone behind me. But because you can't narrow down that person's identity, you chose to approach me instead. Then I doubt you'll be too keen to throw away that chance so easily."

"I see. If I revealed your past before I can draw the answer out of you, then there'd be no incentive for you to tell me anything. And my search for X may be delayed." That's what it means, Karuizawa seemed to be saying as she averted her eyes. "Personally, I don't have a problem with you not giving me X's identity. I can just take my time in that case. You failed to take into account that there's still plenty of opportunity in the future for me to narrow down their identity."

"Assuming an attack is launched against you in the future, that is. If they know you're onto them, surely they would take care to not let their identity

slip, no?" She's better than I expected. A quick-witted and sharp-tongued woman.

If X's train of thought runs similar to my own, I should assume they saved Karuizawa because they noticed her usefulness given her high social status within Class D. They're someone who wouldn't bat an eye at using others. In other words, they'd be fine even with tossing Karuizawa to the curb. Of course there's no doubt that X is acting to elevate Class D but they may prioritize the safety of their identity above that. If I just reveal the bullying problem, then there's the possibility that their identity would be concealed just like Karuizawa said. On the off chance that X manages to conceal their identity any more than this, it would mean my fun would be significantly cut short, huh?

"Not only did you think up a good self-defense measure but you also made it this far on your own, hmm?" I can't imagine Karuizawa came here without having thought anything through. There's the possibility that she may have received advice from X but...that possibility's a faint one. "Get it now? Don't you think it's best if you just let me go back?" I checked my phone's screen. But there's no contact from anyone. Did the mail I sent to X misfire? Of course, I do know that it won't be this easy to smoke them out.

I suppose I'll take things to the next level while preparing to take a few risks. "Basically, I just need to make you spit out X's name, right? In all likelihood, if you do know their identity, the best option for me would be to draw it out of you here." It's your fault, X. This is the result of weighing your options of saving Karuizawa or hiding your identity on a scale. "...if your threat's failed, how are you going to make me talk?"

"Isn't it obvious? Torture's the good old-fashioned way to make someone talk."

"Ryuu-en-san, are you serious...?"

"Ibuki, hold Karuizawa down."

“Why me? You could just do it yourself, right?” Ibuki, who isn’t very keen on what we’re going to be doing, disobeyed instructions. “Do it.”

“I won’t be complicit in this. No matter how you look at it, this gamble’s far too risky.”

“That’s lame, Ibuki. To back out after so many failures. The important thing is how you can win back our trust.” I grabbed Ibuki’s arm and firmly tugged on it. “Don’t worry, I’ll take responsibility for everything. That’s why you don’t need to hold back. Do it.”

“Tch.....” I once again issued orders to the rebellious Ibuki and had her carry them out. While clicking her tongue, Ibuki approached Karuizawa. “W- What?”

“I’ve got my own problems here. Sorry.” Ibuki swiftly maneuvered behind Karuizawa and restrained both her hands. “Ow!”

Karuizawa screamed. Despite her reluctance, Ibuki completely shut down any resistance from Karuizawa. Being restrained by someone with martial arts experience like Ibuki, there’s nothing Karuizawa could do. “Ishizaki, go fill the buckets with water. Let’s start with two buckets. There should be no one using the toilet one floor beneath us right now. There are two buckets used for cleaning in the men’s toilet.”

“Ehh? Water? What are we going to use it for?”

“Are you going to disobey me too?”

“N-No, I’ll go fetch some right away!” Ishizaki panicked and passed by Ibuki despite looking like he’s about to fall over. “Let’s chat a bit more until Ishizaki returns, shall we?”

“No! Let me go!” Karuizawa thrashed around with all her strength but she couldn’t break out of Ibuki’s hold. The reason we’re holding her isn’t to prevent her from escaping, it’s a way to amplify her fear of what’s about to happen.

As a matter of fact, Karuizawa's desperately resisting and struggling to the very end, perhaps because she's realized what's about to happen to her. "I'll seriously report you if you so much as lay one finger on me!"



“Kukuku. You’re quite the fierce one, despite coming all the way here. Do you think X will protect you this time around as well?” No matter how many times I ask her, she gives me the same answer. She stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the existence of that person. “This is just my onesided hypothesis but perhaps the X lurking in the shadows of Class D promised to protect you in case of an emergency?” Karuizawa’s eyes gave it away. Despite her trying to hide it, it’s not so easy to conceal.

“Because if that’s not the case, then it doesn’t add up. Your bullish personality would cause girls from other classes to dislike you as well so there’s the possibility of you being targeted by girls other than Manabe’s group.” Ibuki took her eyes off Karuizawa to look at me. “You must have lived each and every day terrified of those who knew the truth. But until today, you’ve managed to avoid having anyone uncover the truth and you’ve come this far without having been bullied. Why is that? It can only be because of the person behind you always covering for you and saving you.”

“And you’re saying that’s X?” Ibuki asked me.

“For now—but, that wasn’t always the case, was it? Because X should’ve only realized the truth when Manabe’s group made contact with Karuizawa. I think...you made Hirata your boyfriend in order to protect yourself, didn’t you?” Karuizawa widened her eyes. “N-No...”

“That’s exactly it, isn’t it? Don’t underestimate me too much, Karuizawa.” I looked into her eyes. And drew out the darkness lurking deep inside Karuizawa.

Surely X did the same thing as well. “Ahh.....!?” She’s finally started showing me her cute side. “...Ryuuuen, how do you know all that?” Karuizawa isn’t the only one surprised by my words. Ibuki also couldn’t resist cutting in to inquire about that mystery. “It comes with experience. I’ve seen a ton of rotten people throughout my life after all.”

“Huff, huff. S-Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Ishizaki, who panickedly ran to fetch some water, came back a few minutes later. Buckets that were 80% filled with water. Seeing that, Ibuki once again hit me with a question. “You said there are two buckets, didn’t you? How did you know that?”

“You guys don’t even know how many surveillance cameras are installed throughout this school, do you?”

“Huh? There’s no way we’d know that.”

“You won’t know if you don’t look into it. But if you’ve done your research, you’ll be able to understand anything your eyes fall on.”

Bit by bit every day, I looked into the locations of the surveillance cameras set up inside the school. As a result, I also came to know that there are two buckets kept in reserve inside the toilet. “One of the measures I took to confirm that was having Ishizaki and the others attack Sudou. Funnily though, there seems to have been a witness from Class D on the scene though.” Ishizaki’s face turned apologetic. If there were no witnesses, Class C would’ve stood to gain more from that incident. “I told you, didn’t I, Ishizaki? To never admit you’re wrong, no matter what.”

“Y-Yes...I just felt timid for a moment there back then and...” But as a result, Ishizaki and the others were tricked by the fake surveillance camera and ended up confessing. “At first glance, this school appears to operate with discipline. But that’s not quite the truth. Depending on how you handle it, use of force may be permitted too.” There are clues scattered all throughout the average day hinting at that. “You guys probably won’t get it but the smart ones are constantly engaging in trial-and-error.” The first thing I did after enrolling was to look into the ‘rules’ of this mysterious school and how to ‘beat’ them.

One more thing I did after enrolling here besides comprehending the system was to measure the usefulness of private points. “For instance, have you ever felt the setup of the exams were strange? Regardless of whether it’s the island exam or the shipboard exam or the Paper Shuffle. If you go over it with the senior student, you’d be able to uncover what it’s all about. At first glance,

you'd think that. But even if you ask them, there's not a single student capable of answering that satisfactorily. Why do you think that is?"

"...each year, the exams are different so there's the possibility that the rules are different."

"That's right. It's not like all the exams are the same every year. But strictly speaking, it's that the rules for each 'school year' are different."

"What do you mean, Ryuuen-san?" If you can beat the exam by simply checking with your seniors, then it fails to qualify as an exam at all. It would just turn into a stupid race to see who can flatter the senior students more. To prevent that from happening, you need to put solid rules in place. "What if a rule like '2nd years and above will be expelled immediately if they leak exam contents' were to be put into effect?"

Regardless of whether exam contents are the same or not, what would happen if shackles like that were to be prepared? "That would mean—they'd never talk."

"That's right. Even if their underclassmen asked them, they wouldn't be able to answer. There's no way those guys who fought for a whole year while risking expulsion would run the risk of expulsion from a careless remark they made. As a matter of fact, I tried negotiating with a few 2nd year Class D students by offering them private points but I've never once succeeded. It's proof that talking carries considerable risk in and of itself."

"But...you might be right. Komimya and Kondou also said so a while back. Even when they tried getting hints from their seniors, they never got anything out of them. On the contrary, it almost felt like they shouldn't even ask."

It's precisely because everyone has thought of it that it feels like it's forbidden territory. Strictly speaking, there's the possibility that there even more detailed rules in place but we'll eventually understand. "Just like this, I've always tiptoed the borderline of legality." The surveillance cameras, bribing the senior students, making a backroom deal with Class A. I've mapped out in detail the line between what I can do and what I cannot do.

“Today, what we’re about to do to Karuizawa is also one of those experiments.” Karuizawa’s begun trembling from the cold.

“Trauma’s better evoked through experiencing it rather than drawing it out through words.” According to the testimonies of Manabe’s group, even the fierce Karuizawa will quiet down immediately. I signaled Ishizaki with my eyes. Ishizaki should have understood what I wanted him to do with just that alone. Ibuki pushed Karuizawa forward and then distanced herself. And in accordance with my order, Ishizaki dumped water from the bucket on Karuizawa’s head. “!?” Underneath the cold winter sky, the chill of the water would reach even the core of her heart.

Karuizawa collapsed on the spot from the overwhelming shock and trembled. She hugged herself with both her arms. Her earlier fierceness has disappeared entirely after a bucket of water. “Does this make you remember? The baptism you received at your previous school, that is.”

“N-No.....!” She covered her ears. Almost like a little girl scared of a ghost, she just kept trembling.

“I won’t settle for this. I’m going to break you thoroughly.” I took out my phone and started recording, then grabbed Karuizawa’s bangs and lifted them up. I noticed a liquid leaking out of her eyes. Right now, Karuizawa’s probably internally reliving the bullying of her past. “This is footage of your bullying. If you won’t tell me anything then I’m going to spread it around the school.” That’s a lie, of course, but Karuizawa is no longer capable of forming rational thoughts. “Go on, cry. Scream. Show me how you beg for forgiveness.”

“No, no!!!” There’s nothing quite like digging up deeply carved wounds. “I can’t watch this...I shouldn’t have helped you...” Ibuki averted her eyes as though to escape. “Bullying the weak is quite fun though? Nothing like it to stir up your heart.” I recalled a bunch of people who attacked me long ago.

There was this one guy who cried like a baby when their arrogance came back to bite them. But in Karuizawa’s case, things are a bit different.

“Despite the thorough bullying you received, you boldly stood out in Class

D. Hats off to you for that.” In spite of her weakness, she stood out on her own to establish a new persona for herself. She maintained her position this far by using Hirata and through receiving X’s protection. “It’s easier said than done, you know.” If a victim of bullying is broken into servility once, the roots of that run deep enough that it can be repeated.

It can’t be helped because that’s the sort of lesson the bullying drills into you. “In a way, you may just be a woman stouthearted enough to not lose to me.” I crouched down and continued as though sneering at the trembling Karuizawa. “But you see, you can’t change human nature that easily. It doesn’t change. You’re the sort of person conditioned to receive bullying, not dish out bullying. Remember that well.” I picked up the other bucket near Ishizaki’s feet and this time, I dumped it on Karuizawa.

“!?” Silently screaming, Karuizawa curled up to the best of her ability. “Ishizaki. Go fetch me some more.”

“Y-Yes.” He picked up the two buckets scattered on the floor and once again, Ishizaki descended from the rooftop. “Who’s the one protecting you by shutting down Manabe’s group?”

“There’s no such person...! No such person, no such person, no such person!” Shaking her head, she denied it over and over as though running away. “Kuku. So you’re still hiding it. You really are a stouthearted one. No, perhaps you’re just used to the bullying? For you, this might not even register as bullying.” I grabbed Karuizawa’s arm and forcibly pulled her up. “...I can’t watch this.”

“This is where the fun starts, you know?”

“This is just utterly disgusting.” Ibuki did not leave but rather, she only leaned on the door to the rooftop while refusing to participate in the bullying. “I’ll leave after I confirm X’s identity.”

“That’s just fine.” I’m not doing this to entertain the lot of you.

I’m breaking Karuizawa for my own pleasure.

PART 3

It chilled me down to my core. The chill of the water dripping from my hair. They've dumped water on me four times now. Not only my uniform but even my underwear are soaking wet now. But it's not the fact that my body's trembling from the cold that terrifies me. It's the cold that grips my heart. A darkness deep and dark enough to make you resent the world reared its head.



Why am I being bullied? Those feelings gradually changed. Why am I even alive? What did I do wrong? I began to blame myself. My heart that's frozen over started eating away at my body. The scars that run deep began to ache again. "Hey, save yourself already, Karuizawa. There's no need to suffer any more than this."

In front of me, Ryuuken laughed while pressuring me for a confession. But that's a dead end road. I'm no longer able to answer anything. If I tell him about Kiyotaka, I may be saved temporarily. But that doesn't mean I've escaped for good. There's no guarantee that Ryuuken won't simply use the same threat on me again. He may show up again and order me to sell out Class D. It's the worst case scenario you often see in dramas. There's only misery at the end of the road for people who continue to betray others. If so, I'll put my faith in Kiyotaka's words, his promise that he'd protect me.

It...is the last line of defense protecting me from being swallowed up by the darkness. "I know what you're thinking. If you reveal X's identity here, you'll lose even the possibility that they'd keep protecting you. A total loss of hope." I could hear the sound of my teeth chattering from the cold and the fear. I desperately pawed at the ground to stop it but my heart's long since stopped listening. A horrific memory came to mind. The past and the present overlapped. "Do you want to die embracing hope? To go back to how things were, are you really fine with that?" His words relentlessly assaulted me. "X isn't the one who's going to save you. I can save you if you spit the name out here."

I'm scared.

"But if you're going to oppose me, I have no other choice but to attack your weakness."

Save me.

"I'm going to make a list of all the things about you and spread it around the school."

I'm scared.

"When that happens, will you still be able to keep your cool and maintain your current position in class?"

Save me.

"No, there's no way that'd happen. You'll just go back to those days. Back to the pathetic you who suffered bullying. Back to the original you."

The bullying I received in the past continuously replayed itself in my head without letting up.

"No, no, no, no, no, no....." I don't want to go back to that dark, miserable world where I wished for death. "Then end it already. End it and protect yourself."

"Please forgive me, pleaseforgiveme.....!" My pride's already been torn to shreds. No, that's not true. I had only stuck it back together with cellophane tape. My pride had already been torn apart in the first place.

The Karuizawa Kei who had been holding on, died. That fun school life crumbled away. "I'm not as merciful as Manabe and her group were. We know your secret. Even if you get me expelled, it's not just one or two people who know the truth. The rumors will spread immediately. When that happens, even your subservient classmates may rise up to bully you."

"No, no, no....."

"Then take a trip down memory lane. Remember how painful it's going to be to go back to those days."

—there's no way I wouldn't end up remembering

For a moment, a pure white world spread through my mind.

And then the darkness came.

Back during middle school, I ended up creating my own hell from something so trivial. I was always the headstrong, competitive type so I ended up making enemies out of similar girls. Every day after that was the furthest you could get from a happy school life. They scribbled on my textbooks and stole my notes. That's still cute, though. As though it were the obvious thing to do, they dumped water on me while I used the toilet more than a few times. They punched me and kicked me and filmed it so they can spread it around the class for laughs.

They put thumbtacks in my shoes and animal corpses on my desk. I remember it all. They even once pulled my skirt down in front of the class. After swimming class, they'd hide my underwear and sometimes even my uniform. They also made me confess to boys I don't even like. There were times when they'd make me pick up garbage on the ground with my mouth and eat it. At times, I was made to lick shoes. I endured humiliation after humiliation.

Yes, that's right.

I ended up recalling it.

At a time like this, the last measure humans take in self-defense is to accept it all.

Accept the reality that I am being bullied by Ryuuken and his group.

If I do that, it'll be easier.

Ahh, I wonder if I'm going back to those days. I know that if that happens, my heart surely won't be able to take it. The ones who were kind to me, the ones who befriended me, they'd end up changing. I won't be able to endure those cruel days again. The only thing the school that abandoned me did for me was to inform me about this school. They offered me salvation in the form of having all the students who know about me disappear. If they're gone, then I'll—

I looked up at the sky.

The tears I'd been holding back overflowed and fell.

Why do I have to go through this?

.....

—I don't want to.

Those feelings welled up inside me. I just accepted it, that I don't want to go back to those days. According to Ryuuen, he just wants to find the person he's been looking for. In other words, if I give him Kiyotaka's name, I'll be free. But there's no guarantee that he still won't reveal my past anyways. They may all know already the next day. If that happens, the result's still the same.

I'd not only lose Kiyotaka's trust but also all my friends.

But—

Salvation is still within reach.

If I give him the name, putting an end to this suffering may be possible.

It can't be helped, can it?

I will save you.

Kiyotaka, who promised me that, didn't come racing to save me. Even if I continue to believe in him and wait for him, this situation won't change one bit. Did he not notice the mail I sent him? But I also gave him a signal through making eye contact. And our eyes certainly met and he acknowledged me.

Telling me that he'd protect me so I can relax. Or so I thought. Am I just deluding myself? I don't know anymore. There's no way I can confirm that now. The relationship Kiyotaka and I share is just too shallow. He cut me off without even a guarantee that Manabe and her group won't try anything. Using a selfish reason like 'it's no longer necessary for him to take the stage'.

I was only an afterthought. Was I betrayed? Did he abandon me? “Albert, did anyone show up?...I see, I’ll call again.”

In front of me, Ryuuuen silently sighed. “You probably expected something but it doesn’t look like anyone’s coming for you.” Ahh, so I was abandoned after all. Well, what else am I supposed to do if not believe? Kiyotaka told me he’d save me. He did protect me from Manabe’s group. “You seem like you trust X quite a fair bit, Karuizawa.” Ryuuuen sighed as though in exasperation. “You were deceived.”

“That’s not.....”

“It’s the truth. I’ll tell you the truth about the shipboard exam that X never told you.”

“Truth.....?” Somewhere along the way, Ryuuuen had stopped smiling. “Manabe wanted to bully you as payback for Morofuji but she couldn’t find an opening to do so. Even if she invites you over to an isolated spot, it’s not like you’d just obey her. By the way, for some reason you went below deck alone. Why is that?”

“That’s.....” That’s because Yousuke-kun asked me to go there. Back then, I was emotionally unstable and had no choice but to rely on Yousuke-kun, the person I was parasitizing. That’s why I went there...and Manabe’s group also came there by coincidence..... “Do you really think it was just a coincidence?” Once again, Ryuuuen saw through me. “There’s no way they could follow you around the clock on such a large ship. In that case, Manabe’s group showing up there isn’t a coincidence but an inevitability.”

Does that mean Yousuke-kun lied to me? No...that’s not it. I understood right away that isn’t the case. But for a moment there, I tried to blame Yousuke-kun. “You already get it, don’t you? X made contact with Manabe and helped her lure you there by acting like someone who also hates Karuizawa and convincing her to team up. All I can say is that you’re a fool for biting the bait. That’s the truth.” I do remember how strange that incident was. Yousuke-kun, who asked me to go there, never showed up.

I understand now because I know Kiyotaka. He gave instructions to Yousuke-kun to isolate me..... “X deliberately set up your bullying to acquire evidence of that. Don’t you think that’s just inhuman?” No, I don’t want to believe that. But what he’s saying...isn’t something so simple. So Kiyotaka showing up there and saving me wasn’t a coincidence? “You weren’t rescued. You were ensnared. How stupid, don’t you think?”

I was deceived.....? “Look around you. Is X here right now? Are they saving you right now?” Kiyotaka...has been deceiving me from the start? “It’s safe to assume that they cut their ties with you when their own identity was about to be exposed.” No, that can’t be.....

That just can’t be.....

I—wasn’t saved. Even though I’m going through this much suffering...I ended up falling for Kiyotaka’s trap and thought I might actually be saved. I was made to help him with a lot of stuff. But at a crucial time like this, he abandoned me. Because that would mean...

“You’ve realized it too, haven’t you? It’s all just you being maliciously ‘bullied’ again.” Darkness shrouded me. In the end, I wasn’t able to escape the Möbius loop of bullying. “Well, there’s still one way for you to save yourself.” The name. To tell Ryuuen about Kiyotaka. “That’s right.”

If I tell him the name, will this end...? “Yes. It will end.” As though reading my mind, Ryuuen laughed again. “If you tell me the name, I promise to never get you involved again.” Ahh, so I will be saved. I just have to say the words Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. I don’t know whether I can trust him or not. But if he hears the words coming from the bottom of my heart, this man in front of me will surely understand.

That alone, I’m confident about. Against my will, my lips started moving while still trembling. The despair and rage at being betrayed and my heart wishing to be saved. But my voice is still not coming out. I can’t bring my voice out, not when it’s this cold. “Take it easy. Give me the name.”

“—ta...”

It's coming out. I trembled and trembled and cowered in fear. Then a word came out. "Ta?" Ryuuuen is listening to me. "Ta.....ka....."

I squeezed it out ever so slowly. I'll be free after this. "One more time. Tell me, slowly, one more time." Ryuuuen's face drew close to me. "No matter....." Words are coming out. No, that's not it. From the very beginning, I had no intention of saying it from the very beginning.....

Because I'm—

"No matter how many times you ask me...I will 'NEVER', 'EVER'tell you."

"....."

And with that, Ryuuuen's smile froze. I felt like a ray of light had pierced through the cloudy skies. A world that, in reality, hasn't changed one bit. And the conclusion I reached.

"Even if, starting tomorrow, I lose my place here at this school...even if I continue to suffer..." Something I need to put my faith in no matter what. That's neither Ryuuuen's words nor Kiyotaka's existence. "I will never, ever give you the name....."

A warm light emanating from within my chest.

"You sure about that, Karuizawa?"

Yes.

I'm fine with this.

I may come to regret it.

But I'm fine with this.....!

"Even though you know X was just using you, why do you still cover for them?"

“I don’t know……” That’s my line. But—there is one thing I do know. “Even I want to act cool until the very end……!” My field of vision which had clouded up, cleared up for a moment.

“I see. That’s a shame, Karuizawa. After today, you won’t have a place in this school anymore. I personally don’t want to do anything extreme either but I’ve got no choice. But, you are worthy of respect. Despite the trauma of your past, despite being betrayed by the only one you could rely on, you still didn’t sell them out. I’ll give you that.”

This is fine. I’m fine with this. I repeatedly told myself that. I will break here though. But for some reason, I felt a little proud of myself. That despite being betrayed, I didn’t betray in turn and that it meant he would be safe. If I could help him gain the peace he desires, then that’s not so bad.

That’s that then. Somehow, aren’t I cool? There never was anything interesting going on with my life but by cooperating with Kiyotaka, things got exciting and that’s not so bad. I had fun. How should I put it, almost like the heroine supporting her hero from the shadows?

Although I didn’t understand a lot of what he did, it was still somehow strangely fun. Besides, no matter how it happened, it’s still a fact that I was saved. That’s why I regret nothing. I have no regrets. But, you know? The truth is, deep down inside, I still held out hope that he might come and save me. Those fleeting feelings—also exist, I guess.

Ahh, I’m such a fool. I was just dancing in the palm of his hand. I guess I brought this on myself. I had Yousuke-kun protect me and then I had Kiyotaka protect me. I really am a woman incapable of doing anything on her own.

Underneath the cold winter sky.

I somehow ended up feeling comfortable.

Goodbye to the false ‘me’.

Welcome back, the empty ‘me’ from the past.

CHAPTER 5: CROSSING THOUGHTS

INTRODUCTION

Roughly two hours before Karuizawa fell before Ryuu-en. Chabashira-sensei gave Class D an explanation regarding the essentials of the winter vacation. “Over the winter vacation, a portion of the school is scheduled for renovation so it will be off limits. Make sure to keep that in mind. And also, all club activities will be suspended after the closing ceremony today. Be sure to head back as soon as you’re able to.” Our teacher explained only the bare minimum to us. But for some reason, she silently looked around the class. And no matter how long we waited, she did not signal the end of class. Feeling numb at this point, Ike raised his hand.

“What’s the matter, sensei?”

“I’m sure there are students already aware of it but you can assume that your promotion to Class C is all but guaranteed. Well done.”

“W-Woah, you actually gave us honest praise. Isn’t this a rarity?” It’s not just Ike, I’m sure the rest of the class feels the same way. “Don’t get complacent. If you cause trouble during the winter vacation, it may have an effect on your class points. Make sure you act properly as a student even over the long holidays.”

After saying that, Chabashira-sensei concluded our second semester. “This really is an unusual sight, Chabashira-sensei reprimanding us gently, I mean.”

“Maybe so.” There’s no doubt that she added the warning to not cause trouble as a follow up. While putting my textbook back into my bag, I looked in Karuizawa’s direction. And when I did, she turned to look at me while still in the middle of a conversation with the other girls. This morning, I had received a single mail from Karuizawa at the address I gave her for emergency use.

That something came up regarding the incident with Manabe’s group and that she had been called out to the rooftop at 2 o’clock today. I wasn’t surprised and I didn’t reply either. After all, I had already been informed of it beforehand by Ryuuuen. He couldn’t care less whether Karuizawa would inform someone else of it or not. It was an act meant to lure me out in the first place. But perhaps Karuizawa felt from our eye contact that I had already seen her mail, because she left the classroom with her friends while looking satisfied. Maybe she intends to leave once and then come back later.

One hour after the class ended most of the students had already left the school grounds. “We’re talking about going to Keyaki Mall after this, what’ll you do?” Yukimura, ready to leave, asked me that while approaching me. “Sure. I don’t have anything particular planned for today anyways. After I finish packing I’ll come.”

“Then I’ll be waiting in the hallway.”

Just in case, I should bring some of the textbooks with me since there’s still the possibility I might be needing them later. “Umm...could it be that you’re not free right now?” The one who called out with that apologetic voice was none other than Satou. “Yeah, I’m planning on hanging out with Yukimura and the others...”

“I...I see. That’s a shame.” Satou’s shoulders droop in disappointment. I wonder if she was planning on asking me out again like last time? If so. “...today might be problematic, but would the winter holidays be ok with you?”

“Eeeh?”

“I mean, it seemed bad for me to refuse you twice in a row so if you’re okay with it then...”

“R-really?”

“Y-Yeah.” I felt a bit overwhelmed by Satou happily pressing her body against me. “I-It’s a promise then!” She said with a blush while jumping around joyfully. I wonder why exactly she’s this interested in me...

Of course I have nothing against this but since there were still people left in the classroom I felt slightly embarrassed. “In any case, from tomorrow onwards is fine I’ll send you the details via mail.”

“Understood! See you later Ayanokouji-kun!” Satou then joined Shinohara’s group with a pleased look on her face. Shinohara’s group looked at me suspiciously before leaving the classroom.

Now then, I suppose I’ll meet up with Keisei and the others. It seems they’ve all already assembled out in the corridor, chatting while waiting for my arrival. I immediately grasped the situation from Haruka’s creepy smile and Airi’s crestfallen expression. As we started walking, Haruka seemed to want to cut in and so I took the initiative. “There’s no deep meaning behind that.”

“I haven’t even asked you anything yet, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter, you were about to ask me, weren’t you?”

“I mean, right? Just look at how Satou-san was acting, not too hard to imagine what’s up, no?”

“How adulterous, Kiyotaka. Horikita and now Satou, you’ve got no integrity.” For some reason, even Keisei is angry. Still, I suppose I’ll make an apology. “I was just invited to hang out.”

“It must be quite something for a girl to ask a boy out though?”

“Surely you don’t think S-S-S-Satou-san is interested in Kiyotaka-kun!?”

There had been a dispute of that nature a while back but Airi said so frantically. "...there's really nothing I can say to that even if you ask me."

"A last minute rush for a lovey dovey Christmas perhaps? Now that's an amazing development there." Haruka is Haruka after all, onesidedly imagining her own scenario. "More importantly, where do we go? I think today's going to be crowded." Since a long holiday begins tomorrow, there's bound to be a lot of students hanging out late into the night today.

Keisei concluded that it'd be in our best interests to decide on a course of action. "Well, can't we just, like, loiter around? There's no rush." As we had that conversation, Akito walked silently without once letting the tough look on his face falter. Akito's focus isn't on us but rather, behind us. While on the move, he checked to see whether or not there's someone behind us. "No sign of anyone tailing us..."

Akito quietly whispered that in relief. Looks like Ryuuen wants to settle things today. He must've concluded that a tail is no longer necessary. "But you know, even though Keyaki Mall has everything, I'd like to go outside after all." Haruka said so and looked towards the main gate, far from here. "I'd like to go to Shibuya or Harajuku, or go see the lights at Omotesando."

"Keyaki Mall aside, the school roads won't be a substitute for that I suppose." Since there are no special preparations for change of any sort, the outside is as it has always been.

"I'm rather satisfied with the way things are now though. The essentials are all here too. Do you feel the same way as everyone else, Kiyotaka-kun? About wanting to go outside." Unlike Haruka, Airi doesn't seem like the outgoing type. Well, I suppose I don't have to force myself to go along with the flow. "I'm satisfied with this too like you, Airi. But I guess I can also understand the feeling of wanting to go outside."

"I don't know if they're doing it to uphold the rules but I think prohibiting any contact with even your family is going too far. Wouldn't a family normally be worried about their child?"

It certainly isn't normal to not be able to see your children for three years. Maybe that resonated with Akito, because his expression turned grim. "See, my mom's a worrywart so maybe she's feeling some anxiety over that."

"Looks like the school also takes care of that. Apparently they regularly report your progress from your report card or something."

"That...might actually make me worry even more. I guess I'll study harder..."

"Parents would worry more about girls than they would the boys, right?"

"Ahh—I'm fine though. Because that's not the case for me."

Haruka smoothly deflected it. Because it looked like there's something she didn't want to talk about, we also didn't press the matter.

PART 1

"So, karaoke next? Might be a bit crowded though."

"No way, we're not going to play that punishment game again are we...?"

"Of course we're going to play. For the sake of Yukimura~'s revenge." I stopped walking while everyone was in the middle of discussion their next course of action. "What's wrong, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"Sorry but I'm going to head back."

"It's not even 2 o'clock yet though?" Akito said while checking the time on his phone. "Truth is, I stayed up all night yesterday so I'm feeling quite sleepy now. Please invite me again over the holidays." Airi looked disappointed at that but there won't be any inconvenience for her now even if I'm gone. Haruka will take care of it properly for me too so I suppose I can

rest assured. I bid farewell to the group and turned my back on them. I then took out my phone and called my homeroom teacher, Chabashira-sensei.

“It’s me.”

“Hello. I have something to discuss with you. Are you free now?”

“What do you want? Haven’t you stopped associating with me?”

“Yes that would be right. But I just remembered there are still things left to settle. If possible, I’d like to meet you face-to-face rather than over the phone. Can we meet at school?”

“...I’ll be waiting in the classroom.”

“Understood. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

After that conversation, I immediately headed back to the Class D classroom. There aren’t any students left in there and near my seat, Chabashira-sensei alone looked out through the window. “Assuming this year is also your average year then it’ll snow a fair bit this year too.”

“Do you like snow?”

“I used to. But when I became an adult, I grew to hate it.” Chabashira-sensei shut the curtains and slowly turned around.

“So you have something to discuss with me. What is it?”

“I thought I haven’t heard your answer yet. Why do you want to rise to Class A so badly to the point you’d even use me?” Unless there’s a very good reason behind it, a teacher won’t use a lie to manipulate a student. “This school makes not only students, but also teachers compete with one another. If one considers their own position, it’s obvious they’d want to aim for the upper classes even if it’s just a cut above.”

“I don’t think that’s the real reason. If you were aiming for Class A from the start, you wouldn’t have made remarks that could have put Class D’s students

at a disadvantage.” During the midterm test of our first semester, Chabashira-sensei intentionally withheld information to put Class D at a disadvantage.
“...that’s already something different from the school’s rules. It’s a personal matter. I’ve got nothing to say to you.”

“You were unsure at that point despite having quietly made preparations to rise to Class A, weren’t you? Whether or not this class really has what it takes to become Class A or whether you should even be aiming for it.”

I don’t particularly care what feelings this teacher is keeping bottled up. The important thing is whether she’s worth making use of or not. “Looks like this has been a waste of time. I’m heading back to work.” I spoke again towards the teacher who had turned her back as though fleeing. “If you won’t answer, then please give up on using me.”

“So that’s how it is. No need to emphasize that. You’ve already stopped associating with me, no?”

“This is the important part. If you let this day go to waste, Class D won’t ever rise to Class A. On the contrary, we may not even be able to rise to Class C”.
“What are you talking about?” I explicitly looked at the classroom’s clock.
“It’s now 2 o’clock. Right now, Ryuuen’s probably putting on an interesting show on the rooftop after calling Karuizawa out there.”

“...Ryuuen is? To Karuizawa?”

“So even you aren’t aware of it, sensei. The fact that Karuizawa used to be the victim of severe bullying in the past, I mean.”

“First time I’ve heard that...” It’s hard to imagine from the way Karuizawa normally is that she’d be the victim of bullying. “And in all likelihood, news of this will spread throughout school tomorrow. Once that happens, Karuizawa may choose to withdraw into herself and drop out. If we can prove Class C is involved in it, we may be able to retaliate but the damage we’d have dealt each other would be immeasurable.” It still isn’t clear the sort of penalty that an expulsion entails but it must be quite the penalty. That much is clear from seeing Chabashira-sensei’s face.

But then she immediately regained her composure and looked at me with her usual, fierce gaze. “I see. I’ve got the gist of your scheme. From what I understand, it would be difficult for you to resolve this matter on your own. But it’d be a different story for a school teacher like myself. Not only won’t the problem be resolved, but your identity would even be kept secret. It couldn’t be better, could it?”

“Will you lend me a hand if I asked for your cooperation?”

“Don’t get too cocky, Ayanokouji. I have no intention of cooperating with you.”

“Of course you don’t.”

“This school doesn’t look favorably upon teachers intervening in students’ problems.” That is true. A teacher going up to the rooftop alone to not only stop Ryuuen’s bullying but also seal their lips regarding Karuizawa’s past. That sort of favorable outcome is impossible. It’s also natural that Chabashira-sensei would decline. “But can you afford to decline that easily? There’s no guarantee that I won’t sabotage Class D in the future, is there? I can deftly make sure we won’t be able to rise to the upper classes.”

“...to think a student would threaten a teacher. It should be the other way around.”

“If you return the favor and restore our relationship to an equal student-teacher one then at the very least I can say I won’t commit sabotage. I think that alone carries a huge merit, no?”

“If, by turning you down here, it means rising to Class A becomes impossible then it’s all the same.” Chabashira-sensei stubbornly refused to lend a hand.
“Please rest assured, I had no intention of asking you for help from the start.”

“What?” The idea of relying on this teacher never once factored into my calculations.

“I was just teasing you for a bit there. Why don’t you observe from afar then? The conclusion of this incident, that is.”

After saying that, I invited Chabashira-sensei to play the role of observer for this story.

PART 2

If all goes according to schedule, it should have been half an hour since Karuizawa went up to the rooftop. Just when I thought Ishizaki had panickedly come running down, turns out it was so that he could fill up buckets with a large amount of water after which he went back up. Judging from the droplets of water on the floor, he’s already done it several times over. The most probable scenario is that Ryuuен is forcing Karuizawa to relive the bullying of her past to extract a confession from her. But then it’d mean Karuizawa didn’t spit it out right away because neither the Class C folks or Karuizawa herself came back down from the rooftop.

There’s the possibility that there’s been a slight divergence from the scenario I envisioned. But that’s a positive divergence from my initial assumptions. “What are you doing, Ayanokouji? How long are you going to wait here?” After leaving the classroom with Chabashira-sensei, I observed the situation while keeping my distance from the stairs that Yamada Albert is keeping an eye on. Just a little bit more. Since I’ve come this far, there’s no need for me to rush into action.

The more I delay, the more things will go the way I had planned. Of course being late comes with its own risks but it’s a necessary risk I’m taking after considering the merits of doing so. “Shall we have a chat?”

“Chat in a situation like this?” I ignored Chabashira-sensei’s doubts and started the conversation. “It’s something that happened not too long after

enrollment but I remember Sudou wanting to purchase a point during the exam.”

“...yeah I recall that. You and Horikita paid 100,000 points in total.”

I think it’s been half a year or more since then but time sure flies. “There’s nothing you can’t buy with private points. That’s what you said, no?”

“It’s the truth. Didn’t Sudou’s expulsion get nullified?”

“Yes, if it’s just the purchase of points then it’s still grounded in logic but if that’s always permitted then there would be no expulsions in the first place, would there? Whenever someone gets a failing grade, someone else just needs to cover up for them the same way. By doing so, they’d be able to avoid expulsion at least.”

“But it’s not easy getting your hands on private points. This Class D miraculously maintained an abundance of points but an average Class D would only have half that. Besides, it’s not like your classmates would all be friendly towards you. It’s not strange for a student to prioritize their private points even if it means losing class points.”

“That is true. But the system itself is a defective one, is it not? As long as salvation via points is possible, the danger of expulsion in a test falls drastically.”

“That might be the case.” She did not deny it but neither did Chabashira-sensei look me in the eye. “The problem is when I asked you to sell me points, you added a price tag to it, Chabashira-sensei.”

“Are you trying to say it’s too expensive after all this time?”

“That’s not it. What I’m trying to ask is whether or not 100,000 points for a mark is something you made up or whether there’s a basis for it. It seemed like you were improvising on the spot but it’s hard to imagine you’d be able to arbitrarily decide the price of a mark on your own.”

“What are you trying to say, Ayanokouji?”

“This school has already established the fine details regarding points thoroughly, has it not? There would naturally be a manual to consult when purchase of points is requested. If that’s the case, then that’s convincing.”

“In other words, you’re saying that the price I gave for a mark during Sudou’s case was something prepared in advance by the school?”

“Exactly. If you could answer me please then.” There was a delay. Chabashira-sensei, who had been firing back answers straight away so far, choked on her words. “It’s not like I’ll just answer anything you ask me.”

“Shall I assume that means you are unable to answer?”

“Do what you will.”

“Then I’ll just draw up a hypothesis on my own. The school has a manual for any and all occasions and in the case of point purchase, 100,000 points for a mark is something they had already determined in advance. Assuming all of this to be true, it gives rise to another question. It’s whether or not we can purchase a mark for 100,000 points every time there’s a test.”

“You’re free to think whatever you want but what meaning is there behind this talk. Right now, Karuizawa’s—” I deflected those words and continued.

“Is it only 100,000 points per mark for a limited period of time after enrolling? Or perhaps it rises every time you make a purchase? Or maybe we can’t even make that sort of purchase again? Question after question keeps popping up. Please tell me which one of them’s the truth.”

“Cut it out already. Do you think I can really answer a question like that? Even if I were to answer, there’s no way you can confirm the veracity of that answer.”

“There is. I just have to ask you directly, sensei.” I forcibly made eye contact with her as she tried to avert her eyes. “Right now, how much would one

mark cost for the next midterm test?”

“.....” Chabashira-sensei stopped speaking entirely.

“As a teacher, you are obligated to answer, aren’t you? If you won’t answer then I’ll go ask another teacher the same question. And if they answer then I can just report to the school that the homeroom teacher of Class D is discriminating against us. Please keep in mind I have that option available.” Of course it’s plenty possible that the other teachers won’t be able to answer either. In that case, several possibilities come to mind. It might be that only that one mark could be purchased or maybe they aren’t allowed to answer unless someone’s actually received a failing grade, etc. But being unable to answer is yet another answer in itself. It would mean that there’s a manual prepared in advance for when a student’s grades are insufficient.

“Are you planning on delving into the rules?”

“At the very least, there are students doing just that. Ichinose, who’s rumored to be saving up points and then there’s Ryuuken who’s sticking with private points. It’s obvious when you consider them.” They’re all trying to figure out a strategy that could benefit their class through trial-and-error they conduct repeatedly daily.

“Very well. I’ll answer your question. It is true that the clue to beating the school system lies in figuring out the rules regarding private points. Naturally, students from past years have tried that approach from a variety of different angles much like you’re doing now. Even the defective Class D isn’t an exception to that. Some were quicker than others though. And the school too, has established the fine details of the rules in advance in order to answer the questions the students have. Purchase of points, erasing violence from your record and preventing expulsion. Points necessary for all that are fixed. But a teacher is limited in the amount of things they can say. As for why, it’s because most of it is prohibited. No, not even that, there are probably many things even teachers aren’t aware of.”

“So I was right in assuming you ‘cannot answer’ my question?”

“That’s right.” This solves one mystery. It’s that there are many things they are unable to answer us on regarding the special usage of private points unless the conditions for said usage have been met. The price for one mark at the next midterm test has already been decided and by telling us that, it would be possible to come up with a countermeasure. But if it remains unknown to us, we wouldn’t be able to do anything reckless. Because if they tell us one mark costs 100,000 points then that’d be the end of that.

“...does this have something to do with the matter at hand?”

“No. I was just having a chat. Nothing more, nothing less. Of course, it also has nothing to do with the matter at hand.” Chabashira-sensei is unable to grasp my true intentions. “Now then...I suppose it’s time. Hide-and-seek’s over.” I confirmed that it’s past 2:40 on my phone. I mailed a certain person. I instructed them to head over to this place right away.

“I don’t know the details but Karuizawa’s suffering at the hands of Class C. I know that much at least. If you have no intention of stepping up then you should call someone else for help.”

“I’ll head over to the rooftop.” Chabashira-sensei couldn’t conceal her surprise at those words. “...are you insane? If you do that, the whole school will know about it.”

“Even if Ryuuen realizes I’m the one behind all the strategies up until now, it still won’t benefit him in any way. On the contrary, he might read too much into it the next time around and self-destruct, all the while thinking I’m involved.”

“If you do that, you’ll be famous overnight. You’ll lose your quiet life at school.” There should be a certain thought smoldering within Chabashira-sensei now. That as long as my identity is kept hidden, she still has a way to make me cooperate with Class D. But if I make contact with Class C in any way, Ryuuen will know with certainty that I’m X. No, even if he cannot ascertain it, it’s still over the moment I become his number one suspect. Even though I’ve kept a low profile so far, my existence will end up becoming common knowledge.

Chabashira-sensei averted her eyes wordlessly. “This may just be my misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding?”

“Chairman Sakayanagi told me about you just before enrollment commenced. That you’re an extremely special student. And that you’re talented. And that you’re a student we must protect. And also that you were raised in a loveless environment. Taking everything into account, a conclusion was reached over the course of my discussion with the Chairman. To make you attached to this school and to make you wish to remain here. And then I told you about your father and how he wishes for your expulsion. Of course, that was a lie but it looks like it’s become reality at long last.”

“I see. You aren’t mistaken in that it’s easier to make people attached to something by giving them a goal to strive for. But unfortunately, I’m not the type of person to worry. No matter what a third party desires, I will choose to continue on at this school. At the very least, I have no intention of going back under that man’s thumb right now.”

“So simply trying to make use of you was my mistake, huh? For Class D to aim for Class A. Chasing a pipe dream like that was a mistake, huh?” Chabashira-sensei spat that out as though in resignation. But isn’t it just comedic how she’s given up on it so quickly?

“It’s not a pipe dream. As a matter of fact, Class D is about to rise to Class C right now. In the near future, Horikita will unite this class. She definitely will.”

“Yeah, you’re right. They’ll achieve things that have never been achieved before. I suppose that alone counts as a victory. But are you serious? About Horikita uniting the class.”

“That’s a line I don’t want to hear from my homeroom teacher. At the very least, I believe Horikita is more than capable of leading Class D”. Although as far as Chabashira-sensei is concerned, Horikita was only the means

through which she could make use of me. “Ultimately, Horikita is beginning to mature. The majority of my classmates are the same as well. All that’s left is for you to guide them as a teacher and they’ll secure their position as Class C...or maybe even draw closer to Class A”.

Of course, a different sort of ability is required in order to actually get there though. “Are you really stepping down?”

“That’s what I currently intend on doing.” Normally speaking, a teacher isn’t allowed to twist a student’s feelings by using their own. Chabashira-sensei is surely aware of that too. It’s not for mere insurance that I’ve brought Chabashira-sensei here. It’s so that I can definitively prove to her that I’m stepping down from the class conflict.

“Let’s get back to the topic at hand. You’re free to boldly make your entrance. But will the problem really be resolved with just that?”

“I can’t guarantee that. I’m just going to deal with it based on Ryuuen’s personality and behavioral patterns. Alright then, thank you very much for accompanying me.” As the person I’d been waiting for showed up, I thanked Chabashira-sensei. Now there’s no problem even if she decides to leave.
“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ayanokouji.”

Chabashira-sensei expressed surprise at seeing Horikita Manabu, the former student council president who just spoke to me. “What’s the meaning of this...?”

“He’s to be a witness when I settle things with Ryuuen. After all, he’s the type to use any means necessary. And I’d like to avoid push coming to shove.” I understand having a teacher play the role of witness is ideal but that option is off the table. If so, the wise thing to do would be to go with the next best option. “Are you planning to have Horikita resolve things by doing what I said earlier?”

“Does the former student council president look like the sort of person who’d do that?” Chabashira-sensei looked over at the older Horikita once and immediately concluded that it’s out of the question. Just like her, the older

Horikita won't get unnecessarily involved either. "There will be witnesses to what happens on the rooftop. As long as that fact stands, all is well." It's for that reason that I made a deal with the older Horikita. Well, I suppose that's currently irrelevant.

"A few minutes after I've gone up to the rooftop, I'd like you to stop halfway on the stairs to the rooftop. There's no need to talk to the students coming back down from the rooftop nor is it necessary to punish them. Just make sure the students coming back down are made aware of your presence." The former student council president has witnessed the students leaving the rooftop. That alone would be extremely effective against Ryuuken and his group. "Very well. But don't forget that promise, Ayanokouji."

"Of course not. Because if I renege on it, you may choose to forget about this incident entirely."

"As long as you understand. Make it quick."

The older Horikita sent me on my way and I headed over to the corridor that leads to the rooftop. "Wait, Ayanokouji. What would you have done on the off chance that you failed to acquire Horikita's cooperation?"

"I wonder what I would've done then." While saying that, I thought it over. I probably would've used the one who knew about me, Sakayanagi, instead. And if that doesn't work then—no, there's no point in considering plans that are no longer necessary. "Either 10 minutes or 20 minutes. I plan to be back by then."

PART 3

I climbed the stairs. Step. By. Step. As I slowly made my way up, a black shadow appeared before me. The gate watcher holding the road to the rooftop. He's silently watching me with a daunting pose. It's Yamada Albert

from Class C. He hasn't made a single move yet. The perfect watchdog. I don't know the details but he's probably one of Ryuuen's underlings too. He looks down at me as though appraising me.

"May I pass?" I don't even know if he understands Japanese but I'll try talking to him. But Albert remained perfectly still and continued to observe me. Is his silence meant to imply refusal? Or a lack of comprehension? It's frustrating how it's hard to tell. He took out his phone using his large hands and deftly tried making a call.

"[Don't panic. I'm the one you are seeking for.] (No need for panic. I'm the one you've all been looking for)". As I said that in English, Albert stopped moving. But a reply was not forthcoming. "[Today I'll solve the trouble by myself, and no one interferes.] (I'll resolve this problem on my own today. There will be no outside interference)". As I explained myself again in English, Albert gave it some thought before closing his phone. And then he silently made way. Wordlessly signaling me to pass. Apparently he's acknowledged me. But him staying behind on the stairs is going to interfere with my plan.

"I'm going to crush Ryuuen now. He doesn't stand a chance without your help." I provoked him in Japanese. Albert looked down the stairs once and after confirming that there's no one else, he opened the door to the rooftop himself. And after stepping out onto the rooftop, Albert stood beside the door and watched me from behind. The overcast sky above seems as though it'd rain down on us any moment now. I looked at Karuizawa, cowering near the fencing, far from the door. And then Ishizaki and Ibuki, having noticed the door opening and closing, looked over at me with Ryuuen following suit. I looked around, left and right, to check for the presence of surveillance cameras.

The camera's lens has been painted black and it's no longer capable of carrying out its function. I see. So he simply blinded it with a spray. After I grasped the situation, I immediately turned back to face Ryuuen's group. "Ayano...kouji...?" Ibuki was the first one to say something. Hearing my name spoken, Karuizawa also noticed my presence.

She didn't say anything right away, but I was able to tell from her eyes that she's shocked at my presence here. "Sorry I'm late." I said that to her. "Why.....why did you come...?" Karuizawa looked at me while forcing that feeble voice out. "There's no need to ask, is there? I made a promise. That I'll save you should anything happen to you."

"R-Ryuu-en-san, does this mean Ayanokouji is X!?"

"That's not possible. He's definitely not the one."

Ishizaki panicked, but Ibuki denied it before Ryuu-en could. "Ryuu-en, surely X is just manipulating Ayanokouji. Don't be deceived. They definitely told Karuizawa in advance that they'd send someone else to save her—"

"Shut up, Ibuki." Laughing, Ryuu-en distanced himself from Karuizawa and drew a bit closer to me. But even then, he stopped while putting around five meters of distance between us. I could tell then that Ryuu-en is extremely wary of me. "Well, well, what do we have here? If it isn't Suzune's orbiter, Ayanokouji. What business do you have at an unpopular attraction like this rooftop here on a winter holiday?"

"Karuizawa sent me a mail. Asking me to save her." I didn't go into detail and I didn't mention that Ryuu-en himself had made contact with me either. As for why, it's because Ryuu-en had foolishly invited me to the hunting ground, a prey hunted by the hunter.



“Hmm?”

“It’s obviously a lie. You were just given orders. Telling you to go save Karuizawa.” Ibuki was just told to shut up but for some reason, she’s going out of her way to deny me. “What’s the matter, Ibuki? You seem to want to believe that Ayanokouji isn’t X”. “It’s not what I want to believe, I’m telling you it’s not true. This guy...this guy is just a goodhearted fool. I don’t think he’s even aware of the situation with Karuizawa and X, no?”

“Goodhearted, you say? You have reason to believe that’s true?” Ryuuuen asked Ibuki.

“Back on the island, I hid Karuizawa’s underwear inside a boy’s bag in order to sabotage Class D. Obviously you’d suspect someone like me from Class C of being the perpetrator. But he never once doubted me. Stupidly enough, he told me straight up that he doesn’t think I’m the perpetrator.”

“And that made you happy, did it?”

“Stop joking around. There’s no way I’d be happy when I’m the actual perpetrator. But it’s true that he’s an incompetent student who wouldn’t even doubt a clearly suspicious person. That’s what I realized.”

So she cannot imagine a person like that manipulating Class D from behind the scenes, is what it means. “Do you believe it, Ryuuuen-san? That Ayanokouji is X, I mean.”

“I’ve always suspected Ayanokouji. Because he’s constantly with Horikita, who herself is said to be exceptional and all.”

“But, isn’t that way too blatant or more like...way too obvious for someone trying to hide their identity?”

“That’s true. I get what you’re trying to say, Ishizaki. That’s why I also carefully made sure to eliminate all other possibilities. And after learning about the incident with Manabe’s group, I delved into it again. Considering

the manner in which they handled the matter with Karuizawa's bullying, I thought it had to be either Ayanokouji or Hirata."

"Stop acting cool. You didn't even mark Ayanokouji or Hirata as targets after that, did you?" Opinions are split even within Class C. A unique situation where I'm admitting to it while Ibuki and the others are refusing to acknowledge it. "It's precisely because I'm the most suspicious one that I deliberately did things that way. Or perhaps I had no other choice but to use Horikita?"

"But—!" I chose to pose a vague yet gentle question.

"No need to fret, I'm the one you've all been looking for."

"Hah. Now isn't that suspicious? Would you really admit to that yourself? This is way too strange." Their denial is understandable, all the more so since I had kept myself hidden this whole time. "I think it's also suspicious. He may have been ordered to name himself as the mastermind to serve as a decoy for the real mastermind..." Ibuki and Ishizaki urged Ryuuken to reconsider just as he was on the verge of acknowledging it. "Surely you also predicted that X wouldn't show up here, no?"

"Yes, normally speaking it would be ridiculous to assume someone who's been hiding behind Horikita all this time would just waltz into such an obvious trap." I suppose it's natural that there'd be some doubts regarding that. "Looks like a poor move to me, Ayanokouji. In this case, the best move for you would've been to abandon Karuizawa Kei. Not to jump into the fray recklessly. I can't blame Ibuki and Ishizaki for doubting you. If you're really X, tell me how you plan to overcome this predicament." That's the only way to prove it. Was what Ryuuken added. "This may be a silly question, but am I currently in a predicament?"

For a moment there, Ryuuken and the others seemed unamused by my foolish question. "I just came here because Karuizawa asked for help. There's no exam going on right now so proof doesn't even factor into this, does it? If you want proof that I'm X, you can just wait until the next exam."

“That’s not true at all. Right now, we’re aware of your identity. Furthermore, we’re also aware of Karuizawa’s secret. Surely you know terrible things will happen tomorrow if you leave without saying anything here.”

“Terrible things?”

“Stop playing dumb. Now then, show me your next move.”

“There’s no move to make. I won’t do anything.”

“I get it now, Ryuu-en-san. Surely Sudou and the others are nearby, waiting for orders, don’t you think?” Ishizaki stared at the half-open door. “Not really.” But Ryuu-en shot him down. “I-Is that so?”

“If a large number of their classmates happen to see this disastrous scene of Karuizawa’s, she’ll lose her position without even the need for me to spread it around. Use your head a bit.” If he wasn’t sure of that, even Ryuu-en won’t act this rashly. “I-I see.....”

“But you’re quite something if you’re going to play dumb.”

“Enough is enough, Ryuu-en. There’s no way X would just boldly march up to us alone.” Ibuki counseled Ryuu-en.

“Good grief, now this is a problem. Ibuki and Ishizaki apparently don’t believe you’re X”. Ryuu-en shrugged his shoulders and exasperatedly looked over at Ibuki and Ishizaki. “You said you won’t do anything, didn’t you Ayanokouji? But I need to ascertain whether this is the truth or not. To do that, I have no choice but to make all this common knowledge. You’re fine with that?” He said that and looked me over with a smile. “I’ve already admitted it from the start but if you still won’t believe me then allow me to disclose some more information. Ibuki.”

I spoke to Ibuki, who just wouldn’t stop doubting me. “During the island exam, you were instructed to film the leader’s keycard with your digital camera. But for some reason, at the critical moment, your digital camera malfunctioned and you were left unable to use it. Am I wrong?”

“H-How do you know!?”

“I’m the one who broke that camera you hid inside your bag. To make sure I don’t leave behind a trace, I used water.” There shouldn’t be that many people, even within Class C, who are aware of the fact that they had purchased a digital camera.

“By the way, when I ran into Ibuki, her fingertips were covered with dirt. On top of that, there were traces of soil having been dug up around where she sat. When I looked into it at night, I found a radio buried there. That was so you could communicate with Ryuuen, no?” If I disclose all this, surely they’d understand it even if they don’t want to. The only ones who saw Ibuki with her dirtied hands back then would be me, Yamauchi and Airi. In other words, it’s definitive proof that I’m someone who’s noticed even that. “You’ve got to admit it now, Ibuki. Ayanokouji is X”.

“Wait, wait a minute. Just because he’s somewhat smart doesn’t mean he’s X, does it?”

“Is there even a need to doubt him any further?” Ryuuen seemed even more exasperated than before. “But isn’t it strange? Even if Ayanokouji really is X, pulling the strings from behind the scenes, why would he just obediently show up here!? He’s demolished all our plans so far, hasn’t he!?”

“He probably has some sort of trick up his sleeve. A miracle that exceeds even our imagination. If not...he’ll just be an idiot then.”

“Trick? There’s no trick I could use in a situation like this. You lot have already grasped Karuizawa’s big secret regarding her past. I know what’ll happen if I act carelessly. I mean, this situation itself is the result of your preparations to make sure I’m unable to do anything, am I wrong?”

“Hah. What’ll you do then? Now we can reveal your existence whenever we want, you know? Now that you’ve revealed yourself, we no longer have any incentive to reveal Karuizawa’s past bullying. If we keep quiet about that then you won’t be able to act carelessly either. A perfect stalemate.”

“Doesn’t look like reporting what was done to Karuizawa here to the school is an option either.” Unlike how it is during exams, violence between students that occur over the course of normal school life doesn’t lead to an immediate expulsion.

Even if we’re able to provide proof of all that was done, it’s doubtful we’ll be able to deal any sort of meaningful damage. “If you tattle on us, we’ll ruin Karuizawa in retaliation.” That’s right. If I attempt to penalize Ryuuен for this, I will end up completely losing Karuizawa. It’s very possible that I’d win the battle but lose the war. Having used Karuizawa’s past as a means of offense, Ryuuен now switched to defense. “No matter how you look at it, I’m overwhelmingly in the lead here.”

“Aren’t you satisfied now that you know the situation? I’ll be taking Karuizawa back with me.”

“Don’t say something so anticlimactic. You’re finally here so you might as well take it slowly.” Ryuuен then grabbed Karuizawa’s arm and forcibly dragged her up. “Ahh!”

“There’s no way you’d reveal your identity without a reason. What trick do you have up your sleeve? Show me.” He extends the palm of his hand towards me and made a provocative gesture with it several times. “Sorry, Ryuuен. But it doesn’t seem like I’ll be able to answer your expectations.”

“Huh.....?”

“I was just dancing in the palm of your hand. That’s all there is to it.” No one here would’ve expected X to say something like that. A cruel X who would protect their own identity even if it meant abandoning Karuizawa. Or perhaps a sharp student who would save Karuizawa while keeping their own identity hidden. They would’ve thought it’d be either one of those. A crack finally appeared in the smile that Ryuuен had been wearing this whole time. “If the X we’ve been making such a big deal out of finding is a fool like this then we may as well have not found him. Surely what happened with the digital camera was a fluke or something.”

Despite being allies with him, Ibuki's always distrusted Ryuu'en. It's precisely because she truly feels that way rather than putting up an act that she questions him so openly. Seeing an opportunity, I made my next move. "I did indeed reveal my identity. But that won't come back to bite me immediately. The only ones who know that I've been manipulating Class D from the shadows would be Horikita and Karuizawa. If the other classes come to know of this, it could only have been one of you who leaked it."

"And what's the problem with that?"

"If you're going to reveal my existence then I'll report everything that happened on this rooftop to the school."

"You've just been cornered because you aren't capable of doing that."

"I can do that. I just have to sacrifice Karuizawa."

"...huh?"

"You assumed I'd abandon Karuizawa. But when I showed up you started talking based on the assumption that this wasn't the case. Am I wrong?"

"Now that doesn't add up. If you had abandoned her from the beginning, you may have been able to conceal your identity. You came because that wasn't an option. Don't bluff now."

"It's fine...if they know about Kiyotaka then they can also reveal my secret." While slowly pushing herself back up from the floor, Karuizawa looked at me. I immediately averted my eyes back towards Ryuu'en. "Or so she says. It's up to you whether you believe it or not but it'll be the fight of your life if that happens."

"Umm...since we've uncovered X's identity, wouldn't that suffice for now?"

"I agree. He might actually sacrifice her."

This was all originally done for the sake of flushing X out. Ishizaki and Ibuki don't want to go any further than this. "...kuku." For some reason, Ryuuен clutched his head and began laughing while shaking. "You're certainly right in that war may break out once either side reveals their secret. I'll admit that." Deep or shallow aside, both sides would be left with scars. Furthermore, depending on how you consider it, there's no guarantee that Karuizawa would receive a lethal blow.

The image of a girl who stood back up despite the bullying she received in the past would form on its own. If Ryuuен calls it quits here then that'd put an end to all this. However— This man will never choose such an option. "To be honest, it's been a letdown so far. Not only revealing your identity so easily, but you also have no choice but to leave your fate in the hands of your enemies in order to protect yourself. But even then, there's still no doubt that Ayanokouji is the X who kept me entertained. Then I'll be losing out if I don't make you entertain me to the very end. Right, Ishizaki?"

"Y-Yes."

"For me, everything's a game. Not just climbing to Class A but crushing Ichinose, crushing Suzune, all of that's an extension of that game for me. Crushing Class D or crushing Class B and even Sakayanagi, who I've saved for last, is but a means for me to kill time." While laughing, Ryuuен grabbed hold of Karuizawa's bangs. Karuizawa's face contorted in pain. But there's no longer any fear in her eyes.

"Kuku...even though you despaired so much, now it's like you were never even afraid. I feel stupid for doubting whether Ayanokouji is X or not. Your eyes tell me you have absolute faith in Ayanokouji. It almost feels like you'd go ahead and reveal your own past if I were to reveal Ayanokouji's identity. You can relax. Your role here is clearly over with this." Having lost interest in Karuizawa, he released his grip on her hair and shoved her by the shoulder.

"You sure entertained me, Ayanokouji. Despite being a defective product of Class D, you saw through my strategies again and again. Not only that, your modus operandi is even similar to my own. It was impossible for me to not be

interested in you. To draw the mastermind out of hiding. That became pleasure to me. I haven't thought beyond that. I thought I'd consider it after meeting you." He poured his heart out ever so talkatively and pleasantly.
"And then I decided."

"...what are you planning to do to Ayanokouji?"

"Why are you so pissed off, Ibuki?"

Ibuki took her distance from me and fearlessly approached Ryuuen until she was right in front of him. "What you're about to do now is something that puts Class C at risk."

"Kuku. You were always a lone wolf, never cooperating with your classmates and yet here you are, saying something like 'this puts Class C at risk'. Don't make me laugh."

"I followed you this far because I thought the class stood to benefit from your recklessness. But this one's over the line. Ayanokouji clearly has nothing left up his sleeve." As thoughts spitting out all the resentment bottled up inside her, Ibuki continued.

"That's why I cannot approve of what you're about to do."

"Do you know what I'm about to do?"

"I can tell after having known you since April. You're going to make him yield through violence, aren't you?" Having heard that, Ishizaki froze up a bit. "Ishizaki, Komiya, Kondou and even Albert have all been made to yield to you through violence."

"It's best to demonstrate the difference in power between us."

"Isn't the difference already obvious?"

"It's true that we've been had many times now by Ayanokouji. We need to return the favor."

“That’s why I’m telling you that sort of thinking is going to spell trouble for the class!” Bang! A sharp sound reverberated. The cause of that sound was Ryuuen slapping Ibuki’s cheek with the palm of his hand. Ibuki went silent immediately afterward.

“I couldn’t care less as long as I’m enjoying it. Violence in particular is easy to understand.” Just like what happened now. It almost seemed as though he was trying to get that point across. As I suspected, that’s the conclusion he’s reached. Now that calling it a misunderstanding and shrugging it off is no longer possible, it has become an inevitability.

“Listen up, the important thing here is what we do with the information we’ve acquired from the other party. Ayanokouji wants to keep what happened here as well as his identity and Karuizawa’s matter a secret. It’s also true that we blackmailed Karuizawa and dumped freezing water on her. If, by any chance, word of this gets out, we’ll surely be punished severely. In short, as long as both sides continue to keep what happens here a secret, no one else will know no matter what happens here.”

Considering the developments so far, it’s not that difficult to make that deduction. By using Karuizawa’s past and my identity as a shield, it ensures what happens here will never leak. “No matter what happens, both sides have no choice but to meekly accept it.” Despite that, Class C wants to pick a fight. “I think I understand why you revealed your identity this late. Now this makes it impossible for us to fight out of bounds. Shut the door, Albert.” After receiving that order from Ryuuen, Albert closed the door that leads back into the school.

“But it’s still a bad move. You may have thought it would all end here but I won’t let that happen.” Everyone here can already tell what’s going to happen next. Ryuuen won’t change his ways. “I suppose my retreat has been cut off. Now you’re free to take this in the direction you desire.”

“First I’ll put the fear on that apathetic face of yours. Are you underestimating me? Thinking I wouldn’t do anything reckless.”

“Are you really going to resort to violence?”

“Conflict isn’t always a mental affair. Violence is the most powerful force in this world. This applies to a general leading his forces and is also a brilliant means to assassinate said general both. No matter how crafty you may be, you will be forced to yield before violence.” Even now, as the situation seems as though a fight were about to break out, I looked over at Ryuuuen, Ibuki, Ishizaki and Albert one by one for a moment. “I’m going to commit your pathetic appearance to memory and then I’ll call it quits. Because I’ll be moving onto Ichinose come the third semester after all.”

“People do yield before violence, that’s for sure. Your logic is sound there. But to carry out that logic, you need to be stronger than the other guy. Do you understand that?”

“Huh?”

“The four of you here won’t be enough to stop me.”

“.....?” Unable to understand, Ibuki raised an eyebrow.

“Kukukukukukukukukukuku.” Seems it found it exceedingly funny because Ryuuuen’s laughing his heart out. “What Ayanokouji is trying to say is this: I won’t be made to yield through violence by the likes of you. Then show me the extent of that confidence of yours. Ishizaki.”

“I-Is it really okay?” Ishizaki unexpectedly hesitated upon receiving the order to attack. It would be a different story against someone infamous for getting into fights like Sudou but I’m just an ordinary student.

His hesitation is understandable even when under orders. “Don’t hold back, get him.”

“But...”

“There’ll be no problem even if we give Ayanokouji a thorough beating.”

“Wait!” When Ishizaki approached me, it was Karuizawa’s scream that stopped him.

“Why are you doing something this stupid!? You won’t gain anything from beating Kiyotaka up, will you!?”

“Hey, don’t just cut in like that, Karuizawa. Your role is over. You can relax, your past won’t be revealed anymore thanks to this guy’s sacrifice. Just be grateful to him.” He then grabbed hold of Karuizawa’s hair once again the same way he did when dumping water on her. “!” And then shoved Karuizawa to the back, just like that.

“That’s why I’m telling you to stay out of this.” Nevertheless, Karuizawa bared her fangs at Ryuuen for my sake. She tried to get back up and jump onto Ryuuen. “Don’t worry, Karuizawa.” I called out to Karuizawa and made her stop. “B-But.”

“There’s no need for concern.”

“That’s right, save that concern for yourself.” Ishizaki stepped forward. “Don’t think badly of me, Ayanokouji. This is just another order from Ryuuen-san.”

“I don’t care either way.” Now that we’ve come to this, it’s all going according to plan. Ishizaki casually swung his fist, as though to swat a disobedient baby.

A dull motion even an elementary school student or a middle school student would’ve been able to dodge. I caught the right fist he swung mightily at me with my right hand. “Ahh.....?”

“Ishizaki, if you’re going to do this then you should take it seriously.” I warned him just once. But Ishizaki still doesn’t seem to understand even after I’ve stopped his fist. Because it would’ve inevitably been stopped. Probably because the strength that stopped it is nothing out of the ordinary. I used my left hand’s grip strength to clench down on Ishizaki’s right fist.

“Oh? Ahh, uuu, ehh.....!?” Ishizaki’s expression slowly changed bit by bit and his knees began trembling. “Wait a minute, Ishizaki?” Realizing that this is clearly strange, Ibuki looked back. “Ahh, uuuu, ahh! I-I can’t, stop!” No longer able to hold himself upright, his knees buckled and he fell to the cold floor of the rooftop on his knees.

Perhaps no longer able to endure it, Ishizaki desperately clutched my arm with his left hand and tried to tear it away but to no avail. The one who first grasped this situation was neither Ibuki nor Ryuuen but the one behind me, Albert. The black shadow approaches. Before even getting permission from his boss, Albert waved his thick arms around like a pole and swung. The reason he attacked me from my free left side may be because he anticipated I would take a defensive posture after Ishizaki frees himself.

Still, that’s unnecessary concern. I could’ve dodged there but I instead received his punch with the palm of my left hand instead, all the while prepared to sustain some damage. Bash. A dull sound reverberated. A powerful force went through my elbow all the way up to the tip of my shoulder. “...as expected, it hurts...” It’s difficult to tell Albert’s expression underneath his sunglasses but surely he’s grasped the situation sufficiently too.

“You’ve got to be kidding...a-are you fooling around, Albert? Ishizaki?” Perhaps from a distance, Ibuki couldn’t tell that Albert had swung with all his might and Ishizaki is genuinely in pain. Or perhaps this is a spectacle she doesn’t want to believe is true. When I released him from the pressure of my right hand, Ishizaki crouched down and clutched his own right arm. “Do it, Albert.” Orders came from Ryuuen.

Albert came charging in with that robust body of his while swinging those massive arms of his. Damage will accumulate if I continue to receive powerful attacks that go beyond what the human body is designed to withstand. I deliberately allowed him to land a hit the first time around but I can’t afford to be hit any more than this. After evading the left hook he threw, I retaliated with a frontal attack. I plunged my fist into Albert’s abdomen. I could’ve held back there but I cannot afford to do so against an opponent

whose ability is still unmeasured. A slight change occurred on Albert's expressionless face but only ever so slightly.

Judging from the sturdy feeling I felt upon directly hitting him with my fist, the damage is shallow. I could tell that not only is he blessed with a body a pure Japanese person wouldn't possess, he's also trained it to a considerable extent. In that case, all that means is that it'll just take more effort for me to break through that steel-like body. Humans have countless spots that can be referred to as weak points. For instance, the solar plexus is an area you cannot train. Of course, I shouldn't prematurely assume a hit there would result in an instant knockout. At best, it's only an area you cannot train. It's still possible to endure the pain.

Albert himself also seems to have realized that I'm aiming for his solar plexus, because he twisted his large body to evade it. But I saw that coming and used the tip of my hand to strike his throat. "!" Albert made a gargling noise. "Ayanokouji!" Behind me, Ishizaki shouted and charged me. "...if you're going to attack me then don't shout..."

While exasperated at Ishizaki for saving me the trouble, I kicked his left knee that he was using to brace himself. He's way too obvious. After confirming that Albert behind him has completely collapsed, I spun around and kicked him in the face. And then I punched Ishizaki in the jaw with my left hand. Ishizaki collapsed and silence fell upon the rooftop.

All Ryuuen, Ibuki and Karuizawa could do was to burn that unbelievable sight into their memories. "Apparently he's more than we expected him to be. The reason he acted so arrogantly was because he had confidence in his skills, huh? This sure is unexpected."

"So you're saying that the stage we prepared ended up favoring Ayanokouji? What does that mean.....?"

"Are you serious, Ibuki?"

"Ehh.....?"

“You’ve known for a long time now that Ryuuuen is the type of person who’d use violence to dominate his enemies. On top of that, don’t you think setting up a situation where no amount of violence would cause a problem is just too convenient for Class C?”

“Huh?” As Ibuki tilted her head, a doubt seems to have arisen within Ryuuuen as well. “Wait a minute, Ayanokouji. Even I don’t understand this. This is a situation I set up.”

“Even though I’m acting this diplomatically here, you still don’t see the real situation?”

After sighing, I decided to spoil it all for him. “Our confrontation here has been predetermined for a long time now. And also the fact that in a situation where neither of us would be able to tattle on the other, Ryuuuen Kakeru would resort to violence to settle things.” Ryuuuen thinks that everything’s that happened so far is the result of him meticulously planning ahead. But that would be a huge mistake.

“If I never intended on having my identity revealed, then I wouldn’t have used Manabe in the first place. It’s clear as day that a search for the culprit would begin as soon as I made her a spy and had her send me the recorded footage. And just like a true dictator, you’d narrow it down to Manabe’s group. And that’s where you heard it from, right? That they were blackmailed after attacking Karuizawa and that they had no other choice.” So far, Ryuuuen cannot deny a single thing. Naturally, of course. “You confirmed that Karuizawa’s connected to me. All that’s left is how you choose to execute it. For that reason, you thought strangling us would be most effective. You had Ishizaki, Komiya and the others tail Class D and openly approached Kouenji so you could put the pressure on X. Well, I suppose you were genuinely enjoying yourself but you may have ended up giving me time to think.”

“Kukuku. Now you’re saying some interesting things. So you’re saying you only made it look as though you were dancing in the palm of my hand?”

“To be more precise, I made it look like I was dancing in the palm of your hand when in fact, you had been dancing in mine.”

“Then allow me to apologize, Ayanokouji. You really are a sharp one. The advantage I held until a while ago has vanished entirely and now I’m the one in a big pinch. What shall we do, Ibuki?” After hearing the full story from me, Ryuuen still laughed happily even after seeing what I’m capable of. “What’s the matter with you...both you and Ayanokouji.....!” As though hitting me with her frustrations, Ibuki sent a flying kick towards me. She doesn’t seem concerned with the fact that her underwear is visible.

No, to be precise she may no longer possess the rationality to care for such things. I stepped back and calmly evaded her kick. Ibuki’s switch has probably been flipped too. She took several steps to close the distance between us and attacked me with a kick that left little room to dodge. What a brilliant move. Despite the fact that Horikita had been sick then, it is still true that she’s strong enough to beat Horikita.

“Tch.” When I evaded all her kicks at the last possible moment, Ibuki stopped attacking for a moment and clicked her tongue in irritation. “What are you really.....?”

“Can you really not believe it even after seeing all this?”

“You piss me off. I don’t know why but you piss me off!” Ibuki leaped towards me again and I immediately closed the distance between us. “!?”

I don’t mind playing along but it’s not a good idea to drag this out. I didn’t give Ibuki the chance to dodge or block before grabbing her neck and slamming her to the ground. Ibuki’s eyes widened before she lost consciousness right afterward and stopped moving. Hitting her head would’ve given me more certainty but it’s not like this is a fight to the death. “Violence isn’t something Ryuuen and his group have monopolized.”

Ibuki, Ishizaki and Albert. Now that the students who could be referred to as Ryuuen’s right hand men have all collapsed, there’s only one person left standing. Seeing all of this play out before her, Karuizawa was left unable to speak a word. “I suppose it’s commendable that you’re still able to maintain your rationality even after seeing this situation.”

“So you’re not just sharp but also first class when it comes to violence. I underestimated you.” Clapping as though to express genuine respect, Ryuuen walked up to me. “Do you know what else I want to say, Ayanokouji?”

“Not a clue.” Not feeling the gravity of the situation one bit, Ryuuen proceeds to calmly make an analysis. His nonchalant behavior surely isn’t merely a bluff. A characteristic Ryuuen and Ryuuen alone excels at. That’s the very reason why he’s able to continue acting this boldly. “Physical strength alone doesn’t decide victory or defeat when it comes to violence. It’s about how strong your heart is.” Ryuuen then lowers his stance while extending his left fist. He’s not aiming for my face, he’s aiming for my abdomen.

I leaped backwards to evade it. Ryuuen immediately closes the distance in pursuit and this time, he extends his dominant right fist. “Sorry but I have no intention of taking your attacks.” After evading that, I launched my own attack. I extended my right arm to grab hold of Ryuuen’s bangs. He reacted immediately and slapped my arm away with his left hand—right after that, my kick connected with Ryuuen’s ribs. “!?” The moment he got distracted by my right arm, I launched my attack.

He distanced himself from me to avoid a consecutive series of attacks. “Not bad, Ryuuen.” It goes without saying, of course, that his strength is far beyond the likes of Ishizaki. I’m honestly impressed. Even though he had received a rather heavy blow, there’s still no sign of him keeling over. “This is fun~”. He said so and laughed.

But I still don’t believe his talent is outstanding enough to beat Albert. “This comeback after having been driven to the brink of despair. I can’t get enough of it, Ayanokouji.” His smile is wider than ever before and he continues attacking without holding back one bit. His movements aren’t that of a martial arts he learned. It’s a self-taught style he picked up from the various battlefields he’s overcome. I can’t afford to keep dodging all his attacks perfectly.

It's easy to fight back but I accepted his blows while maintaining my guard. After I received the fourth punch, Ryuuen spoke. "Why won't you fight back? Surely you can do so boldly."

"I've got my own circumstances here."

"Really? Then I'll hear them out after I beat you."

"Do you think you can win?"

"Kuku. Do you think you're invincible?"

"...sorry, but I can hardly imagine losing."

What Ryuuen sees that I'm not seeing. "You'll probably win here. But what about tomorrow? What about the day after?"

"So you're saying it's not certain if we keep repeating it?"

"What about when you're in the toilet? While you're shitting? I'll attack you from all angles."

"Are you not afraid of losing?"

"I've never felt fear. Not once before."

"No fear, eh?" Now that's interesting. In all likelihood, this is the source of Ryuuen's confidence. "You'll understand once you feel pain. One slowly learns fear after that."

"Then teach me that so-called pain of yours."

"As much as you desire and more!"

When Ryuuen grabbed hold of my shoulders, he struck me with a high-speed kick to the abdomen. "Kiyotaka—!" Karuizawa screamed in worry. But it was an attack I intended to receive, nothing to worry about there. "You'll understand if you get hit twice or thrice! Hah!" As though aiming for the

same spot, Ryuuen stamped down with his left leg. As he stamps down, he closes the distance between us and I guarded my face with my left arm.

He extended his right arm and struck my right knee with it after winding it up. The most critical hit yet today. I lay on my back while feeling pain rush through my body. “How’s that? Do you understand now?”

“...unfortunately I don’t get anything. It’s just pain spreading through my body.”

“Are you trying to say that you’re like me, that you feel no fear?”

“That’s not it, Ryuuen. That’s not what I mean.” I know fear that’s caused by pain.

I know how miserable and terrifying it feels to be a loser. I’ve seen people break down in front of my eyes countless times. But after a while, it stopped being fear. I just felt cold. Because I realized that no matter how much suffering and despair others go through, I myself will never have to experience the same.

As long as I possess the means to protect myself, all is fine. As long as I’m safe, that means I’m the victor. “Let’s play some more!” Ryuuen screamed and concentrated fire on my abdomen several times over. By lowering my knee a bit, I was able to intercept Ryuuen’s kick. “Tch! So you predicted it!” I’ll deal with it patiently, through dodging it. I won’t let any critical injury befall me.

“You want to play, Ayanokouji? Why aren’t you dodging attacks you could’ve dodged?”

“I was conducting an experiment to see whether I’d really feel that fear you just described.”

“Just how much are you underestimating me, you bastard.” Even though he senses the difference in power between us, Ryuuen continued to maintain that momentum. It would be a different story if he were on a berserker rage but

when one gets into a fight, the more one is confident in their own skills, the more they will despair upon sensing the difference in power. But I can't sense that from him.

Even while he dominated, I had incorporated miscalculations into my moves and by making a comeback, I had expected to shatter his spirit. In that sense, I suppose I did miscalculate a bit. Of course, I simply misread his upper limit and it's not a problem to be worried over. All it means is that one extra step has been added to the process of shattering his spirit. All it means is that Ryuuken will have to go through that much more pain. "Where did you acquire that sort of strength? This isn't normal, Ayanokouji....."

It is true that this isn't a level you'll reach by just getting into fights and what not. I didn't answer, I simply closed the distance between me and Ryuuken step by step. It's obvious that his sharp eyes are focused on me. "So you've been lurking behind the scenes even though you possess this much power. How does it feel? To look down on small fry day to day? I bet it feels as good as ejaculating, no?"

"I've never once thought of looking down on them or anything. Because whether others succeed or fail have nothing to do with me." Perhaps he didn't like that answer. Ryuuken laughed while brushing his hair back. "There's no possible way that's true. Humans are all bundles of greed." He rejects me, denying the possibility of an entirely apathetic being existing. Of course, even I feel many things you could call greed. But that's a story for another time.

In all likelihood, nothing's going to change even if I play with him any more than this. I assumed my stance again. "Then I'll pulverize you until you do feel fear!" That's enough, Ryuuken. I grabbed Ryuuken's right arm as he shifted his leg to knee me in the face and forcibly pulled him in for a merciless right hook to the face.

"Gah—!?" Having received a blow powerful enough to blast his consciousness away, Ryuuken flew away. But I won't reap his consciousness with a single blow. I restrained myself to stop one step short of doing so.

I straddled Ryuuen as he fell to the concrete and I started raining down blows left and right. “You mentioned you never felt fear, didn’t you Ryuuen?”

“Haa...haa...kuku, that’s right. I don’t understand fear. I’ve never once felt it.” Despite having half his field of vision blocked by the swelling and bruising, Ryuuen fought back from underneath me. But his strength is now impaired and soon enough, he’s begun swinging and missing. In response, I rained down a powerful yet precise blow from above.

His expression turned grim. “Zuu, puu...! I’m confident in my fighting skills but it’s not like I’ve never lost before. No, I know best precisely because I’ve lost many times over before...” He seems to be having difficulty speaking. Maybe the inside of his mouth’s been cut up? He’s spitting blood out of his mouth down to the ground. I swung my fist down again. “Gah!...ahh, shit, it’s becoming difficult to talk again.”

I repeatedly rained down blows left and right at short intervals. But even then, Ryuuen didn’t really feel fear. “Violence reflects your true self. Both the one doing the beating and the one being beaten.” Ryuuen closed his eyes and laughed. Provoking me to hit him as many times as I want. “Hah, hah... kuku...it must be fun for you, Ayanokouji. You can act as cocky as you want with that sort of strength. You can do whatever the hell you want. That’s why show me, Ayanokouji...”

He opened his eyes. And I then started raining down punches while aiming for his face. His face had already swollen up but both his external and internal bleeding have also gotten really bad. But even then, Ryuuen does not feel fear. As a human being, it should be one of his primal instincts. Yet that’s not kicking in. “Hasn’t this gone far enough, Ryuuen?”

I made that proposal but of course he won’t accept it. “Kukuku, what’s the matter Ayanokouji? I haven’t yielded yet. Knock the living daylights out of me.” I swung my fist again at Ryuuen, who is putting his own life at risk to provoke me. His face warped with pain but that was also only for a moment. “It hurts, it hurts...but that’s all.”

His eyes have yet to change since we met. He seems to believe in losing the

battle but winning the war. “Even if you win here, I will keep coming after you no matter how many times it takes. No matter where you are at school, as soon as you show an opening I’ll attack. And I’ll have the last laugh.” Surely he’s lived his life so far by making exactly that sort of comeback. No matter how strong his enemy may be, it’s not like they’re always invincible. His confidence stems from being able to strike at their openings without overlooking them.

To use violence to plunge his enemy into fear and dominate them. The fear that if you make an enemy out of him, there’s no telling when he’d attack you. “Enjoy this temporary pleasure. Go on, victory is within your reach. Ayanokouji!” Despite losing his ability to fight back, Ryuuen continued laughing to the bitter end. “When a human being goes up against someone weaker, they’d feel emotions like pleasure. And fear lurks on the other side of that coin.”

Fear lurks on the other side of emotions? “Do you want to win? Do you not want to lose? What feelings are you feeling, Ayanokouji?” Do I want to win? Do I not want to lose? “Right now...are you laughing at your dominion over me? Are you angry? Or perhaps you’re excited? Or perhaps you’re irritated? Tell me!”

I don’t know what he’s been saying for a while now. Unfortunately, I can’t see my own face, my own expression. But there’s one thing I am sure of. It’s that something as trivial as this won’t shake my heart. There should be no emotions seeping out.

I landed my fist on Ryuuen’s face for a number of time I’ve lost count of. “!” I won’t stop anymore. Right. Then left. I continued to swing my fists with the same force behind them. Ryuuen’s face contorted. Yes, that’s it Ryuuen. Now you see too, no?





That the feeling known as fear certainly exists within himself. I pummeled Ryuuен with a blow more powerful than any that came before. And in that single blow, I reaped his consciousness. You may have planned to manipulate my heart but unfortunately for you, I don't have a heart that can be manipulated. I slowly stood back up from above Ryuuен.

I can't afford to leave Karuizawa in this cold weather any longer than this.

"Sorry, I ended up putting you in a tough spot. Are you hurt anywhere?"

"I'm...fine. I'm numb from the cold though....." I extended my hand to Karuizawa, who witnessed it all from where she sat. When I touched her hand, it was so cold it seemed as though it had frozen over. "Disillusioned of me?"

"Obviously...you betrayed me from the start."

"That's right. Then why didn't you sell me out to Ryuuен?"

"...for my own sake. That's all."

She said that before collapsing into my chest, trembling. "I was scared...I was so scared.....!"

"There's no need to think about anything right now. What happened today, what's happened so far. You can think about it all later. The only certain thing is that as of this moment, you've been freed from your curse. From this point onwards, Manabe...no, no one else will be able to dredge up your past. As for the rest, you can act as you always have." No longer possessing the strength to hold herself up, Karuizawa entrusts her body to me.

Looking at it from Karuizawa's perspective, it's been a calamitous few months. Incidental bullying at the hands of Manabe's group. Then further bullying after realizing she's being targeted. Then having Ryuuен dredge up her past and having to realize all of it is because of me. She must be falling apart, her emotional state unstable. "You managed to create the present by

overcoming your past. You'll just pick up where you left off starting tomorrow." But if it's Karuizawa Kei we're talking about, there's no problem.

I confirmed it when I encountered her again on the rooftop. "I'm the one who hurt you. I won't ask you to forgive me. But please just remember this one thing. If something like that happened today happens to you again, I will definitely save you."

"Kiyo, taka....." Despite going through all she's gone through, Karuizawa still refuses to leave the parasitic destination that is me.

Karuizawa's reached the point where she won't be able to go on at this school without my existence. No matter what happens, her heart will never crumble so long as I am there. I wonder how it would've turned out if I had stepped in to save Karuizawa at an earlier stage. There's no doubt that by swiftly fulfilling my promise to her, feelings of dependence would have grown stronger on Karuizawa's end. But if she were to be placed in a similar situation again, it would only amplify Karuizawa's despair.

But by dragging this out to the last stage, she grew to have faith in me until the very last moment. At the same time, I was also able to grasp that Karuizawa isn't someone who'd easily betray me. Of course, even if she had spat my name out, that in itself would've resulted in 'guilt' and from that moment onwards, there's no doubt I'll be able to make use of her at will. It would be sacrilegious to let go of a pawn like Karuizawa. Her usefulness is secondary, there's nothing more important than keeping her in hand.

"A few flights below us the student council president...no, the former student council president and probably Chabashira-sensei as well are waiting. They should know the situation to a certain degree as well so they'll be able to help you take care of things, including that drenched uniform of yours."

"I-I got it...what about Kiyotaka?"

"I still need to clean up here. Besides, it'd be troublesome if we're seen together. You should head back first." I said so as I lightly nudged

Karuizawa's back and saw her off from the rooftop. "Now then....."

I can't just abandon these four on the rooftop. Chabashira-sensei aside, it would be a problem if some other teacher were to find them. Starting in order with Ishizaki, I gently slapped their cheeks to wake them up. Saving Ryuuen for last. "...kuh."

"Finally awake, are we?"

"Do you think...this settles things, Ayanokouji?"

"It's over. Surely you're not going to say you want to keep going, are you?" No matter who looks at it, it's clear this fight's been settled. "I'll use any means I have to if it's for the sake of victory." Saying that, Ryuuen slowly raised his upper body. "If necessary, even war."

"Are you going to report that I pummeled you?"

"...kuku. Now that'd be lame. But, that's an option if it's for the sake of winning." No matter how pathetic it makes him seem, he'll consider it as an option if it means winning against me. "While I'm at it, I could even forcibly set it up to make it look like you set the trap."

"For the record, this is just my advice but I wouldn't recommend doing that. Beneath us, the former student council president is waiting. Even if he doesn't know the details, the fact that a problem did occur would be immediately revealed. And the fact that Ryuuen is the one who set the trap has been made clear from the moment the surveillance camera got destroyed. On the other hand, I was in Keyaki Mall around that period. If necessary, I can come up with as many alibis as needed."

The natural course of action is to have as much insurance on your side as possible after all. "...even though you could've had a third party act as witness from the start, you didn't?"

"Because you wouldn't stop attacking me unless I pummel you once."

“You think I’ll accept this defeat?”

“At the very least, I think you will. There’s only one reason behind your defeat, Ryuuen. You messed up the order of conquest. That’s all. If you’d first faced off against Ichinose’s class then had the experience of fighting against Sakayanagi, perhaps you might’ve been closer to my level when you fought me. You got too curious and overextended.” He laughed bitterly when I spat those words out. “You’re being rather frank.....”

“I’d like to say I’ll accept a rematch anytime but.....I have no intention of standing out from this point onwards. If possible, please go after someone else.”

I expected Ryuuen-like words to come flying back at me but for some reason, he seemed to be silently thinking it over. “Unless I’m reading too much into the fact that you had the witness keep their distance, it means if I persist in going after you, you’ll drive us into a corner even if it means sacrificing your identity and Karuizawa’s past, is what it means.”

“I’d like to avoid that to the best of my ability but yes, I’d have no other choice but to do that.”

“And not only me but you’ll also drag the others here Ishizaki, Ibuki and Albert down with you.” I don’t know how they’ll be dealt with but they surely won’t be able to avoid a harsh punishment.

“Yet another one of your failings was assuming that my identity and Karuizawa’s past would be absolute. If you wanted to shut me down in advance, you should’ve either done it on a larger scale or posted more watchdogs.” There’s always a hard limit on what he can afford to do in this area called the school. “In other words, as long as I continue to exist, Class C will be handicapped.”

“Not really. As long as you don’t take any reckless action against us, I have no intention of using this matter as a tool either.”

“I’m not naive enough to believe in a verbal promise like that. If Class C ever drives you into a corner, you’ll report today’s incident to the school. Am I wrong?”

“Perhaps.” I certainly cannot guarantee that. Can Class C function properly when they’re constantly forced to keep their heads down? “But what’ll you do? What’s done is done, Ryuuen.”

“Shut up. I’m done fighting against you. And, my own battle’s also over.” Ryuuen looked around at Ibuki and the other two before taking out his phone and typing something into it. And then he slid the phone across the floor of the rooftop where it came to a stop near Ibuki’s feet.

“What.....” Ibuki, who had been silently listening to our conversation, glared at him. And also at me. “I take responsibility for everything. Before that, I’m transferring all my points over to you.”

“Huh...? Ryuuen, you, what are you saying.....? Are you stupid?”

“T-That’s right, Ryuuen-san! It’s not like anyone’s going to talk about what happened here so there’s no need for you to take responsibility!” Both sides cannot afford to speak up about this incident. On the surface, we’re locked into a stalemate.

But the truth of it is that Class D is in an overwhelmingly advantageous position and Ryuuen’s realized that. There’s only one way to cancel it out. “Ayanokouji, I’m the sole perpetrator of all this. One expulsion’s enough, isn’t it?”

“You’re being rather serious. To take responsibility for your actions.” How stupid. He spat those words out along with the blood that had accumulated inside his mouth. “A tyrant is only tolerated so as long as his power holds meaning. Now that I’ve lost this badly, no one will follow me anymore.”

His domineering actions and attitude are only tolerated because they produce results. Involving the other classes in his search for X has resulted in appropriately large waves being made. He’s done things his way by force so

far but now that he's lost, he's determined that he's lost the right to do so. He grasps things far quicker than I expected. It looks like I made the right choice setting up a stage where Ryuuen is able to go all out. "You've got to be kidding me. Why are you entrusting it to me.....?"

"It's because you hate me. Divide the remaining private points up between everyone. Once I get expelled, Katsuragi and Sakayanagi will declare the contract null and void but there's nothing that can be done about it." If the contractor himself drops out of school, there's a very high possibility that would be the case. "Are you seriously saying this, Ryuuen-san!?" Ishizaki also stood up and shouted that out in a sad sounding voice. "Shut up. I can hear you just fine without the screaming." Ryuuen laughed thinly. "You guys handle the rest yourselves."

It would seem he's serious about dropping out. He stood up without even looking at his phone. "Later." Leaving behind those words, he tried to exit the rooftop. Neither Ibuki's words nor Ishizaki's words reached that back of his. "Are you sure? About dropping out of school. I think you'll regret it though." I stopped Ryuuen. "What do you care?"

"If you leave here without even knowing the reason behind your loss, your growth will stop right there and then."

"Huh?"

"Are you fine not knowing the reason you lost against me?"

"...spare me. There's no reason for you to save me in the first place. You stand to gain nothing from sparing me, not after I've learned about you and Karuizawa. There's no telling when I'll spill the beans."

"That's right...if I have to state a reason then it would be that things will get easier for Class D even without me if you would take out Sakayanagi and Ichinose on my behalf. Besides, if your contract with Katsuragi remains intact, Class A will slowly accumulate damage. And most importantly, if you suddenly drop out, Sakayanagi and Ichinose would end up thinking Ryuuen got beaten by X. It would be troublesome if that were to happen."

In other words, give-and-take. I added that afterward. “Even if word of this unexpectedly spreads, I’ve sustained no visible injuries, fortunately enough. No matter who looks at it, it would only seem as though you guys had a falling out, no?”

“...then this’d be the scenario. I tried to punish you for not working hard enough but you got fed up and retaliated and as a result, I was overthrown. Let’s leave it at that.” That way, it won’t inconvenience me any either, is that it?

“You...are you really fine with that?”

“Everyone here got demolished by Ayanokouji alone. To hell with it all at this point. Besides, me disappearing off on my own minimizes the damage dealt.”

“Just let me add this. You’re free to drop out on your own and you’re free to doubt me too. But I have no intention of telling anyone about what happened here. I also ensured that the former student council president waiting below will keep his silence on the matter. In other words, nothing happened here that would require expulsion. If you still wish to drop out, then I won’t stop you.....”

“Then don’t stop me. I don’t trust easily.” Leaving those words behind, Ryuuuen left the rooftop. Ishizaki and even Ibuki seemed dissatisfied with Ryuuuen’s actions.

EPILOGUE

PART 1

That night, I dreamt about my past. About that one snake I killed. Perhaps if I had snapped at it and taught it fear, would I have made the same choice? "...this is stupid." That train of thought is pointless now. Humans live the one life they've been given, unable to do it all over again. And each day, victory and defeat is being determined. There will be days where you win just as there are days where you lose.

It just happened to be the latter day yesterday. The number of times I've lost would be in the three digits by now. Even if we're just talking about Ayanokouji, yesterday wouldn't be my first loss. But what makes this so different? Early in the morning at 8, I stepped outside with the intent of heading to school. Although today's the first day of our winter holidays, the school is still perfectly open for the sake of club activities. Normally, the rules state that wearing a uniform is mandatory when entering the school building but there's no need for me to abide anymore.

Morning practice for the clubs will start around 7 o'clock. And because Keyaki Mall will only open at 10 o'clock, I should pretty much be the only student heading towards school. "...achoo." In the middle of the road leading up to the school, a lone student stood while trembling from the cold. I ignored her and kept going but when I passed by her, she spoke to me. "You finally came."

I heard her out and kept walking. “Hey, hold it right there.” She panickedly ran after me and grabbed my shoulder. “Huh? What the hell are you doing? Don’t go around casually touching me.”

“I don’t want to touch you either. You gave me your phone, didn’t you? I just came here to give it back.” Saying that, red-nosed Ibuki thrust the phone towards me.

“You could’ve done it some other time. How long have you been waiting?”

“I don’t know.....?” Pretending not to know means she must’ve been waiting for some time now. Why is she so fussy when it comes to futile things like this? I didn’t take it. I tried to give Ibuki the slip but this time she grabbed my arm. “Are you really dropping out?”

“Aren’t you just giving me back my phone?” Ibuki angrily glared at me when I gave that retort. “Remember how you fought with Ishizaki, Albert and the others after enrolling? You said the strongest one is determined by who wins in the end, no matter how many times they’ve lost before. And it played out just like that against Albert and the others.”

“So what?”

“Are you really going to put an end to this after losing once to Ayanokouji?”

“I misread and ended up sealing my fate. Besides, I couldn’t care less now.”

“What? That’s really lame.” It doesn’t matter anymore. To think he’d make me feel this way. What a guy. “Maybe.” That’s why I indifferently responded to Ibuki’s question. “Don’t ‘maybe’ me.”

Ibuki refused to let go of my arm. “You wanted me to drop out, no? If so, isn’t this just perfect?”

“I cooperated because you said you’d get us all to Class A. And yet this is how it’s going to end?” I had intended on taking my time but Ibuki really

made herself at home waiting for me. Looks like she still hasn't said her piece because she's still going on and on.

"I tolerated your domineering attitude and actions so far because I believed we shared the same goal. The other day, even when you didn't give us an explanation regarding the penalty for Class C, no one complained. Because they all believed that in the end, we'd rise to Class A. But you're just going to drop out here? That's way too lame." She stopped to take a breath, and then added. "Is there anything more pathetic than this?"

"How long do you intend to keep interpreting this in your favor, Ibuki?" I stopped walking. I'd rather not do anything unnecessary because my whole body's hurting. "I did tell you small fry this, that if you follow me I'd take you up to Class A. But that's just me offering you the carrot after the stick. You know about my contract with Class A, don't you? I had no intention of giving it to you guys."

"So you're saying the plan was for you to go to Class A alone?"

"That's the idea, yeah. There's no way I'd seriously look after my classmates, is there?"

Surely even Ibuki will be convinced if I say this. "That's enough, no? Later."

"800 million points."

".....huh?". After you handed me your phone yesterday, I seriously contemplated whether or not I should take a look at your points. I thought it wouldn't matter either way so I took a look". She switched my phone on and pointed the screen at me.

It's the trend in the points over the course of three years that I had drawn up. "If it's only for one person's sake, 20 million points would've been enough. But what's with this strategy? 800 million is the number of points necessary for all of Class C to rise to Class A, isn't it? Well, I don't think it's possible to save up that much though."

“Stop dreaming. I was just fooling around with that memo.” I forcibly took my phone from Ibuki. “Hiyori and Kaneda will take the lead from now on. It’s still possible as long as Ayanokouji doesn’t make a move.”

“That’s not my point here.” That damn Ibuki. Not a single private point’s been transferred. It’s completely untouched. How troublesome. “What do you want me to say?”

“If you’re going to drop out, then fight me.” Again, what a crazy proposal to make. Idiots are easy to use but they run out of control occasionally.

“There’s no way you can move your body properly, not with the injuries from yesterday and today’s cold.” I noticed she couldn’t exert much strength in the arm she’s using to grab my sleeve. I forcibly peeled that arm off my sleeve and started walking off. But the very next moment, I was beaten up. I fell onto the stone pavement. “...it hurts. I can’t even fall safely.” That bastard Ayanokouji. He’s thoroughly destroyed my body.

“Ahh—this is refreshing. If you’re going to quit, then quit already.” Ibuki walked back towards the dorm. Just how long has she been waiting here.

PART 2

“Sakagami, I’ve got something to say. I told you about it yesterday.” After coming to school alone, I went to my homeroom teacher. I had made an appointment in advance from the dorm’s landline. The reason I delayed it by a day is because it would be far too troublesome to drop out right after that. It’s likelier to become a problem considering what I did to the surveillance camera. Even more so if the former student council president is aware of it. I plan on cutting myself free.

“I understand. I’d rather not stand and talk here. Please accompany me to the counseling room.”

“Sure.”

“But before we do that, there’s a problem.”

“Problem?”

“Please come out.” Sakagami then spoke towards the staff room and called the students out.

Not too long after, the two of them showed up. “Ryuu-en-san.....”. “Huh?” It’s Ishizaki and Albert. Why are the two of them here after that idiot Ibuki? “They were waiting here since early morning after asking whether or not you had dropped by. They won’t listen to me even when I told them to call you directly so I’m in a bit of a bind here. First do something about these two.”

“What the hell are you doing? Get lost or I’ll kill you.”

“We—” I glared at Ishizaki who was about to say unnecessary things and distanced myself. “uuuu.....” Sakagami touched his glasses while looking at me intimidate them. “The surveillance camera destroyed yesterday? Do they have something to do with it?”

“I did that alone. Let’s get going already.”

Careless interaction here will just cause these guys to corner themselves. I shook them off, ignored Sakagami and started walking towards the counseling room. Despite suspecting Ishizaki and Albert, Sakagami urged them to go back while following me. “I understand more or less from your call but let’s go over it step by step, Ryuu-en. First of all, do you admit to breaking the surveillance camera using a spray can?”

“Yeah. I did that on my own.” “And one more thing. Do you admit a fight break out between you, Ishizaki, Albert and Ibuki?”

“I admit it. I take responsibility for it all. I threw the first punch. As a result, they ended up retaliating though.” There’s no need to get them involved in this defeat. “If you understand that then this makes things easier.”

“Please wait, Ryuu-en-san! We aren’t unrelated—” I launched a kick towards Ishizaki, who followed me instead of going back. A bout of violence or two at this point doesn’t matter for someone who’s going to drop out. “What are you doing, Ryuu-en!?”

“How many times are you going to make me say it? Does the beating I gave you yesterday not satisfy you?”

I took my eyes off of Ishizaki, who crouched down in pain. “You can add that just now to my penalty.”

“...regardless of the circumstances, you won’t be the only one in trouble if a problem occurs again.”

“Shut up. This is the end anyway.” After heading into the counseling room, I got down to business right away. “Hurry it up, Sakagami. Please go ahead with the withdrawal process.”

“It would seem there’s a misunderstanding so allow me to correct you.” Sakagami slowly spoke. “There are contradictions within your statements.”

“Huh? Wait a minute. Contradictions?”

“From what I understand, some sort of trouble happened between you and Class D?” Could it be that, at the very last minute, Ayanokouji did it.

If he ignores my proposal and reports what happened to Karuizawa to the school then it won’t just be me but also Ibuki and Ishizaki receiving the punishment. It won’t end with just the loss of our private points. “Did they file a complaint against us or something?”

“Complaint? From what I understand, a student from Class D was also involved in the destruction of the surveillance camera.”

“What.....?” For a moment, I couldn’t understand what he’s saying and I got confused.

“Class D has already paid private points covering the cost of repairs. What I wanted to confirm is whether or not you’re fine with splitting the blame evenly or not.”

“He’s fucking with me.....” If you think that would stop me from dropping out then you’re making a huge mistake, Ayanokouji. “I’m dropping out.”

“...even though there’s no problem?” Sakagami is no fool.

He’s probably already guessed from this situation that some sort of trouble occurred on the rooftop yesterday. “That’s right. There’s no point in staying at this school anymore.” He has to respect the student’s decision. “I see. If you’ve already decided then I can’t stop you.” Sakagami said so and retrieved a paper from the drawer. “Please write your name, student ID number and reason for withdrawal here.”

“Give me a minute.”

I picked up the pen but Sakagami retrieved two more papers. “After we’re done with your withdrawal, let’s deliver these to Ishizaki and Yamada too.”

“...what? They’ve got nothing to do with this.”

“Yes, they certainly have nothing to do with this. But this is their wish. That should you choose to drop out, they would do the same and I couldn’t talk them out of it.” That bastard Ayanokouji.....did he suggest something unnecessary to those idiots?

Holding Ishizaki and Albert hostage to prevent my withdrawal. If I choose to withdraw here, they’ll go down with me and my very withdrawal would become meaningless. It’d be the same as getting my priorities backwards. “Shit....”. “Personally, I’d rather not have someone from my class withdraw either. That’s how I feel.” Sakagami looked down at the paper I held in my hand. “At this current stage, you can still settle it with nothing more than damage to property. This is your only chance.”

“I wonder exactly what merit there is in having me remain here.” He should know that at the very least, I no longer have any intention of causing problems for Sakayanagi and the others. “I won’t drop out.” I handed the paper back to him and stood up.

PART 3

In no time, strange rumors began circulating among the 1st years.

That Ryuuken Kakeru has stepped down as leader of Class C.

That he’s stopped associating with Ishizaki and the others. That he no longer speaks to anyone.

It’s almost like I’m looking at myself just after enrollment.

Ryuuken, who now spends his time alone.

I wonder if in the future, a day will come when he finds something. I can’t tell. But I can tell this...

He and I are similar. And he may still be worth using.

Short
Stories



HASEBE SHORT STORY: I, HASEBE HARUKA, DON'T PLAN TO CHANGE

After school, the temperature gradually decreased. The Ayanokouji group gathered as usual at the entrance of Keyaki shopping center.

I hurriedly put aside my conversation with Miyacchi and approached Kiyopon.

“Ah, talking about Class C … I saw it~, president~ you really make people hate you~”

Then I used my elbow to touch his flank.

“What did you see?”

Was it because he didn’t realize it, or because he was trying to hide it? Kiyopon’s expression didn’t change and it was as usual.

“And you ask me what I’ve seen… it was the scene of Kiyopon having lunch with Shiina from Class C.”

I didn’t like to beat around the bush, so I launched a frontal attack.

If he was guilty he would show a trace of wavering in his eyes, but despite mentioning Shiina-san’s name, Kiyopon’s attitude was still the same as usual.

“Airi has been concerned about that all the time, she dropped rice several times while eating.”

“Waah, Haruka-chan! We agreed not to say that!”

Airi got angry, her face was blushing.

This frank reaction was really cute, I couldn’t help but tease her a bit.

“Is that so? Then what I said earlier didn’t count.”

Until now, a child that can honestly show her love reaction was very scarce. I really admired her.

Although sometimes there were also girls who showed a calculated love reaction, but I didn’t like them.

“Don’t tell me you were planning to hurriedly start a romantic relationship before Christmas?”

At this very moment, for the sake of Airi, I had to further interrogate him.

“Kiyotaka, is that true? I had the impression you wouldn’t do those vulgar world things...”

“Too naïve, Yukimu, you are too naïve~. Between a man and a woman, it always ends in a romantic emotion in the end. By the way, the term vulgar world is too outdated. Young people nowadays are even more precocious than you imagine.”

“What precocious... we are high school first year students.”

“You know, high school first year students having their first love is already considered late. When I was in elementary school, some classmates were already in a relationship with middle school students or high school students.”

“I-I’ve never heard of that.”

“That’s just because Yukimu, you didn’t pay attention to your surroundings. There are a lot of girls who have no interest in childish male classmates.”

So you boys, you have way too much fantasies about girls. If you want to get a pure and cute girlfriend, you need to pay attention to the surrounding girls like Airi.

“I-I’m sorry, Haruka-chan. That...”

Airi whispered me in a low voice. It looks like she had finally realized I was assisting her.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. You need to confirm at all times whether Kiyopon is single. But Airi, you also need to try your best. If he got a girlfriend, then we wouldn’t be able to be this blunt, right?”

Digging other people's information, no matter if it was thinking or doing it, Airi would never do it.

"Ok."

Airi nodded with resolution, her face red. Airi being so cute, if it was a normal boy, I guess she would have immediately fallen into the enemy hands. They would normally carry the thought of "let's first go out to see if it works."

Miyachhi and Yukimu had more or less understood the situation, but Kiyopon hadn't become aware of it yet.

I really didn't know what he was thinking.

Forget about it, let's sound him out a bit, with a bit of assist fire.

"...But..."

Until now, I had never been in a relationship with anyone.

But I would be lying if I said I had never had anyone I liked.

When I was in elementary school I had one, in middle school I also had one. They were both 2 years older senpai. Unfortunately, I've never talked to any of them. They were intelligent, handsome, good at sports, those types of all-rounded senpai.

More than liking, using the word longing in order to express my feelings would be more fitting.

I had tried to start a conversation countless of times, but I had never gathered enough courage.

I regretted two times.

That was a past where I couldn't even confirm whether that was love or not.

The next time I harbor these kind of feelings, I don't want to regret it again. I had been thinking like this all the way until now.

... In short, the threshold for me to fall in love was a bit high, or maybe I was basically not interested in ordinary boys. As a living creature, this should be very normal. In brief, my ideal standards were extremely high.

Inside our class, Hirata is the closest to my ideal person. However, I'm pursuing an even higher ideal standard.

Recently, I unexpectedly started to think Kiyopon's qualifications were very good.

Although he was not as good as Yukimu at studies, he also looked like he was not as strong as Miyacchi at fighting.

But –I kept feeling that he was unfathomable.

Probably Yukimu and Miyacchi also started to gradually perceive that.

I remembered my astonishment during the sport festivals. The relay race between Kiyopon and the Student Council President.

Until now, nobody knew Kiyopon could run so fast –because he had a terrible precedent.

If Kiyopon was my ideal man.

At that moment, would I be able to suppress my feelings?

I drove out the bad premonition that floated in my heart.

It was hard to come by forming such an intimate group.

The feeling of wanting to support Airi, who was as cute as a small animal, was also very strong.

And no matter how, this must be me over thinking things.

It was only because Kiyopon was full of mysteries.

I bet that if I was in contact with him a little bit more, I would definitely reach the conclusion of “ah, Kiyopon is also an ordinary boy.”

“What’s wrong, Haruka-chan?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

I don’t plan to change.

I will definitely not change.

Be it the place I’m right now or this feeling. I can’t bring whatever unnecessary thing that breaks the equilibrium of this small group.

“I’m sorry, I’ve disturbed you all because of my keen interest, but

“I’m sorry to disturb you while you got excited by your own account, but there’s absolutely no such frivolous thing.”

After hearing my conversation with Yukimu, Kiyopon ridiculed us while being unperturbed.

“Is that so? You are not trying to hush up a scandal?”

“Y-you see? Even though I told Haruka-chan that, she didn’t believe me!”

Ok. The current situation is fine.

I told my heart this again.

I, Hasebe Haruka, don’t plan to change.



HIYORI SHORT STORY: I WISH WE CAN BECOME FRIENDS

That day, I went towards the library when the lunch break started.

I had been going to the library several days in a row in order to look for Raymond Chandler's "Farewell, My Lovely." Recently, due to its popularity, it had been hard to borrow that book.

I didn't have anyone I could consider as friend and I had always been alone.

Of course, it's not like I didn't want to make friends, but I had never been good at dealing with people.

"...It's not here."

As soon as I arrived at the mystery novels section, I immediately dropped my shoulders in disappointment.

I'll come back after the classes are finished to check for it, I need to come here before going to the Tea ceremony club.

Although I was quite happy being alone, I also felt loneliness once in a while.

Ryuuuen-kun couldn't stand to see me like that so he talked to me, but since there were always a lot of people around him, that made me feel very nervous so I wasn't able to stay together with him.

"Eh?"

There was a book placed in a high place.

Suddenly, I realized that the book didn't match with the classification of the section.

Was the staff member who made a mistake?

"En..."

I extended my hand in order to get it down, but I couldn't reach it.

Incredibly, even though I knew I couldn't reach it, I still tried to do it several times.

“I still can’t reach it.”

Then, when I was about to arrive at the conclusion that I couldn’t reach it.

“I might be doing some unnecessary things...”

A boy said that and helped me draw the book that was classified wrongly.

“I recall you are class C’s...”

He said that to me and after that, I also remembered him.

“I recall... you are Ayanokouji-kun, right?”

Thinking back, I saw him previously during Ryuuen’s introduction.

I remember at that moment they were looking for the person who defeated Ryuuen-kun... that sort of stuff.

Although, as a result, they performed a thorough investigation to Class D, but that has nothing to do with the present situation.

I have never been interested in those things.

“Yeah. For now, I’ll give you this.”

“Thank you.”

I took the book and just in case I confirmed the library card.

As expected, this book should be placed in another section.

“Do you like Brontë’s books?”

I opened the book and closed it again. He looked at me as if it was strange.

It looks like he misunderstood me and thought I liked Bronte’s books.

“Personally, I neither like nor dislike anything. But the book was in the

wrong section, so I just wanted to return it to the right place.

“So it was like that...”

At that moment, I noticed a certain thing.

That was the book Ayanokouji-kun was holding in his hand.

“By the way, the book you have in your hands is... ‘Farewell, My Lovely’ right? It’s a masterpiece.”

I didn’t know why but I thought I’d found a comrade, so I couldn’t help but to inquire him.

“I managed to borrow it from a friend today.”

“You’re very luck then, for some unknown reason, Raymond Chandler is very popular amongst the 2nd-year students and the battle over this book has been continuing for a while. I’ve also been wanting to read it for a while now, but today I haven’t been able to find it here either.”

“I’m sorry, I seem to have done something bad. Monopolizing it.”

“I don’t mind. I’ve read this book before. And besides, while looking for that book, I was blessed to run into other books. It seems this school’s library has a large collection of books. If I were to immerse myself into reading them, I might have graduated before I realized.”

“...I see, that might be so”.

After that, I unconsciously talked passionately about books with Ayanokouji-kun.

Although I also realized in the middle of the speech that he remained silent, but that was because extremely happy and I did it involuntarily.

Time passed in the blink of an eye.

I felt lonely because the chat was ending and I unknowingly said the words that didn't match my usual self.

“You have probably not eaten lunch yet, right? If it's okay, would you like to have lunch together with me?”

“.....Eh”

It was normal to be confused.

After all, not even I expected that I would proactively say those kinds of words.

In addition, there seemed to be a lot of dispute between Class C and Class D.

Even if I also believed I would be rejected, I still continued talking.

“There's no one in Class C who likes reading novels, so I have no one I can talk to”

Therefore, I frankly told him my feelings.

“Wouldn't this cause a lot of problems? Right now Class C is in an uproar by actively looking for someone from Class D, right? I think I'm being counted as one of the many suspects.”

“Please don't worry. Last time, I was only helping Ryuu-en-kun as a formality. From the start, I was never interested in things like conflicts. Or is it a problem for you to talk to me?”

“No. If there's no problem on your end, I have nothing to say either.”

“That's a relief. Because creating cracks between classes over such trivial things makes me unhappy. After all, the best thing is for everybody to live in harmony.”

Ayanokouji-kun didn't reveal a disgusted expression, so that made me feel very happy.

“Shall we leave then? Time is flying.”

Maybe I can make a friend with similar interests.

A part of me thought these actions were not like me, while the other part was extremely excited towards this development.

I hoped that, in the future, the dispute between classes wouldn't create a crack between us.

I thought this deep in my heart.

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SAKURA SHORT STORY: I, SAKURA AIRI, HAVE BEEN TOSSED BACK AND FORTH

“I-I see. So you were not having a date.”

Hahaha, great...!

My heart felt at ease, I exhaled in relief.

“But I totally didn’t get that impression, and no matter how many times she asked me I wouldn’t be able to answer. Honestly, it’s really unbearable.”

Ever since I saw Kiyotaka-kun and Shiina-san having lunch together, my heart has been beating very fast.

If she was Kiyotaka-kun’s girlfriend – my heart would probably stop beating.

“You’re very naïve, Airi. You need to confirm it carefully, you know?”

Haruka-chan whispered in my ears in a low voice.

“True, saying Shiina was Kiyopon’s girlfriend was going a bit too far, but the probabilities of both liking each other or Kiyopon harboring feelings towards the other part exist.”

“Eeeeeeh!?”

B-but, if that were the case, perhaps it could be...

“Right? That’s why you need to thoroughly investigate in advance.”

“Saying this, Haruka-chan started talking to Kiyotaka-kun.

“But I feel like you looked rather happy back then, weren’t you?”

Just like that. Haruka-chan asked the questions I wanted to ask in my place.

“I couldn’t show a dislike face either. After all, she is also a first year like me.”

Yes, yes. It was just that, right? Because Kiyotaka-kun is very kind-hearted, that’s why he couldn’t ignore someone if they talked to him.

“Leaving aside the love Haruka said, I’m a bit concerned about the person Class C is looking for. She apologized for eavesdropping me, but Sudo also seemed to discussed with Horikita about being bothered constantly.”

Realizing the topic had shifted from love to a more serious topic, I felt relieved.

“Yes. But it should be half true.”

“T-that high!?”

“Even if Kiyopon said he couldn’t show a disgusted expression, the fact is that he had lunch with a girl, you know? I actually think it’s better to be suspect a bit.”

“Uuuuh. So it was like that after all...?

“Ah, aren’t you over thinking? Perhaps Kiyopon treats everybody like that.”

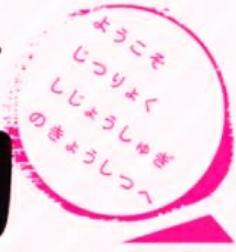
“Yes, yes. It must be that.”

“But~ aren’t boys all like that~?”

“R-r-r-really!?”

I, Sakura Airi, am always been tossed back and forth by my own heart.

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CHABASHIRA SHORT STORY: INVISIBLE DARKNESS

Ayanokouji had contacted with his father.

I was walking in the corridor while my heart was trying to bear with that carefully.

“...What do you mean by you have realized everything?”

Even if I was unclear of the situation, I still showed a calm teacher appearance.

“Chabashira-sensei. I’m saying that everything you’ve told me are basically lies.”

“What are you talking about?”

Not good. I can’t treat the boy in front of my eyes as a normal high school student.

“That man has never contacted with you, Chabashira-sensei. Of course, he also didn’t have you force me to quit school.”

“No, your father asked me for help. In fact, just like what I told you, I’ve been constantly trying to get you expelled.”

Impatience appeared in my heart and Ayanokouji saw through me.

“Stop trying to deceive both of us. Chairman Sakayanagi has told me everything –he told my situation to you the instant my enrollment was

decided.”

I wanted to hide that truth, but Ayanokouji pointed that out.

In that instant, I relaxed.

“...The chairman told you everything?”

I carelessly asked him the question I had in my mind.

Even if I knew Director General would never act hastily, I still made a mistake.

I felt Ayanokouji in an instant smiled a bit.

“Ayanokouji, were you probing me?”

“Yes. The chairman never told me anything about Chabashira-sensei. But I was certain it was related to you, this has become very clear.”

I knew I was going to gradually be dominated here. Even though I only learned about him growing up in a special environment, but what in the world did they do to teach such a strange kid?

I had seen a lot of excellent students during my career. But Ayanokouji was different to them, he was unknown to me.

Ayanokouji revealed his speculations, as if he wanted to unmask all the lies I had told him until now.

What should I do? What should I do in order to use this child?

If only I could step over this obstacle, I could probably be promoted to Class A.

And after that I could finally cover my past.

That's why — no matter what methods I have to use, I must use Ayanokouji.

As long as I can get ahold of something decisive, I can make Ayanokouji be unable to decline.

I've been fighting with the darkness in my heart every day.

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ようこそ
じつりぢやく
しじょうしゅぎ
のきょうしつへ



IBUKI SHORT STORY:

IBUKI, ISHIZAKI, ALBERT AND SHIINA'S DAY

INTRODUCTION

This happened after the second term ended, in the first day of winter vacation. At the same time, it was two days after that “Incident” happened.

That day for Ibuki Mio was an extremely boring day.

Under the cold air, I looked at my reddened fists while heaving a sigh.

“What am I doing...?”

The breath I exhaled slowly dissipated in front of my eyes.

During the first day of the winter vacation, I didn’t know what I was thinking, that I directly went to the boulevard that lead to the school after waking up.

After that I beat up Ryuuen and following that, I should’ve gone to the dorms in order to warm myself.

I thought this was enough to make me satisfied.

However, I didn’t know why but I was still staying in the boulevard.

“Aha. It’s so cold.”

Being alone, I started to meditate.

About what happened yesterday.

The incident of that moment.

All these disturbances happening in quick succession, I could only believe we were possessed by something.

All the things that happened until now, that event.

Don't tell me I—

No, including Ryuuken, everything that happened was in that man's expectations.

In retrospect, since I entered this school, there hadn't been a peaceful day and there had been a lot of commotions.

Right after being assigned to Class C, Ryuuken Kakeru started to control the class.

Of course, the people in the class didn't acknowledge him at first and defied him.

Ishizaki and Komiya didn't need to be said, even Kaneda didn't acknowledge Ryuuken's attitude of using power to control.

Ryuuken, with that kind of attitude, would naturally be alienated and suppressed by class C.

It even gave people the feeling that abuse would appear inside the class.

However, that guy did a frontal resistance. He didn't even care about the existence of the surveillance cameras and school rules and sent Ishizaki and the others flying—Honestly, I was shocked at that moment.

But Ryuuen had understood from the very beginning. The conflicts within the class couldn't be reported to the school. Because that would be the same to shooting oneself in the foot.

Ryuuen repeated those indiscriminate things multiple times and at the same time he saw through the closest point to the limits of the rules.

In fact, until yesterday, Ryuuen had used a lot of methods to lead class C.

Those thoughts and plots of his brought him "pride."

In his own wishful thinking, he believed he would never lose if there were rule violations.

That incident was bound to happen, that's why it happened.

That defeat had its origins in Class C not being able to stop the student Ryuuen Kakeru.

Although all of this happening to the horrid Ryuuen had nothing to do with me, I didn't know why I felt anger.

I didn't know the reason why I felt anger.

Even if I didn't think about anything, I couldn't wipe this anger out from me.

What is making me feel irritated?

"Ah, really! Don't think about it."

Why do I have to waste the winter holiday's time to ponder over those things?

Before I noticed, the boulevard that led to the school building that was welcoming the winter vacation was overflowing with students wearing casual clothes.

They were probably preparing to go to the Keyaki mall to enjoy the winter vacation.

No matter what, that was unrelated to me. There didn't exist anyone that could be considered my friend.

"Too slow..."

I had already been waiting for 30 minutes. My patience was already at its limit, so I took out my phone to try to urge the other person.

"Yo, Ibuki. I've kept you waiting."

Before I called him, the target approached me.

Ishizaki said that and started a conversation with me. Standing beside him was Albert.

"How long did you want me to wait?"

"I'm sorry. We were also struggling a bit."

"...is that so?"

"Anyways, it could be considered a success. But Ryuu-en-san is very mad."

"I guess so. Your injuries have also increased."

Ishizaki must have been hit strongly in the face by him, it looked very painful and he was caressing his reddened face.

However, his face didn't show anger or regret, he looked very cheerful.

"You've been beaten up and yet you look so pleased, are you a masochist?"

"Don't joke around. I'm just very happy, that's all."

Eh...isn't that just being a masochist?

Although I thought that, Ishizaki's eyes were flickering and he looked really satisfied.

"You've been suppressed by Ryuuen until now, shouldn't you be resentful towards him?"

I asked him the doubt I felt with another meaning.

Ishizaki had been regularly blamed for his incompetence under Ryuuen's dictatorship.

Adding punishment to that, the person who got beaten up the most was Ishizaki.

"To tell the truth, regarding that, I'm certainly feeling dissatisfied... but."

"What?"

"Nothing. Now I already acknowledge him, or perhaps I should say I respect him."

Was it because this guy got beaten so many times that his brain become weird? To go as far as to acknowledge that kind to person?

And respect him?

"In my eyes he's just a loser that got too carried away."

"Don't say such things about Ryuuen-san."

Uwa, so disgusting. He probably got beaten up too many times that his brain has become weird.

But from Albert, who was standing behind Ishizaki, I could also feel a similar atmosphere than Ishizaki's coming through his sunglasses.

"...Don't tell me, you also think in the same way?"

I faced Albert to ask him and he nodded slightly his head without saying anything.

“Haa. I can’t understand it. What’s so good in that guy?”

Even if I asked this, Albert didn’t answer me.

“If you took it seriously, even if the adversary was Ryuuen, you could also win.”

If it was a normal quarrel, Albert would have an overwhelming advantage.

Actually, Albert obtained victory in three of the three direct confrontations in the past.

Only that during the time I wasn’t aware, those two were constantly repeating the fight, and in the end, Albert became one of Ryuuen’s generals. I understood the situation to some extent, but that still was really inconceivable.

However, Ishizaki seemed to understand Albert.

“Albert unexpectedly hates fights.”

That must be something that men mutually understand, Ishizaki laughed while poking Albert’s flank.

“You have that body and yet you hate fights?”

“Apart from the ones Ryuuen-san instructed him to beat, have you ever seen Albert beating someone?”

“...Probably not. No, but, all the more reason then.”

As long as he didn’t follow Ryuuen, he wouldn’t need to beat anyone.

“Ryuuen-san let him experience what is manliness.”

Not knowing why, Ishizaki said those words I failed to understand and slapped Albert's back.

"Aah I see, forget about it. I shouldn't have hoped for a serious reason."

In short, I had understood the situation from Ishizaki's words, so it was time to go back.

Today I had been standing outside for a lot of hours, I was almost frozen to death.

"I'm going back."

I said this, but I didn't know why, Ishizaki peeped at me with a serious face.

I couldn't help but want to kick him flying, but I managed to restrain myself.

"Ibuki, if you don't mind, do you want to come with us for a tea?"

"...What?"

What did this person say just now?

I didn't manage to understand his words, so I stayed stiffly. Ishizaki asked again.

"Let's go drink tea."

Don't tell me this guy was inviting me?

The idiot Ishizaki was inviting me?

The moment I was pondering about this, Ishizaki denied that while being flustered.

"No, I'll say it in advance, I don't have any weird thoughts. I'm very normal, I'm more concerned about Ryuuen-san? Ah, if I say it like that it becomes weirder. In short, it's not like that. And Albert is coming with us."

What kind of explanation was that?

But his words didn't seem to be lies.

Even though Ishizaki was rude and violent (although I don't have the right to say that about others), his personality was very honest.

I understood Albert also wanted to drink tea with me –although I didn't know why he wanted to drink tea with me.

Those kind of things had never happened until now, where did this sudden impulse come from?

Or was it because yesterday's events left them a deep impression?

"If anything happens, I will also knock you down, there's no problem in that."

"I'm telling you I don't have that kind of intention. I'll definitely not have those kinds of thoughts towards you. Definitely not."

Being directly rejected like this, why did it make me feel a bit in a bad mood?

"To sum it up, you will accompany us for a bit. After all, you don't have anything planned for winter vacation, right?"

"...I understand."

Although I was not willing, my schedule for winter holidays was completely in blank.

In addition, since I had been standing outside for so long, my hands were almost frozen.

"If you want to go, then hurry up."

"Albert, do you also want to come?"

Facing Ishizaki, who was inquiring him, Albert calmly nodded his head.

PART 1

During the first day of the winter vacation, there were students everywhere in Keyaki mall.

To the point that I couldn't help but regret that I was too hasty to come here.

“Returning to our main topic, I didn't expect you would stay on our side.”

“What are you saying?”

“I'm talking about Ryuuen-san's issue. I thought you hated him.”

“Ha? It's clear that I hate him.”

What kind of misinterpretation led him to that conclusion?

“Then, why did you contact with us today?”

“That's—”

It was just that it put me in a bad mood that that guy fled without permission.

But Ishizaki and the others would certainly not be able to understand my feelings.

Since I entered this school until now, I had never liked Ryuuen. It was only that I acknowledged his abilities in a certain extent.

That was why I was feeling irritated because of the things that happened in these 2 days.

“Anyways, it has nothing to do with you.”

“Well that’s true.”

It looked like the person who asked didn’t plan to inquire any further.

Ishizaki munched the ice cubes while drinking ice coffee with lots of gomme syrup in it.

“Why are you drinking ice coffee during this season?”

“There’s nothing bad about that. It’s just because it’s very cold that’s why drinking cold drinks will be more delicious.”

Of course, Albert and I ordered hot drinks.

“Anyway, what’s going to happen when the third term starts? Iya, really.”

Ishizaki took the initiative, and after finishing the drink his body was trembling. It looked like the ice cubes were very cold. He’s stupid.

“How I would know those kind of things.”

“But... we need to think about that, don’t we?”

What exactly did Ishizaki want me to say?

Even if we didn’t think about that, it was very clear.

“Even if I think about that, Ryuuuen’s decision won’t change. You are free to fret by your own accord, but you’re probably wasting your time.”

“Uh...”

I used an intense tone to say the strict words.

I knew it. He probably wanted me to assist him, but it was really a waste of time.

Although I thought they were thinking about indecent things, it was that after all.

“But.”

“No buts.”

“Ryuu-en-san’s thing is like this, Class D’s—”

“Stop.”

I used the most straightforward tone I had used today to stop Ishizaki and glared at him.

“Listen carefully. I forbid any topic related to “them.” If you can’t respect that, I will be leaving.”

Since I told him that, Ishizaki had no choice but to admit defeat.

“I understand. I really understand.”

Ishizaki, in a panic, tried to ease my mood.

After all, I didn’t know why I had to discuss those things with these two.

“I’m leaving once I’ve finished this drink.”

There was still half of the drink left. I should drink it a bit faster.

“I’m not going to talk about that, do you really hate that topic?”

“I hate that. And after yesterday, the number of people I hate has increased to 2”.

That’s all.

“Good morning Ibuki-san.”

When we were having this tea party without chatting too much, Shiina came to us.

She had her schoolbag and a drink in her hands.

“What?”

When I replied her indistinctly, Shiina smiled and said.

“I started a conversation with you by accident since I was thinking that this combination is a rare sight. Isn’t it?”

“Is it? We are frequently together.”

“Not true.”

I hated being considered by others that “I was always together with Ishizaki”, so I replied immediately.”

“May I join you?”

In the exams that needed to use the brain, she could be considered Class C’s treasure. Together with Kaneda, they had been asked for help by Ryuuen multiple times. But at the same time, she normally didn’t have any contact with us.

“There’s no problem with her joining, right?”

Because she was a student Ryuuen acknowledged, Ishizaki and Albert easily accepted her.

“Then, excuse me for disturbing.”

“Where did you go by wearing the school uniform?”

“I’m from the Tea ceremony club. During winter holidays we also have to continue with the club activities.”

“Tea ceremony club... what do you do in there?”

“We do a lot of things. Learning etiquette, how to handle the tools or receiving guidance.

“Ha, so there are still people that want to do those kinds of things.”

Ishizaki interrupted his conversation with Shiina, and said that while feeling bored.

Although I was completely unaware of it, from Shiina I heard that there were very few members in the tea ceremony club.

“If you don’t mind, do you want to try joining the club?”

“I’m not joining. I hate club activities.”

Ishizaki started chewing the remaining half of the ice cubes in the cup.

“I’m changing the topic a bit... actually, I saw Ryuuen-kun this morning.”

Shiina also mentioned Ryuuen.

“Since he was wearing the school uniform, I was a bit concerned.”

“Don’t worry, there’s nothing.”

“Is that so. I feel at ease after hearing your words.”

With these members, if that guy wasn’t present, they would naturally mention him.

I was planning to leave silently, but Albert grabbed my shoulder.

“What are you doing, it doesn’t matter if I go back. There’s also nothing to say.”

Facing me, who was saying these words, Albert silently pointed at the drinks.

“...Do you want me to not leave until I’ve finished the drink?”

It seemed that since I had said I would be leaving after I finished drinking, I had no choice but to do so.

Right now I was a bit in a bad mood, so I planned to just finish it.

“So hot.”

“Ara ara, don’t force yourself. I remember Ibuki-san can’t handle hot food, right?”

“So noisy. Me being able to handle hot food or not has nothing to do with you.”

“But we are classmates.”

Even if we were classmates, what about it?

Right now, asking for that kind of stuff in Class C was cruel.

“Starting the third term we will drop to Class D. The battle has already ended.”

“Not necessarily, we Class C will definitely rise again.”

Shiina said with a serious face the words that made people feel uncomfortable.

“What’s that? Do you have any basis? Or do you want to lead the class?”

“Of course I will provide assistance to the class. After that, we will gather everybody’s strength.”

Even though I had thought this child always said things as if she was missing something, but I never expected it would be to such extent.

What Class C lacked the most was unity – that is, helping each other.

That was something that didn't exist in a Class C that Ryuuen led alone until now.

Even Shiina should have understood those things.

"We may be late by a lot compared to others. But for that reason, from now on we need to help each other in order to be promoted to higher classes, don't you agree?"

"I see. Then do your best. I'm not participating."

I really wanted to leave earlier, but I still hadn't finished the drink yet.

If I had known, I wouldn't have ordered a hot drink and should've chosen a cold drink instead.

"Why are you so irritated? Even if you are usually like this..."

"You too, do you plan to have a fight with me?"

"I don't plan to do that."

"By the way Iwasaki-kun, you look like you've suffered a lot of injuries."

"So you've only realized now. And I'm not called Iwasaki, but Ishizaki."

"Haha, I'm just joking. I remember clearly all the classmate's names."

It looked like the reason Shiina, who usually didn't interact with us, didn't approach us because of Ryuuen not being here.

It was because she saw Ishizaki and Albert's injuries and she was concerned about the specific details.

"How did you get those injuries?"

"Well, some stuff happened."

“Some stuff?”

“Actually, yesterday—”

I believed Ishizaki would say unnecessary things so I unwillingly joined the conversation.

“Because he had differences with Ryuuuen about the policies and had an argument. After that he got beaten up.”

It’s like that, right? – I glared like this at Ishizaki and he nodded in agreement.”

“Difference in policies… that’s a rare sight.”

Since Ishizaki usually was stuck together with Ryuuuen, it was difficult to imagine those things happening.

“Don’t tell me you had a fight with Ryuuuen-kun?”

That was ridiculing Ryuuuen while he was not being here.

Albert realized what I meant, faced Shiina and nodded.

“I think sometimes fighting is good, but please make up as soon as possible. If you need it, I can also help you.”

“What can you do?”

“I will request Ryuuuen-kun and tell him “please stop fighting””

It seemed that she didn’t intend to do anything special and directly convey that to Ryuuuen.

With her like that, it was really fortunate that she didn’t get beaten by Ryuuuen until now.

However, Shiina was not good at sports and disliked violent conducts, so Ryuuen wouldn't take it to the heart.

After all, she had never done anything that went against Ryuuen's policies, as it should be.

“Fu, I've finished my drink. Bye.”

“Are you going back now?”

“I've kept company to you to this extent, it should be enough already.”

“Ah, by the way, Ibuki-san. I've heard that interesting movies are going to be released soon. If you don't mind, do you want to watch them together?”

“I'm not going.”

Even if I wanted to go, I would go alone.

“I see... it's a pity.”

I picked up the empty cup and left the seat.

If I continued to frolic with these guys, I was afraid I would get hives.

Moreover—

Right now, I had never been so angry to myself.

That's right.

I had finally realized why I had been so irritated in these past two days.

It wasn't Ryuuen's fault, nor Ishizaki nor Albert's fault. And of course, it wasn't related to the Shiina who appeared by chance.

I couldn't forgive myself.

That was the reason of my irritation.

If I was a bit more reliable, things wouldn't have developed in a way that made Class C be in such a dire situation.

Ryuuuen Kakeru wouldn't have made a mistake as the leader.

It was because I arrived at this conclusion.

If I kept staying in that place, I would have continued losing my temper.

That's why I wanted to hurry up and be alone.

"I say, Ibuki."

Ishizaki called me, who wanted to escape.

"What else do you want??"

"Don't you just shoulder everything alone, you should also consult with us."

"Ha-?"

I inadvertently made a dry laugh sound.

"You're kidding. Who would look for you to discuss things? And there's nothing to talk about."

A group of people that normally were very stupid, but why were they so sharp only in times like this?

"Ibuki-san, let's talk again together next time."

Shiina also said that, and the silent Albert stared at me.

That really looked as if those 3 people invited me in order to cheer me up.

In retrospect, no matter if it was Ishizaki or Albert who invited me to drink tea, or Shiina after seeing the group composition, the first member they talked to was always me.

What is this.

I had never hoped for these kind of things.

Not being able to endure that scene, I started walking.

I didn't hope for that kind of warm environment.

I thought today was an extremely boring day and at the same time it was a no way out day.

But, in reality, the “real no way out day” would come just a bit later.