

NOVEL

6

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE 2

YEAR

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

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"Your eyes are glued to my underwear. You're naughty, senpai."

"Sorry, but it's not like I'm trying to look at it. It's more like I'm more worried about what you'll do to me if I stop watching you."

I kept my eyes locked on her. Amasawa pulled her head out from under my bed and turned around to face me. Exuding an air of maturity that you wouldn't expect from someone a year my junior, she was crawling toward me.



SPORTS FESTIVAL – VOLLEYBALL TOURNAMENT





SAKAYANAGI ARISU



6

WELCOME TO THE CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

NOVEL 6

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku



Seven Seas Entertainment

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Chapter 1: Akito Miyake's Soliloquy

I'VE NEVER ONCE thought of myself as someone special. Sure, I don't have any particular strengths or anything, but on the other hand, I don't really have any major faults either. I'm just an average Joe. I've basically just lived my life doing whatever I wanted, coasting on by and going with the flow. I've done some bad things from time to time, and I've done some kind things too, in my own way. I'm not a good person, but I'm not a bad person either. If I had to evaluate myself, that's how I'd describe the kind of guy I am.

I mean, ever since I was born, I've pretty much gone around just being a regular person, you know? Not particularly good or bad. That didn't become so obvious to me until I came to this high school, though. I started taking up archery just because I happened to see it on TV and figured I'd give it a try to kill some time. I've just lived my life, well, normally. Like surrendering myself to the river's flow.

I wasn't interested in anything big—I didn't really care. My daily routine was this repetitive cycle of staying put and keeping away from things. It might have been boring, but I did it because I thought it'd be easy. Maybe it was a consequence of that lifestyle, but I didn't have anyone I could call a friend right away in high school. I didn't really feel lonely or anything, but... Unexpectedly, all of a sudden, I happened to make some friends.

Keisei, Kiyotaka, Haruka, and Airi. There were five of us, including me. I was weirdly comfortable with that small group of people. And at the same time, I felt like I'd be spending the rest of my days at this school without a care in the world, together with those four other people. Even though my environment had changed, I was still me. I knew that part would never change, at least.

But despite my expectations, there was a major change. Falling for somebody. There've been people of the other sex who I thought were, like, cute or beautiful or whatever, but I never had a *crush* on anybody before. I wonder when it all started...

When I started staring at Haruka from the side.

I was fully convinced that I'd caught feelings when Haruka said she was going to let herself get expelled during the Unanimous Special Exam. I realized I couldn't accept being separated from her. My emotions took priority over logic. I wanted to protect Haruka, even if it meant abandoning Airi, who was another part of our same friend group, and who I also cherished. I didn't know if the feelings I had were okay, if they could even be allowed. I prioritized my wanting to protect Haruka and didn't weigh the pros and the cons of the situation. But I had no regrets.

"Will you go along with my revenge plans?"

The words Haruka just muttered snapped me back to reality. Her eyes looked the same as always as she looked at me—they were fierce, looking straight ahead, and the color of danger. But she had the determination to accept what might come, without a hint of hesitation. There wasn't a single cloud of doubt there. I didn't answer her question out loud. I mean...I couldn't.

Her revenge would absolutely cause trouble for our friends and many of our classmates. She probably saw right through me and guessed what I was feeling, because Haruka laughed and turned away. She walked on ahead, alone. The old me would've indifferently watched her go. It would've made way more sense to do that. How much easier would it be if I just watched her back as she left?

Man, I never knew that liking someone could be so much trouble. It's so hard, and so messy.

I...

No matter how many people would come to hate me in the days to come...

I couldn't just let her go it alone. My heart wouldn't let me. On that day, the day the Sports Festival ended, I... I made up my

mind and steeled my nonexistent resolve.

Chapter 2: The Price Of Victory

THE UNANIMOUS SPECIAL EXAM was over. After Saturday and Sunday passed by, the new school week began. It was now September 20th. After waking up around six o'clock in the morning, I turned on the TV and started preparing breakfast. A new Monday was here, but things were going to be very different today compared to the way they'd been, up through the previous week. And no one needed to do any deductions to figure out why that was the case.

There were two major issues casting this shadow over the class. First, there were new, major fissures that had been created in the relationships between classmates. Kushida, driven into a corner, had laid bare a number of students' secrets during the exam. The second issue was the fact that the prerequisite we had laid out for the vote, that we would only expel the traitor (meaning Kushida) had been overturned. As a result, the other students' trust in Horikita and me had been shaken.

"Should we expel someone, or should we not?" Presented with that choice, I made everyone vote in favor of the issue, based on the promise that only the traitor would be expelled. Then, I took advantage of the groundwork I had laid beforehand, backing Kushida into a corner. After I got her to confess that she was the traitor, I enacted my plan to get her expelled. Kushida had some protection from students who wanted to believe in her and those who favored her, but she ultimately lost their trust when she revealed her true nature and began sharing everyone's secrets.

She was just one step away from being expelled from school, but something totally unexpected happened. Horikita Suzune spoke up. After learning the truth about Kushida, she appealed to the class, telling them that Kushida was a talented person that the class needed. If that weren't enough, Horikita even went so far as to declare she would never agree to Kushida's expulsion. Originally, I was the only person who promised that the traitor would be

expelled; Horikita had simply agreed with the idea and nothing more. But I was still shocked that she chose to defend Kushida.

The choice we had to make in what little time we had left shifted. Should we keep Kushida and accept the penalty that came with running out of time? Or should we expel someone else and clear the exam? At any rate, as I mentioned previously, our classmates' trust in Horikita and me was being shaken. Horikita changed the policies we set, and I went ahead and accepted those changes. I even announced who was going to be expelled.

There were those who were genuinely hurt that their fleeting romantic feelings were revealed. There were friends who heard the kinds of insults and bad-mouthing that went on behind their backs and were now feeling deeply suspicious of each other. There were those who lost friends, who resented their others they thought they were close to. The seriousness of the situation in the class, and the reasons that it had come to this, were far too many to count.

However, this fallout from secrets being revealed wasn't a problem worth panicking over. That was something that had been planned from the beginning. It was a necessary expense and impossible to avoid if I wanted to trap Kushida. She had been trusted so deeply up until that point.

It was easy to simply view the current situation as a negative, but I didn't see things that way. If you looked at things that way, then you couldn't gain valuable experience. It would then be a missed opportunity for growth.

"We were the only one of the four classes who had someone get expelled. Our classmates were deeply hurt. In exchange for that, we gained Class Points." No. It was important for them to change their perspective on the situation and veer away from that kind of thinking. Instead of focusing solely on the hurt and pain and leaving it at that, they had to look beyond, at the bigger picture. The students had to see that it was precisely *because* people were hurt that they had gained an opportunity to strengthen their bonds. By doing that, Horikita's class could become even stronger.

It was unclear how many students were aware of that, but they needed to confront the problem anyway. They couldn't shy away from it.

In a way, the special exam was still ongoing for Horikita's class. The weight and the value of those 100 Class Points was heavy. This was the perfect opportunity to look back and reflect on their actions, to understand things further. If things were left as they were, the class could very well get stuck in a rut, so they needed to be careful. If left unchecked, there was a chance that these wounds could open up even more.

After I finished my breakfast, I checked my phone with one hand while I brushed my teeth. It didn't seem like I had gotten any calls or texts after the last time I checked in the middle of the night.

"Even so..." I muttered.

This wasn't the outcome that I originally foresaw. Even now, I was still shocked the special exam had taken such an unexpected turn. Looking at the situation with various philosophies in mind, such as rationality, conformity, and objectivity, there was no choice but to expel Kushida Kikyou. She had continuously, persistently voted in favor of the issue during the exam and threw the class into chaos. I had determined beforehand that expelling her would cause the least amount of damage to the class, and then everyone would be able to shift their full attention to the Sports Festival directly afterward.

In other words, from my own subjective point of view, Horikita's choice to not expel the traitor Kushida Kikyou was an unthinkable, irrational mistake. Still, even though I felt it was clearly the wrong thing to do, I had supported Horikita's decision and steered the class toward expelling Airi. That meant I had chosen to resign myself to an irrational mistake. That option would have been entirely impossible for the old me, before I had come to this school. So...what was my reason for accepting it now?

The student known as Horikita Suzune had stronger feelings for Kushida than she did for other students. Without a doubt, Kushida was someone very special to Horikita. She held her in the same esteem as a close friend, even though that particular label

wasn't technically correct. It made sense to keep around those who were special to you. But if you based your judgments on those priorities, it would ultimately be unfair. Moreover, it could be seen as an abuse of power for someone in a leadership position—a position that Horikita was becoming increasingly established in.

It'd probably be easier to understand if one simply considered Haruka's perspective, for example. She was Airi's best friend. In Haruka's eyes, Kushida, who stubbornly continued to insist on the option of expelling someone, was evil and thus should've been eliminated. And also in her view, Horikita and I advanced the discussion based on the premise that we'd be eliminating that evil. That was precisely why she herself had voted in favor of expelling someone. But despite all that, her best friend had been expelled as a result of Horikita's favoritism toward Kushida.

After everything that had happened, I was certain that there was no way she'd be on board with anything you tried to convince her to do. Not even something as simple as "Hey, let's all do our best next week."

At the same time, you couldn't forget that this wasn't an easy decision for Horikita either, not in the slightest. This special exam forced us into making that difficult choice, and Horikita made her answer clear. She took on the risk of putting herself in the line of fire, bearing whatever attacks came her way, and declared she was going to stand by Kushida.

That alone would've been an impossible choice for an ordinary, run-of-the-mill student to make. Horikita was prepared for others to talk behind her back. They would say she was being unfair because she believed keeping Kushida around would be in the class's best interests.

"It's tough to say whether she made the right choice at this current stage though," I mused aloud.

Before the Unanimous Special Exam was held, Kushida was clearly more valuable than Airi in terms of what benefits she brought to the class. Even after the incident, after Kushida exposed everyone's secrets, she still held that advantage over Airi. However, it was also true that the large gap that existed between

them before definitely narrowed. In addition, at this stage, Kushida herself never claimed to have any kind of change of heart. Others would expect her to keep being uncooperative with the class in the future. In other words, there was no guarantee that keeping Kushida around would be beneficial to the class.

Horikita was mistaken about how things would develop on that front. My conclusion on that alone hadn't changed.

Nevertheless, there was one single reason why I supported Horikita's line of thinking. It might sound blunt, but I wanted to see Horikita's growth. I wanted to see what direction it would go in, and ultimately the results of that growth. That was why.

I could only wonder what consequences were in store as a result of the actions that Ayanokouji Kiyotaka could never have opted to take?

I wanted to see the chemical reaction that was going to result from keeping Kushida in class. Would Horikita reach Class A by a slim margin and prove that she had made the right choice? Or would the class crumble, making her realize her error? Perhaps this could even bring about some other unexpected change. At the very least, I thought it was very likely that it'd end up creating a negative chain reaction, but...

Anyway, when I booted up the OAA app on my phone, I saw that Sakura Airi's name was already removed from the class roster. It was almost as though no student by that name was even there in the first place. I tucked my phone away in my uniform's right pocket, grabbed my bag, and headed for the door.

Aside from the situation in Horikita's class, there were things happening in the other classes that I found concerning. Ryuuuen and Sakayanagi had both expressed a desire to fight against one another in the year-end final exam. For Ryuu'en's part, it wasn't so strange for him to select Class A so he could snatch away their Class Points...but why did Sakayanagi go for it? There was no benefit for her in choosing Ryuu'en's class, since it was ranked the lowest at the time. Was it because she was allied with Ichinose? Or was it because she had decided that crushing Ryuu'en was the best course of action?

I wondered if the “promise” that Sakayanagi and Ryuuen made with one another was also relevant somehow. I supposed I should keep a close eye on that as well. Sakayanagi and Ryuuen going up against each other was the best possible scenario from the perspective of Horikita’s class, but...

After leaving my room at the same time I always did, I made my way to leave the dormitory. When I got off the elevator, I was met with a familiar sight: Horikita was sitting on the sofa in the lobby, waiting for someone. She glanced over at me but showed no signs of getting up right away. However, perhaps due to the fact that there wasn’t anyone else around right at that very moment, she eventually did stand and approach me.

“Are you waiting for Kushida?” I asked, breaking the ice.

Horikita paused for a moment, struggling to find the words. Then, she finally answered.

“Seems like you saw right through me. Yes, I am. I actually went to her room a few times over the weekend, but, well...”

It sounded like Horikita wanted to try and provide Kushida with some emotional support, but she hadn’t been able to reach her. I was sure that for Kushida, what happened must have been the most humiliating thing she had ever experienced in her entire life. There was no way she’d want to face Horikita so soon after that. Perhaps Horikita had been waiting for Kushida to come down to the lobby for quite some time now, maybe even from an early hour. But what bothered me more was that I could easily see the dark circles under Horikita’s eyes, indicating a lack of sleep.

“It seems like you’re really worried about this situation with Kushida,” I commented.

“Huh? Oh, no, that’s not it,” Horikita replied. “Yes, I’ve been experiencing a lack of sleep, but for a slightly different reason. She’s never left her room, not even once. No matter how many times I went to check on her, she didn’t answer. She just pretended to be out. It’s like she’s completely walled herself in there. I was still determined to meet her though, so I staked her out, and...”

"You said she's been holed up in her room... Does that mean you've been waiting by her door?"

Even if Horikita had only been doing that over the weekend, it was still a big deal if she was camping outside Kushida's room from morning until night.

"I repeatedly rang her doorbell and waited," said Horikita. "But even so, I didn't hear a single sound from inside her room. It was completely quiet."

I could see Kushida having enough food stored in her room to remain holed up in there for two or three days.

"Besides, we need to be mindful of our surroundings, don't we? It wouldn't do us any good if the other classes found out that Kushida-san was shut away in her room."

So Horikita, on high alert, continued to wait in the hallway for Kushida to come out. It truly had been a grueling weekend for her. An ordinary student would've likely buckled under Horikita's persistence, but Kushida was Kushida. She was just waiting it out, without giving Horikita the slightest bit of sympathy.

"After what happened the other day, she can't just carry on like she used to," said Horikita.

"Since you made the choice to keep Kushida in class, I suppose it's only right that you follow up with her, yeah," I replied.

Horikita nodded, her determination showing. But it seemed like she still hadn't marshaled her thoughts about the matter.

"Ayanokouji-kun, how...was your weekend?" she asked.

By that, of course, she was really asking how things were with the Ayanokouji Group. Since I was the one to name Airi and got her expelled, I supposed Horikita was thinking that must have created more problems than keeping Kushida around would have.

"I exchanged a few messages with Keisei and Akito, but that was about it," I replied.

The topic of Airi wasn't brought up during any of those conversations, however. It was more that I didn't really know how to touch on it though, rather than I didn't try to. And as for

Haruka, there wasn't any indication that she had read any of my messages. I wasn't an expert on how to use the app or anything, but I wouldn't have been surprised if she at least blocked me, even if she hadn't left the group chat.

"You still haven't been able to talk to Hasebe-san?" Horikita asked.

"You're right, I haven't. As you'd expect, I couldn't muster up the courage to send her a message."

Horikita gave me an apologetic look and bowed her head to me. Even if I forced us into having a face-to-face talk over this, it would be impossible for us to resolve the situation like that right now. It would be more realistic for the three of them to maintain their existing group relationship with me out of the picture instead of me trying to repair my relationship with them. The best option here was probably to sit and wait. That way, even if Haruka resented me over the situation, her resentment would gradually fade over time.

If that happened, it would actually be quite convenient for the class. But we needed to be prepared for the case that it didn't. If Haruka continued to resent me, Horikita, and the rest of the class, there was a nonzero chance that this personal situation would lead to her harming the class as a whole. Her abilities weren't essential for the class, but it would be disadvantageous to take away one more pawn that could be used in its own way, thereby reducing the class's maximum value. It was also possible that a chain of events could result where, thanks to their incidental connection to Haruka, Akito and Keisei's strengths and utility would diminish as well.

"I don't think anything I say would get through to her right now anyway," I added. "All I can do is wait."

This was most definitely not something to be discussed in a place like this though. After we had each gotten a grasp on the other's situation, Horikita sighed quietly.

"My forcing the choice to keep Kushida-san caused a change in your relationship," she said.

I had been the one to name Airi directly and guided the discussion toward choosing her, sure, but I took on that role of my own volition. That part, at the very least, was all on me.

"There's no need for you to apologize twice for the same thing," I told Horikita. "If you thought it was the right thing to do, then it's fine."

"But you covered for me. No, actually, not just that..."
Horikita seemed like she was getting her thoughts in order, choosing her words carefully. "Even if I tried to guide the class toward expelling Sakura-san in that situation, I'm sure it would have been impossible for me to convince Hasebe-san to give in, even at the very last minute. I wouldn't have been able to avoid the penalty that came with letting time run out."

Having spent the weekend cooling off and thinking it over, Horikita was now able to see the situation clearly. She understood the burden of the role of sentencing someone to be expelled and the difficulty in carrying it out. The fight that had taken place in that limited amount of time was even tougher than she had originally imagined. While I could tell that she was relieved we had avoided a worst-case scenario, I could still see some traces of unease in her eyes.

To a significant extent, Horikita had been looking for the path leading to salvation, where no one was expelled because time was running out. A world where we weren't fewer than thirty-nine people. Hoping that big "if" had happened, where even though we lost Class Points, we deepened our bonds with one another by protecting our friends and would strive to reach Class A once again. Horikita herself knew that such thoughts were an escape too. That was precisely why she was holding those feelings deep inside, even as they attempted to rise to the surface.

"It was almost like you were able to see and understand everything in that exam, from the very beginning," she said.

"It's not like I can see the future," I told her. "I simply considered every possibility and dealt with them accordingly."

"That's what's so incredible, though. I can visualize things to a certain extent, but I can't read situations perfectly," she said.

"The nature of the issues, what kinds of statements you should give to make people do what you want them to do—you did it all, based on your calculations."

Horikita was beginning to see the world as I saw it, and to think about it little by little.

"Reflecting on what happened and analyzing it is all well and good, but don't you think that, right now, dealing with the class's problems comes first?" I asked.

"Y-yes. You're right..." she conceded.

"Don't go expecting the environment to be the same as it was before the exam," I warned her.

"I'm prepared for that, of course," she said. "Hasebe-san undoubtedly holds a grudge against me, and I'm sure that Yukimura-kun and Miyake-kun feel the same. And I'm sure that there are also students who disagree with me forcing the decision to keep Kushida-san in the class."

Horikita said that she was prepared, but it was hard to tell whether she understood what that truly meant yet. Just how long could she remain calm over the changes that would come as a result of the decisions that she herself had made? If these were positive changes, that would be fine. But this time around, it was the exact opposite. These changes were bad. Students probably weren't going to view her as someone who had worked hard and contributed to an increase in Class Points.

"You should've already gone ahead to school," said Horikita.

She was busy trying to deal with Kushida right now anyway, so there wasn't any point in me trying to drag out the conversation.

"Yeah, it wouldn't be good if we carelessly drew attention to ourselves here," I agreed.

It wasn't just students from Horikita's class who lived in this dormitory. People from the other classes that we should be calling our enemies like Sakayanagi and Ryuuken lived here as well. I didn't think it was possible to keep a lid on everything, like regarding the matter of Kushida's true nature, but that didn't mean

that we should be handing them something to exploit by revealing that information ourselves either.

Our class had scored major points, that was true. Whether the students were able to successfully deal with the cost of that win would depend on what they did in the days to come. But, before that...

There was an immediate problem that I could see when it came to fixing the situation in class, and along with what to do about it.

2.1

WHEN I ENTERED the classroom, I immediately noticed that the feeling in the air was significantly different from the way things were before the special exam. For one thing, there were a few students who were looking my way. Many of the onlookers were students I had no close associations with on a daily basis, but I supposed it wasn't surprising that they were looking at me. Up until recently, I had been on the sidelines, a passive observer, but during the test I had demonstrated that I was willing to take drastic action.

There must have been many things they didn't quite understand yet either, like my relationship with Kushida, the behavior that I had shown before the exam, and so on. But even though these students were concerned, there didn't seem to be any who were willing to come up and ask me anything directly.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."

And in the midst of this situation, as soon as she spotted me in class, Matsushita approached me happily.

"Morning," I answered.

The stares of the guys and girls in class morphed into looks of surprise in light of her actions. Although Matsushita waved to me from a distance, this might very well have been the first time that she called out to me like this, after arriving at class. Was she concerned about what happened the other day? Or did she have some other objective in mind?

Matsushita had a high opinion of my abilities. My attempt to get Kushida expelled and the way that I had dealt with her might have actually *increased* my worth in her eyes, rather than lowered it. Even in the process of getting Airi expelled, Matsushita was one of the students who agreed with the course of action and voiced her opinion that there was no other choice.

"So, are we finally moving on up to Class A?" she asked me.

"Not sure." I avoided her light ribbing and sidestepped her question. She quickly backed off, perhaps because she thought she didn't need to press the issue any further. She then cast a sidelong glance at me.

"There might be a lot of things going on for a while, but I don't think you need to worry." Matsushita then quickly added, "I mean, I'm sure that *you* won't be bothered, Ayanokouji-kun, knowing you."

She was hitting me both with a polite opinion and her earnest thoughts.

"It's the other stuff that's really important, right, Ayanokouji-kun? Not whatever's going on with you and Horikita-san."

I thought that Matsushita understood how I felt about the results of this situation better than Horikita did... Or, well, she seemed to be interpreting things accurately. It was the matters with Shinohara and Haruka, as well as with Kushida and Mii-chan, that were likely to be the problem. Those students had particularly suffered as a result of the Unanimous Special Exam.

Shinohara occasionally cast a pained look in my direction. But instead of looking at me, she was watching Matsushita.

Matsushita herself, though, seemed calm and composed. Even so, she must have noticed Shinohara's gaze fixed on her because she commented on it. "I tried to reach out and make plans with her this weekend, to find a time that worked," she said in a quiet voice. "She canceled on me at the last minute. Girls tend to take a long time with these kinds of things. They hold onto stuff."

"Sounds pretty rough."

"Well, we're the ones at fault though," Matsushita said.

This all started because Kei, Matsushita, and their friends were making fun of Shinohara and Ike behind their backs. They joked about the two being a couple, among other things. It was only natural that Shinohara would be angry with them—her friends had been insulting her appearance and so on behind her back.

"It's pretty much a normal, everyday thing," Matsushita added. "I've had much tougher things to deal with in the past."

Guys tended to have superficial relationships with each other and couldn't even begin to understand the deeper friendships girls had. They wanted to know, but at the same time, they *didn't* want to know either.

After my conversation with Matsushita, time passed by and no one else came forward to talk to me. And even though Horikita came to school late, Kushida wasn't with her.

Sudou and some of the other students tried to talk to Horikita, but since she showed up with barely any time to spare before the bell rang, everyone took to their seats instead. Horikita hadn't seen any sign of Kushida all weekend, and it seemed like she was continuing to stay in hiding. But morning homeroom started all the same, even though three conspicuously empty seats stood out.

When Chabashira-sensei arrived, she immediately noticed those seats were empty too.

"Kushida, Hasebe, and Wang. Three students are absent. Hm, that's unusual."

We didn't know the details of their absence, but Chabashira-sensei did.

"I've been notified that both Hasebe and Wang are not feeling well, so their absences have been permitted. As for Kushida, we haven't had any contact from her yet, so we'll reach out to her later and confirm the circumstances over the phone. We'll soon find out if she simply overslept, or if she was feeling so sick that she wasn't able to get out of bed."

Chabashira-sensei's expression was somewhat exaggerated when she spoke about Kushida. It sounded like the teacher assumed she was faking being sick. Absences weren't that unusual, and we had been at this school for a long time. However, this was the first time in the last year and a half that three students were absent at the same time. Before now, whenever there was an absence, Chabashira-sensei never really said anything about it.

She was behaving differently now than in the past, back when she used to just act indifferent toward us. If this were a normal school, you'd be the only one having to pay for all your absences when the bill came due, so to speak. If you skipped school for a week, it would only have an effect on your own grades, and you'd get left behind in class. However, in this school, one person's responsibilities were really everyone's responsibilities. Although no one in class was saying anything, I was sure that Chabashira-sensei understood what the students were anxious about.

"Don't look so worried," she told the students. "Being absent for one or two days won't have any effect on Class Points. I'm simply saying it's unusual for three people to all feel unwell all at the same time."

She declared definitively that there would be no impact on the class at this moment. I was sure that clear statement must have made our classmates feel relieved.

"That being said, that'll only remain true if these absences aren't prolonged. And if it turns out that someone is feigning illness, then problems will gradually come to the surface."

Chabashira looked at Kushida's empty seat as she spoke, as she was the only person who hadn't contacted the school.

"Well, perhaps saying 'feigning illness' might be a bit of an exaggeration, but what I mean to say is that there are limits to what you can get away with when you say that you don't feel well, coming down with an illness that has no specific name. Well, I hope they all make a speedy recovery, if possible."

Even if they didn't want to look directly, all of our classmates' eyes were on Horikita now. During the Unanimous Special Exam, Horikita had declared that she was going to give priority to her own ideas and keep Kushida in class. So, naturally, many students then focused their criticisms on Horikita. And despite that dissatisfaction... Well, to put it simply, she wasn't quivering in the slightest in the face of it. Still, even if I couldn't see what she was feeling deep down, even if Horikita was upset by it, it wasn't like she couldn't say anything right now.

Taking notice of the situation, Chabashira-sensei let out a cough, forcing the students to take their attention off of Horikita.

"Yes, those three students being absent is a concern, but don't let yourselves dwell on that too deeply," she said. "Now that the Unanimous Special Exam is over, you must turn your attention to the next battle."

She gently placed her palm on the monitor behind her, bringing up something on the display.

"I'd like to explain to you the details of the Sports Festival now, along with the unique rules that apply to this year's event. Please listen carefully."

I was sure the students were expecting the Sports Festival that awaited us this year to be the same as last year's event, which had been just like every other year before it.

The first to ask a question was none other than Sudou, who was more fired up about the event than anyone else.

"Unique rules?" he repeated. "Wait, so does that mean that the Sports Festival this year is gonna be different from last year, sensei?"

Chabashira-sensei nodded in response. "The student council president's recommendation for a new status quo here at this institution has been accepted. You saw that in the Uninhabited Island Special Exam as well. The goal is to incorporate ideas that emphasize the ability of the individual, and this Sports Festival is going to be the embodiment of that."

During the Uninhabited Island Special Exam, Kouenji had been hugely successful thanks to his outstanding academic ability and, more importantly, his absolutely phenomenal physical ability. His efforts resulted in a gain in Class Points, and he had also gotten a huge payout of Private Points. That exam was a true example of a meritocratic school. On the other hand, students who weren't as capable were in danger of expulsion during it.

That same emphasis on individual ability was being placed on the Sports Festival as well. Even if we only went by what Chabashira-sensei was telling us right now, it could very well be a

grueling exam for students like Keisei—those whose academic abilities were their strong point, but their physical abilities were cause for concern.

"I'm sure that more than a few of you are troubled by this, but the rules of this year's Sports Festival have been adjusted so that no one will be expelled for a lack of individual ability, and nor will any individual student suffer losses alone," said Chabashira-sensei gently, perhaps to avoid throwing the students into a mild panic. "After all, not everyone can be the perfect athlete *and* scholar, excelling effortlessly in both academics and sports."

Some of the students exchanged surprised looks when they heard her soft tone of voice. It was quite different from anything they had heard from her prior to this week. Since there wasn't anything more to say, Chabashira-sensei put an overview of the Sports Festival and the rules up on the monitor.

SPORTS FESTIVAL OVERVIEW AND RULES

Overview

A sports festival consisting of various events, wherein all grade levels will participate.

Event Period: 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

(A break period will be held from noon to 1:00 p.m.)

Students are free to participate in different events of their choosing to earn points. Students will compete together as a class in terms of overall score.

Rules

Each student will be granted 5 points at the start.

Students taking part in the Sports Festival must participate in five different events.

1 point will be awarded to students as a participation prize for each event.

Winners will be awarded additional points in accordance with the nature of the event.

Students may participate in more than five events but will have to pay 1 point to participate per event from the sixth event onward. Students will not be granted the 1-point participation prize for taking on additional events.

Students can participate in up to a maximum of ten events per person.

If a student participates in fewer than five events by the time the Sports Festival comes to an end, all of that student's points will be forfeited.

If a student does not participate in or abstains from an event they have signed up to participate in (except in the case of compelling circumstances), that student will lose 2 points.

Students who have already finished the events they intended to participate will cheer for their classmates in designated areas.

That was what was displayed on the monitor. Just from a brief glance at the overview and rules, you could tell that this year's Sports Festival was completely different from last year.

"What you see here are the overview and rules for this year's Sports Festival," Chabashira-sensei announced. "Unlike our usual Sports Festival where the entire school watches a single event, this time, events will be running in parallel, at the same time in different locations."

"Th-that sounds pretty busy," said Sudou, sounding baffled by the rough idea of the day's events he imagined in his head.

"Your top priority is to participate in the competitions and aim for the top of the rankings. However, it does require putting together a meticulous schedule," replied Chabashira-sensei. "If you're planning on competing in a large number of events in order to win, then yes, this will be a busy Sports Festival. There are two major categories of competitions this time. The first are called basic competitions, which are competitions in which one person can participate solo. All basic competitions have fixed rewards: five

points for first place, three points for second, and one point for third. Plus, everyone taking part will get one point as a participation prize. The other kind of competitions are team competitions, also referred to as special competitions. Special competitions are events in which two or more people can participate. The rewards for team competitions are more substantial, and everyone on a participating team will receive an equal number of points. But while the rewards are certainly attractive, there are drawbacks too. For example, these events require cooperation, among other things, and have a more substantial time commitment."

That meant there was a clear distinction between individual and team events, and the number of points we could win would be much higher in team events. There was no downside for coming in last place either, and students who weren't adept at sports would surely appreciate that.

"The rewards for team competitions vary depending on the event, so please check the details for each competition accordingly," added Chabashira-sensei.

Once you understood the rules, they were actually quite simple. But still, there were surprisingly many things that we had to do during the Sports Festival. There were the five points that we would initially receive at the start, plus the five points we could get for participation, which came out to a total of ten points. Regardless of our performance, we could obtain ten points simply by participating in and finishing the event. But what if a student couldn't fulfill the minimum requirements as the result of some sort of accident? Did that mean that we would essentially be losing ten points from our total score for each student who was out?

If we were to assume that all students were participating, then that would mean Ichinose's class, which currently had forty students at this point in time, could get 400 points, whereas this class, which had two fewer people, could get up to 380 points. We'd be starting the competition with a twenty-point handicap. As of now, it was clear that we could get five points as the reward for placing first in an individual competition. To make up for the difference, we would need to get first place four times.

That didn't sound like much, but each person could only participate in up to a maximum of ten events. Even if we had Sudou going at full strength, we couldn't expect to have him sweep the competition in fifteen or twenty events—that would be impossible. Figuring out what to have him focus on could be a surprisingly difficult burden.

"Each individual and the class are free to choose whether they wish to use the points they have on hand to pay for participation in a sixth event and any subsequent ones," Chabashira-sensei explained. "The overall scores at the end of the Sports Festival will determine the rankings for each grade level."

The rewards for each grade level were now shown up on the monitor.

Class Ranking Rewards

1st Place: 150 Class Points

2nd Place: 50 Class Points

3rd Place: 0 Class Points

4th Place: -150 Class Points

Compared to normal exams, the variation in Class Points was fairly substantial. I wondered if that had something to do with the Sports Festival being a major event overall, and the fact that the variation in Class Point rewards were relatively moderate in the recently announced Cultural Festival.

"What you see here are the rewards for class rankings. Now, I'll show you the results for individual competitions," said Chabashira-sensei.

The class-specific rewards were suitable motivation on their own, but they apparently weren't everything. Since the Sports Festival was structured around testing the abilities of individuals, it made sense for individual rewards to be offered as well.

Sudou leaned forward, waiting with bated breath for the information to pop up on the monitor. More than anyone else, he

was acutely aware that this was the event in which he would shine the brightest out of everyone this year.

Individual Competition Rewards (By Grade; By Gender)

1st Place: 2,000,000 Private Points or Class Transfer Ticket (Limited)

2nd Place: 1,000,000 Private Points

3rd Place: 500,000 Private Points

When Sudou saw the exorbitant Private Point rewards, he excitedly pumped his fist in the air. But in addition to the points, there was something noted in the rewards that we had never encountered previously.

"C-Class Transfer Ticket?! No way, does that mean what I think it means?!" exclaimed one student.

The class was more shocked and abuzz than I had ever seen them.

"The school officials were also quite cautious in implementing this new system," Chabashira-sensei told us. "That's because the introduction of Protect Points was similarly unprecedented, and this new system is coming not long after those were introduced. However, it's the natural right of students who have demonstrated a high individual ability to be able to move up to the top."

The only winners at this school were those students who were able to graduate from Class A. If you were considered the number-one student in your grade level in a test like the Sports Festival, something that required a considerable level of physical ability, you could be deemed worthy of the right to transfer classes. Also, for what it was worth, it seemed like the Sports Festival didn't actually fall under the category of special exam, in a manner of speaking. But what I found curious was that the 2 million Private Points and the Class Transfer Ticket were treated as equal in value.

Originally, we were told we needed *20 million* Private Points to transfer classes, and this was one digit off. Nevertheless, with that ticket, you were entitled to transfer classes if you wished. I supposed that the answer to that discrepancy in point value could be found in that key word in parentheses: Limited.

"Limited..." Like, what, you gotta come back to the class you transferred from eventually? You only stay transferred for a limited time?" asked Ike.

"Uh, there's no way that could be it...could it?" protested Sudou. "That doesn't make any sense."

The two of them talked across the classroom, clearly also bothered by the word "limited."

"It grants you the right to transfer classes," Chabashira-sensei cut in. "I'm sure it's probably difficult for you to see the big picture and look beyond the Sports Festival; you won't know what the rankings will be in the future. In this case, limited refers to limited-time use. You will only have the right to use the ticket during your second semester this year. In other words, if you haven't used the ticket by the beginning of the third semester, it will be rendered void."

Here, "limited" meant the Class Transfer Ticket could only be used within a certain time frame. In that case, it made more sense that it was considered equal in value to 2 million points. If you were able to hold onto the ticket until just before graduation, that would essentially be a guaranteed ticket to Class A. However, since the ticket was limited in when you could use it, that meant you needed to have a discerning eye to figure out which class would ultimately advance to the top. If you transferred from your current class to another class only for your original class to end up winning out in the end, you'd feel bad about it for a long, long time, thinking that you had succumbed to the trap of the ticket's temptations.

Even without that kind of worst-case scenario, it'd still take a considerable amount of courage to use the ticket. It wouldn't be easy to abandon the class you had come to know and love over the past year and a half, after all. Even if, for example, Sudou won the right to transfer classes, when you considered whether he

could really abandon Horikita and his friends to move up to Class A, it was hard to imagine him going through with it. At any rate, even though this Sports Festival was rather high profile, a single success here did not guarantee a trip to Class A. It was important to keep that point in mind.

But that only held true for the second-year students. Different grade levels could find the ticket to be more valuable. A first-year student might abandon their current class that they weren't very close with yet and move to a class that they felt had a better chance of winning in the end. Or, they might simply just transfer to whatever class was currently ranked as A at that point in time. On the other hand, though, third-year students saw this ticket as their absolute best opportunity to transfer into Nagumo's class. In essence, getting this ticket would be the same thing as graduating from Class A for a third-year.

Regardless of someone's grade though, being given the right and the choice to transfer classes was significant. I figured I'd just have to wait and see how this was going to affect the future. I was sure the school was going to be watching for the response too, to decide if they would offer this same kind of ticket again. Overall, it was a profoundly intriguing reward, and one with an interesting balance.

"The male and female students who win first place in their respective grade levels will be asked to choose one of those two rewards," Chabashira-sensei said. "Sudou, if you're intending to aim for the top in individual competitions, then you'd best think long and hard about this."

Sudou's back visibly stiffened at her words. What she meant was that, instead of succumbing to the delusion of always putting friends first and jumping at the 2 million points, he should look to the future. Would he choose to stay where he was now, in Horikita's class? Or would he transfer to Sakayanagi's class, which was far away in the lead? He had the right to face his own future and consider the matter very carefully.

"Now then, let's move on to a more detailed look at how this works. There are two types of competitions: those that are open for registration before the festival, and those that won't be

available until the day of the festival. So, in other words, there will be a fair number of events that you can only sign up for during the Sports Festival itself," Chabashira-sensei explained.

In addition to standard events such as the 100-meter dash and an obstacle course, there were several interesting and unusual events that had shown up on the monitor. They included things like penalty kicks, basketball shootouts, tennis singles, mixed men's and women's doubles, and so on. There were quite a number of competitions that you wouldn't normally see at a school's Sports Festival.

"The event times are fixed, as are the number of people who can participate in each one, so you may not necessarily be able to compete in all of the events that you hope to," Chabashira-sensei warned us. "If you push yourself too hard to register for lots of events and make plans that don't align with the posted schedule, you might end up being unable to make it to certain events in time. If this happens, you will be regarded as having abstained from entering after signing up. Don't forget that you run the risk of losing your points too."

Students whose physical abilities were superior to most of the student body as a whole needed to take part in a lot of events where they could efficiently rake in points. That meant it wasn't *just* physical ability that was required of us for this festival. We needed to be able to use our heads to decide what events were the best to enter, or at least have the ability to make a good guess. Or, even in the end, luck.

However, if we were to have the Sports Festival right now, with the way things were at the moment, the students would probably panic. If everyone rushed to sign up for a certain event on the day of the festival, there was no way it could work out. Of course, there was no way the school wouldn't have anticipated this.

"For events that can be registered for beforehand, registration will open via the dedicated app at 10:00 p.m. tonight," announced Chabashira-sensei. "Events are first-come, first-served, for all grades. Cancellations will be accepted any time up to one week before the actual Sports Festival, but you can only cancel up

to three times. The final reservation deadline is two days prior to the festival; if you have not registered for at least five events by that time, then you will automatically be assigned to available spots."

With that announcement, the schedule I assumed would be used in the app was displayed on the monitor.

"As an example, let's say that you wish to participate in the 100-meter dash," said Chabashira.

The image on the screen changed.

100-meter Dash

An event that allows a maximum of seven participants; divided by grade and gender. Four races in total. Reservations can be made for any of the four races. Day-of registration is allowed if spots are still available. Participants must arrive five minutes before the start of the event to complete entry procedures. Students are not required to wait around after their race is over. Scheduled start time for the first race: 10:15 a.m.

If you combined men's and women's races, the maximum number of people who could participate in the 100-meter dash during the Sports Festival was fifty-six students. Hypothetically, even if you were to participate in any number of the races, the competition started at 10:15 in the morning and so you'd be required to arrive at least five minutes before then. Judging from the explanation provided, you didn't have to wait around after completing your race, so if you participated in the first race of the period, you could move on to the next competition shortly after. On the other hand, if you were signed up for the fourth race, you'd be waiting around for a long time for your turn to come. It was the same competition, and the rewards were the same, but there were losses with respect to time.

"It's also important for you to note that students will not be allowed to participate in events related to clubs that they are currently in or have been a part of at any time during their tenure

here at this school," noted Chabashira-sensei. "That means Hirata would not be allowed to participate in events related to soccer, nor would Sudou be allowed to participate in basketball-related events."

Students who were involved in club activities for a specific sport would not be at an advantage here; instead, they'd be barred from participating. Since there wasn't anyone who could beat Yousuke or Sudou in their areas of expertise, the school must have wanted to avoid competitions where students who had club experience faced off with novices. If Sudou played in a soccer event, or Yousuke played in a basketball event, then even the other students they were playing against would still have a good chance of winning.

There also might be a few students who were active in sports clubs in junior high but didn't join them in high school. That could lead to slight advantages or disadvantages too.

"Y'know, this actually kinda sounds like bookin' a seat for the movies." Sudou had been absorbing the explanation intently and voiced his thoughts on the system. He was right on target.

"Yes, you could certainly say that the system here is similar," Chabashira-sensei agreed. "It's also designed to show who has signed up for what events and at which time slots. It also updates in real time."

"Wait, so does that mean that some people might cancel because they don't wanna go up against me, then?" Sudou snorted, crossing his arms proudly.

"That's right. Those students will run into a wall sooner or later though, since you can only cancel reservations up to three times," replied Chabashira-sensei.

Since the number of participants was limited and the event times were fixed, you would want to lock yourself into the events you were best at and the specific races you wanted to enter as soon as possible in order to put together your schedule. However, the earlier you signed up for events, the greater the risk of being paired up with a formidable opponent. Still, if there was a fixed number of times that you could cancel to get out of a situation like

that, people would be indecisive and hesitate even just making their reservations. This was going to be a battle where you'd have to keep your enemy in check while searching around. It was like an online competition serving as a prelude to the proper Sports Festival.

Chabashira-sensei then added, "Also, please note that if an individual competition ends in a tie for first place, the Private Point reward will be split equally between those students. However, the Class Transfer Ticket option will not be available."

In the unlikely event that some students were to collude to both take first place somehow, deliberately reaching a tie in order to try and get the most Class Transfer Tickets possible, the system would cause that plan to fall apart. I supposed that taking the ticket away in the event of a tie was one way of avoiding that issue. At any rate, if you performed well yourself and earned many rewards, you could either get a huge number of points or a Class Transfer Ticket. It was truly a reward worthy of something designed to test your true abilities.

Even if you didn't intend to change classes, you could still use those 2 million points to various ends. It was even possible to use them as a stepping stone on the lofty goal of securing the 20 million you needed for a definite ticket to Class A later on.

On the other hand, students who weren't confident in their athleticism would be smart to stick to those mandatory five events as much as possible. If they used up the precious points they had on hand to enter a sixth event and more after that in an effort to win, they'd just be spending one point per event. That would make them a significant liability in this fight, which was ultimately a class-based competition.

After Chabashira-sensei finished giving us her explanation and left the classroom, students started feeling like they had to rush and take action *now*—almost like a pot of water immediately coming to a boil.

"All right, Suzune! Let's have a meetin' right away!"

The first person to say something, and rather loudly, was none other than Sudou. Having heard the rules, he had become

even more motivated. Yousuke also got up, naturally, and began walking toward Horikita. Up until this point, it was the same sequence of events as usual. However, some of the students in class were staring at Horikita coldly. Doubt swirled around in the air, and the students were uncertain whether they could really entrust this matter to Horikita, and if they were okay with making her the leader.

Horikita decided to make the first move. "First, there's one thing that I need to tell all of you before we discuss the Sports Festival." She got up from her seat and turned around so that everyone could see her face. "I forced the choice of not expelling Kushida in the special exam held at the end of last week, and I violated the promise that I made to all of you. Please allow me to apologize for that first," said Horikita, bowing her head.

However, once she raised her head, you could see that there was a strong determination in her eyes.

"However, in the end, I do believe that I made the correct choice," she said. "She is someone who can be an asset to the class."

"I don't think so."

The first person to speak up and reject Horikita's words was none other than Shinohara. She was one of the people who suffered as a result of Kushida exposing people's secrets.

"Now that we know Kushida-san is like that, no one's going to trust her," Shinohara continued. "I don't get the feeling that anyone from the other classes is talking about this whole thing with Kushida-san yet, but don't you think it's just a matter of time?"

Shinohara cut straight to the chase, pointing out an important matter that should be considered, regardless of whether people liked Kushida or not. The fact that she was going to continue to be their classmate couldn't be changed. And if things were going to proceed based on that assumption, it would be best to keep the inconvenient truth of the matter as quiet as possible. In other words, going around telling enemy classes that Kushida

was actually a bad person with dangerous ideas would undermine our efforts.

It was a simple matter of just keeping things quiet, but pulling that off was going to be surprisingly difficult. Shinohara was protesting right now, and she had particularly suffered because of Kushida. It wouldn't have been surprising if she'd exploded before now, but it seemed like she had been holding it in all this time.

Shinohara didn't seem to understand the advantages that came from this, and being the case, it wouldn't be surprising if a clever person who *did* understand, like Yousuke, had urged her to keep quiet about the matter in advance. However, it was doubtful whether that would last forever. When her suspicion and unease toward Kushida reached its limits, the dam would suddenly break, and it would all come out.

"So, Horikita-san? Can you really say that keeping Kushida-san around was the right thing to do? Answer me that."

Shinohara's words needled Horikita, urging her to reply immediately. Meanwhile, Horikita simply looked straight back at her.

"That's not a question I can answer at this very moment," she said. "But the same goes for me, or you, Shinohara-san, or our other classmates, if you were to ask about them. We need to make our presence felt during the rest of our time here at school."

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" Shinohara shot back. "I want an answer right now. No matter how you look at this, Kushida-san is going to be an issue for our class."

"It's true that you might have been hurt by what happened in the Unanimous Special Exam," Horikita acknowledged. "It might have also hurt Wang-san and Hasebe-san, who are absent today. But that doesn't erase the fact that Kushida-san has contributed to the class over the past year and a half. Or can you proudly say that you've gotten better results than she has?"

Kushida had caused a major problem, but that didn't simply erase her past accomplishments. She had brought the class together, provided emotional support, and contributed to raising the class's average scores both in academics and in sports. At the

very least, Shinohara personally had not been able to measure up to Kushida's accomplishments.

"I can't blame you for not having a favorable opinion after my underhanded move and Kushida-san's stubborn persistence in voting *For*," Horikita went on. "But if I had gone ahead with it and had Kushida-san expelled, could we really say that was the correct decision? Could you sit there and remain calm even if our class average went down and we lost a special exam?"

"Well, that's... We wouldn't know unless we tried."

"That's right. And similarly, I'm trying to do something, and I won't know until I've tried it," replied Horikita.

In any case, there was no changing the fact that the future was uncertain. With Shinohara's abilities, it wasn't going to be easy for her to beat Horikita in an argument.

As the two of them glared at each other, Yousuke stood up, raising his hand. "Excuse me, but may I say a few words?" he said. "There's something that's been worrying me a bit. If we're going to make the most of Kushida-san's skills, then we're going to need to make sure her secret stays within our class. That's exactly why I asked everyone to keep quiet about it."

"I had a feeling you might have done so," said Horikita. "If someone hadn't given instructions to people behind the scenes, then I'm sure everything would've gotten out by now."

Horikita had also been wondering what was going on, since it was now Monday and there were still no rumors beginning to circulate.

"But even so, you never asked me or any of us to keep quiet about this, Horikita-san," Yousuke pointed out. "Why was that?"

"Because no matter how many gag orders I might've tried to impose, it wouldn't matter at all to people who really wanted to bring her down. The only difference would've been that the student body would find out sooner or later."

Whatever the process, the students were now going to make a decision for themselves. Would they let their emotions get the

better of them and expose Kushida's true nature to get back at her? Or would they keep her secret, for the sake of the class?

"I wouldn't have said anything even if Hirata-kun hadn't asked me to keep quiet," Matsushita chimed in. "Me and some other people had a chance to get together on our day off. We talked about it, and we decided it wouldn't do us any good to let it slip. Of course, I'd be lying if I said that I didn't have some mixed feelings about Kushida-san right now."

I should've expected as much from Matsushita as she was rather clever. She was one of the people affected by Kushida sharing her secrets, but she understood the downsides that came with trying to repay her in kind by spreading things about Kushida. The only thing to be gained from exposing someone's secrets in an attempt at retaliation would be a temporary feeling of satisfaction.

"I will definitely bring her back to class," Horikita promised. "And if by some chance I can't, then... If that time comes, I intend to take responsibility in whatever way necessary."

When Horikita said that she'd shoulder that weight, even the students who had been snarling at Horikita in the face of her determination suddenly stopped. Several people gulped loudly, taking a breath. Even Shinozaki was no exception.

"...You're really going to accept responsibility?" asked Shinozaki.

"I was fully prepared for that outcome when I chose to keep Kushida-san here," Horikita replied. "If that time comes, you can judge me."

Akito and Keisei silently watched Horikita as well. It wasn't difficult to imagine how they felt right now as they listened to this conversation.

At any rate, Horikita had brought the conversation to a close with some strong words, and now, free time had arrived. Horikita's gaze wasn't on me, but on someone else. That person also stared back at her, and eventually, Horikita left the classroom. At the same time, Kouenji, who had been sitting next to an empty seat, got up and left the classroom in a similar fashion.

I was curious, so I decided to crack open the door slightly and see what was going on.

"You looked as though there's something you want to say to me. What is it?" asked Kouenji.

"I wanted to confirm something with you regarding the upcoming Sports Festival," replied Horikita.

"*Fu fu.* Well now, I suppose I'm not wrong in thinking that I don't have to cooperate...am I?"

"You're absolutely right. You don't," Horikita said. "I just wanted to confirm your intentions. Would it be all right for me to at least ask that much?"

Could she include Kouenji's contributions in her calculations or not? Depending on that, her strategies would change. After being asked that, Kouenji smiled smugly and placed his hand on Horikita's shoulder. That must've gotten on Horikita's nerves—she tried to brush his hand off, but he didn't budge an inch.

"You seem to be a very lucky girl," he said.

With Kouenji's hand still on hers, Horikita looked somewhat displeased. She then asked him about the true meaning behind what he just said. "Does that mean that you're feeling motivated?"

"I've saved up some money from the Uninhabited Island exam and the treasure hunt. Now, the time has come to spend a little," he said. "As far as I'm concerned, there's no reason not to participate."

Kouenji had demonstrated overwhelming prowess in the Uninhabited Island Special Exam and wasn't expected to take any further actions for the class. But from the sound of it, he was plenty enthusiastic when it came to a unique event like this where individuals could earn gigantic sums.

From Horikita's point of view, this was an unexpected bit of good luck. As long as Kouenji was earning as many points as he could, Horikita wouldn't have anything to complain about. And for Kouenji, there was a good chance that he could easily earn ten or twenty points.

However, I was sure Horikita had some concerns about the rewards. She seemed to hesitate for a moment, but then opened her mouth to speak.

"If you earned the right to transfer classes...what would you do then?"

Kouenji was, without a doubt, the biggest problem child in the entire grade. Well, maybe the most free-spirited would be fair, I supposed. He wouldn't hesitate to abandon his current class if the whim took him. Whether he would be an asset to the class moving forward or not was another matter, but at the very least, Horikita could not consider the loss of students from her class to be a positive. Besides, Kouenji would likely take special exams that offered a lot of money very seriously, like the Uninhabited Island Special Exam and the Sports Festival. If that happened, he would undoubtedly make a formidable opponent.

"That's no problem," Kouenji replied, "I don't think there's enough appeal to any of the other classes at the moment for me to throw away the contract that I have with you, Horikita girl."

"At the moment,' huh..." repeated Horikita.

That meant there would always be a possibility he'd transfer classes later, depending on the conditions.

"As of today, you're safe," said Kouenji.

I didn't think that this had anything to do with being safe, but regardless, I was skeptical that many other classes would *want* to bring Kouenji on board anyway. There would be advantages to having him, sure but there would be disadvantages too.

"Very well," said Horikita. "I'll take your word for it. But I can't trust you if you're going to get carried away with whatever whims pop into your head. Can I plan on you earning enough points to take the top spot?"

"I don't mind if you interpret it that way," Kouenji shrugged. "I won't be working with anyone, though."

From the sounds of it, he was only going to be earning points from competitions that you could participate in on your own. I wouldn't be surprised if Kouenji won first place in all of

those events, so it was highly possible that he'd get a maximum score of fifty-five points.

"Are you really sure you're not interested in moving up to Class A?" asked Horikita.

Kouenji answered her question with a laugh. He then proceeded to walk back toward the classroom. "Is eavesdropping a hobby of yours?" he asked, coming right to a stop beside me.

Did he guess that I was listening to them a bit after seeing that the door was slightly ajar? Or did he know that I was there all along?

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious about what you were going to do for the Sports Festival," I replied.

"Yes, I suppose you would be," said Kouenji.

"Can I ask you a question, Kouenji?"

"My heart's pounding with excitement about the rewards in the Sports Festival right now, so I'm in quite the good mood. I will answer your question."

"You and Horikita have an agreement," I said, "but that's not an absolute guarantee of anything. Just like the way Horikita kept Kushida in the class, while being prepared to be antagonized by the rest of the class over it, there's a possibility that she might betray you. Do you have any thoughts on that?"

I wanted to know whether he felt Horikita would keep her promise to him or if he was terrified that she'd renege on it. Kouenji's original position, after all, was that he was assuredly in favor of students being expelled in the previous exam. Of course, to be fair, his motivation was to get Private Points.

"Everything I do is based on calculations," he replied. "In the last exam, if I were in a situation where I was on a list of candidates for expulsion and the list could have been narrowed down to me, I would've voted against the issue at an early stage. What I said about trusting the Horikita girl is based on that premise. It was calculated."

"I see. So, you didn't fully trust her."

"There is no way I would ever entrust myself to another person. It's the same for you, no?" he asked.

"You're probably right about that," I agreed.

On the outside, Kouenji seemed like a free spirit, the sort of person who just did whatever they wanted. However, there was a calculated thought process behind his actions. And on top of that, even though he was calculating, he maintained his freedom. No matter how many students I pulled apart to find the answers about who they were inside, this man alone was someone I couldn't figure out.

2.2

IMMEDIATELY AFTER lunch started, Horikita came up to me with a question.

"Ayanokouji-kun. Do you have a moment?"

"Well, Kei and I are actually—"

"We're going to be having lunch together. So, sorry! I can't lend you Kiyotaka." Kei ran up to me and aggressively inserted herself into the conversation, stopping Horikita in her tracks. Furthering the point, she held her hands out, signaling "no." Kei then continued. "Besides, what are you thinking, inviting a guy who has a girlfriend to come with you?"

"I see," said Horikita. "But you know, I'm not the one who wants to see him. It's someone else. And it's not a girl. Still, I'd have to wonder if you'd allow it, even so."

Horikita held her phone out toward us, and Kei peeked at the screen before I did.

"Yagami...Takuya?" she read. "Who's that?"

"The sender of the message doesn't matter. What's important is the contents," said Horikita.

Yagami's text to Horikita appeared to have been sent about an hour ago. It read: "*Could you please bring Ayanokouji-senpai to the student council office during lunchtime? The student council president wishes to see him. If that's inconvenient, please let me know so that I can come to you instead.*"

"As a member of the student council myself, I also have a role to play," Horikita told us. "If a fellow member asks me to take care of an errand, I cannot turn down their request."

Horikita had no choice, so she had to come tell me about this.

"It seems as though Student Council President Nagumo wants to see you again," she added. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing." *At least not lately*, I added in my head.

"If you refuse to go, Yagami-kun will come here," Horikita said. "And if you still refuse to go even after he comes, then... President Nagumo may come here himself. How should I respond?"

Horikita was simply acting as a messenger. No matter how I answered, she would just carry on with indifference.

"Sorry, Kei," I said. "If I ignore the student council president, there'll be trouble later."

"Hmph. Well, if it's him asking, then I guess there's nothing we can do about it..." Understanding that she had no other choice but to accept the situation, Kei immediately rushed over to Satou and her friends. "Satou-saaaan, do you wanna have lunch together?"

"Your girlfriend sure changes gears quick," muttered Horikita. I wasn't sure if she was impressed or disgusted.

"I'll head over there now," I told her.

"In that case, I'll let Yagami-kun know you're coming."

"If the people on the student council have each other's contact information, wouldn't it have been faster for President Nagumo to just contact you directly, rather than doing it through Yagami?" I asked.

"The only person on the student council that President Nagumo has exchanged contact info with on the chat app is Yagami-kun," Horikita explained. "Yagami-kun requested it directly."

I was satisfied with that answer, so I left the classroom. When I did, Horikita followed me into the hallway.

"I don't know why he wants to meet with you, but I suggest that you try not to offend him as much as possible," she said.

After she gave me that bit of advice, we went our separate ways. At that point, I had no other choice but to head over to the student council office, so I decided to do just that. I figured that, considering that he could very well come directly to me, it would be significantly more comfortable for me to go to him. Once I arrived outside the office, I lightly knocked on the door.

Shortly afterward, I heard Nagumo's voice from the other side of the door and I went in. As I expected, there was no one besides Nagumo in sight inside the student council office.

"Yo, Ayanokouji. Any changes in your day-to-day lately?" Nagumo started the conversation off with a light jab.

The person who was responsible for disrupting my life these days was none other than the person before me, the student council president, thanks to the order he gave. The pressure from the stares the third-year students had been giving me on a daily basis had not diminished in the slightest. In fact, even third-years who didn't have the first idea about me seemed to have completely committed my face to memory now. Without a doubt, to the upperclassmen, I was now the most infamous junior in the school. Even though they didn't know what happened exactly, they knew me as the junior who defied Nagumo.

"Well, I'd like to say that no, there haven't been any changes, but I suppose there are some things that have been bothering me," I replied.

It would've been easy for me to pretend I hadn't noticed anything, but if I showed him that I wasn't distressed by the situation, it could cause him to escalate things even further.

"Y'know, as the student council president, you can talk to me about things that are bothering you," said Nagumo.

"It might just be my imagination, anyway," I said. "When I really am in trouble though, I'll come ask for your help."

If I could make Nagumo feel satisfied at least to some extent, there was a possibility that even he would back off.

Well...probably not, actually. That was being overly optimistic. All Nagumo wanted was to defeat me personally, by his own hand. There was no way he'd be satisfied just with what happened so far. I was sure Nagumo was already feeling somewhat happy with this conversation and there was no way he'd let it end here. He ended up changing the topic.

"You heard the rules for the Sports Festival already, right?" he said. "That means the time has come for a direct showdown,

Ayanokouji. There are some events in the Sports Festival that all grades can compete in, so, you're gonna fight me in one of those."

"Is this your way of laying down harsh discipline to a junior student?" I asked. "I've seen your OAA scores, Student Council President Nagumo. Unless we're talking about a competition where luck is a major factor, there's no way I could possibly hope to win no matter how hard I try. The outcome of a match between us is patently obvious."

Even though being modest was the only way I could've responded to him, my words likely wouldn't convince Nagumo.

"So, you're the kind of guy who'd give an answer like that, huh... You think that if you act modestly, that'd satisfy me? I can't really fault you for that though. No judgment. I mean, you don't really have any other choice but to be all humble right now anyway."

Nagumo wasn't the sort of man who would be fooled by such shallow-minded thinking, it seemed.

"Look, I know you're not on board with this," he went on. "Even for someone who's like, trying to drag this out, dealing with you would be a waste of my time. So, let's say that if you win one competition against me during the Sports Festival, a direct showdown between you and me, I'll just drop everything. We'll let bygones be bygones."

"One competition?" I asked. That was far, far more lenient than I had imagined.

"You seem to be thinking to yourself, 'Just one win, huh? Really?' You think that it'll be that easy for you?" asked Nagumo.

"Absolutely not," I said. "But I think it means that I have a chance."

"I could've told you that you had to win every competition. But no, if I gave you a condition like that, as student council president, it would've been an embarrassment."

It wasn't likely that mere pride was getting in the way of his decision. If anything, I suspected he was using that pride as a shield, while still somehow dragging me out onto the battlefield.

"However, all that said, I'm still going to add a condition," he added. "Whether you win or lose doesn't matter, but you have to participate in five competitions that I pick. If you don't show up for even one of them, then you lose."

"What happens if I lose, anyway?" I asked. "Wouldn't you be satisfied with that, since it'd mean you won?"

"That'd be nice if it was that easy," he sneered. "Because if I'm not satisfied, then not only are your various troubles not going to go away, but you might also be summoned like this by me repeatedly. Or maybe you'll start getting bothered even more often than before."

"I have to consider what my class's policies might be," I said. "Could you give me a little time?"

"That's all I have to say for now. I'll give you one week. Get in contact with me before next Monday."

"I understand. If this conversation is over, then may I be excused?" I asked.

"Don't be in such a hurry. Or maybe you have some plans after this? You didn't carelessly make any promises to anyone after I called you to come meet me, did you?"

"Well, no. I don't have any plans."

"I'm relieved to hear that," said Nagumo.

As Nagumo spoke with me, he occasionally glanced at his phone, checking something. He apparently didn't have any intention of letting me go yet.

Just then, I heard a voice I hadn't heard in quite some time come from the other side of the door.

"Please pardon the intrusion."

There stood Ichinose, with a plastic bag in hand. "Oh... Sorry to have kept you waiting, Nagumo-senpai," she said.

"No big deal. Sorry that I wasn't able to go with you to buy lunch today," Nagumo said to her.

"It's all right, um..." said Ichinose.

"Oh, you're wondering what's going on here, huh Ayanokouji? I've been having lunch with Honami every day lately, here in the student council office. We've been so busy with student council work, after all. My right-hand is keeping me pretty busy, I mean."

It seemed like we were getting fewer opportunities to pass by one another or bump into each other during our lunch breaks, but this was the reason, huh? I guess if they were in the student council office, somewhere regular students didn't typically go, then I naturally wouldn't see Ichinose as much.

"Y'know, when Honami and I are alone together like this, she tells me about all sorts of worries she has. Isn't that right, Honami?" said Nagumo.

"Y-yes," she answered.

"I told her I was gonna have a visitor today. Join us for lunch, Ayanokouji."

I saw three bento lunch boxes peeking out from the plastic bag. Apparently, he was planning on having me here for lunch from the very beginning, allowing us to finish our talk. It would be easy for me to turn him down, and I was sure it would be emotionally painful for Ichinose to sit next to me right now too. However, since Nagumo had already gotten me to say that I had no plans and verbally cornered me, I no longer had any way of escaping.

"You said you didn't have any plans, right?" Nagumo pressed. "In that case, take a seat."



Since I was trapped, and on top of that, I was given an order by the student council president, that basically meant I had no right to refuse. I sat down at a small distance from Nagumo. Ichinose must have always eaten her lunch while seated next to him, I guessed, because she handed me the plastic bag and sat down beside him. She didn't look at me, but rather kept her head slightly downcast and began to take out her lunch. There was no way that Nagumo wouldn't notice how unnatural her behavior was, and he had to remember what happened back on the boat.

"The rules for the Sports Festival this year are quite different from last year," remarked Ichinose.

"If anything, I'd rather you thank me for that," Nagumo replied. "If the rules were exactly the same as last year's, then obviously I would've won."

In the previous Sports Festival, we were divided into red and white teams and competed against each other. Right now, Nagumo had control of the entire third-year grade level, so if it was like last year, he could've had the third-years not on his team lose on purpose. In that scenario, no matter how hard the first- and second-year students fought, they would have zero chance of winning.

Soon afterward, what should have been a conversation between the three of us turned into just Nagumo and Ichinose talking about things while I silently ate the food from my lunch box.

I finished my meal before they were even halfway through theirs, so I shut the lid on the box and picked it up.

"What, you're done eating already?" said Nagumo. "You can leave the empty box over there."

"Thank you very much," I answered, but Nagumo's eyes were already focused on Ichinose and not me.

Ichinose was facing him as well, perhaps to keep her attention away from me.

"I'll be going now. Please excuse me," I announced. Knowing that there was no point in staying there any longer, I decided to

leave the student council office.

"A strategy to demonstrate his superiority, huh..." I thought aloud.

I supposed it might have looked like a humiliation attempt to an outside observer, but it was pointless if it didn't inflict any psychological damage on me. If that was the effect Nagumo wanted, he should've had a few more members of the student council standing by, looking on from the sidelines. That way, he could have at least had the people around him label me as "that poor guy."

At any rate, it looked like Nagumo was probably going to continue reaching out to Ichinose like he had today. Depending on how things went, it wouldn't be a surprise if something happened to change their relationship. I thought about the ramifications of that as I walked away. Would becoming a part of Nagumo lead to growth in Ichinose Honami? If things proceeded smoothly, she might gain enough favor to take over the position of student council president in the future.

And then, with the confidence that came with that development, she'd... No, that line of thinking was a bit overly optimistic. If Nagumo's current fixation on Ichinose was only because of me, it was entirely possible he'd just end up abandoning her at the last minute. And if Ichinose was fully devoting herself to the student council only for Nagumo to recommend Horikita who had been contributing less, then her spirit would be crushed before the year was out.

I couldn't underestimate Nagumo's way of doing things. But though I needed to keep his machinations in mind, there were other things I needed to prioritize right now. The Sports Festival was just around the corner, but preparations needed to be made for the Cultural Festival that was just after it. In light of the class's situation right now, I'd already asked the original proponents of the maid café idea—meaning Satou, Matsushita, and Maezono—to hold off for the time being, but we were going to need to move forward with getting staff for the maid café soon.

I had originally counted on Airi's participation in my calculations, but that was no longer possible. At this point in time,

I couldn't expect Haruka to participate either, and it was probably fair to say that another powerful asset, Kushida, had also been removed from the board. Even if I tried to learn the fundamentals of this whole maid café thing, I couldn't just carelessly ask my classmates for help. And with such fissures in the relationships between people in class right now, if I were to carelessly bring up the topic of the maid café, I'd run the risk of people shunning me and considering me a nuisance. And if *that* happened, people could end up leaking information about the café plan because of it.

"A maid café..." I muttered to myself.

I didn't have the first clue about this whole maid café thing, but judging from the costs, we would need a high volume of sales. We were also going to need a winning strategy, and we'd need to research our competition as well.

2.3

IT WAS NOW morning homeroom, the day after the rules of the Sports Festival were shared with us. And just like yesterday, the mood in the classroom was dismal. The reason was those three still-empty seats where our classmates should have been. They were absent again today, for the second day in a row. It wasn't unusual for anybody to miss school due to illness or being physically unwell, but I was sure that everyone in class suspected those three were absent for other reasons.

In the event of consecutive absences, it was usually necessary to go to the clinic in Keyaki Mall to get a doctor's note. As long as you had a doctor's note, it wasn't a big problem if you were absent. Even if you didn't have a fever, the clinic was expected to cover for someone for two or three days if they were complaining of some kind of malady. However, according to what Chabashira-sensei said in homeroom, none of them had gotten a check-up at the clinic.

With the exception of Kushida, the other two students seemed to have contacted the school, but it remained unclear exactly how long the administration would allow this to go on. The problem was what was going to happen if those three continued to be absent indefinitely. Haruka's absence was because of Airi's expulsion. Wang's absence was because her romantic feelings for Yousuke were exposed. As for Kushida, her absence was due to her true nature being revealed. None of their reasons had anything to do with illness.

What was going to happen if this continued for three days? Five days? A whole week? The school could very well judge that the absences weren't just a series of coincidences and launch an investigation. Just as Chabashira-sensei had said, it would eventually have a significant impact on our Class Points.

On top of that, several other issues were starting to appear which weren't immediately apparent. Wang wasn't the only casualty of Kushida's actions. Ike and Shinohara, who had only

recently become a couple, were also hit by the firestorm, so they were a concern too. In fact, Shinohara didn't appear to be on speaking terms with the people who had reportedly insulted her behind her back, meaning Matsushita, Kei, and Mori. And although Kushida hadn't specifically mentioned Satou and Maezono by name back then, I couldn't rule out the possibility that Shinohara wasn't speaking to them for the same reason.

Even though the girls each had their own groups that they'd usually hang out with, there used to be generally strong ties between the girls in this class. But right now, there was a definite sense of estrangement. Although this was the time when we should have been deciding things like which people should team up to compete in group competitions so we could score the most points, we hadn't reached that stage yet in this class.

If we tried to divide the class into teams right now as things were, the internal divisions would become even more pronounced. Horikita knew that all too well, and that was why she was unable to move things forward herself. That being said, it would be impossible to just force everyone to pretend everything was fine with each other right here and now. It wasn't just Horikita who knew this—Yousuke knew it too.

Time continued to pass, and morning homeroom came to an end. Immediately afterward, I received a message on my tablet.

"I need to talk to you for a minute. Follow me."

It was a concise message: instructions from Chabashira-sensei. Not long after she left the classroom, I got up from my seat naturally, like I was just stepping out to use the bathroom. I was able to take full advantage of the fact that my seat was situated far in the back of the room, near the hallway, and so no one saw me leave.

I turned the corner in the hall toward the faculty office and I spotted Chabashira-sensei there, standing with her back to the wall.

"It's rather unusual for you to call me out like this," I said. "Is this an urgent matter?"

For a moment, I assumed that this was about those three absent students, but apparently, that wasn't the case.

"Yes, it is," Chabashira-sensei replied. "There's something I have to tell you. It's about Sakura."

"About Airi?"

A week had already passed since Airi had left the school. Time continued to move on. What was there to tell me now, after all this time?

"The school has already gone through the necessary steps to process her expulsion, of course," said Chabashira-sensei. "You know, packing up her belongings, collecting her Private Points, those sorts of things that you need to take care of... It's called post-processing."

Her choice of words was straightforward, but she was still being a little evasive and wasn't getting to the point. I wondered if it was because of her own feelings about the fact that a student from her own class was now gone.

"Anything that a student purchases while at school before being expelled is essentially that student's property," she went on. "And it's up to him or her to decide on what they'd like to do with those things. There's no problem if they opt to leave it behind or if they want to take it with them. Once a student is expelled, their property is officially handed over in the faculty office, but... Well, to tell you the truth, something unexpected happened before we started the process this time."

"Something unexpected?" I repeated.

"Yes. Well, I suppose in this case, it'd be more accurate to say that after the Unanimous Special Exam, we found records that indicated that Sakura tried to use about 5,000 Private Points she had on hand for something, and we haven't decided what to do about it yet."

"When a student is expelled, their Private Points are forfeited, right?"

"Yes. But as I said before, that process only *really* starts when the official handover happens. However, by the school's

estimation, there's a gray area with some things. For example, there's the matter of someone not normally being allowed to transfer their Private Points to a particular student."

"I see. I suppose that if someone were to transfer all of their Private Points after their expulsion was definite, that could lead to some problems. Are you telling me that Airi transferred 5,000 points to someone?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying. Sakura—"

I was then told how she had spent those Private Points in a rather unexpected way. As I listened to the explanation, I realized that the teacher's story had something to do with me after all.

"...So, there you have it," Chabashira-sensei concluded. "That's why I thought I would reach out to you, as this matter concerns you. Of course, you are under no obligation to accept it. If you want to refuse it, we'll handle it."

Airi had done something in the short span of time after her expulsion was certain. While I had a hunch about her true intentions, I made a decision about how to handle it.

"It's not that large an amount, so it's all right. I'll take care of it," I replied.

"You're going to pay in her stead?" she asked.

"That won't be a problem, will it?"

"Not at all. Since you're simply using your own Private Points, as a matter of convenience, then the school will not see it as a violation of the rules."

"I understand."

I had a clear statement from a teacher confirming that it wasn't going to be an issue.

"I just want to ask you one thing. You have...something to do with all of this, don't you?" she asked, her gaze somewhat probing.

"No, I actually don't," I told her. "It's just that this is the conclusion I came to myself, in what limited time I had."

Of course, I didn't know all of the details, but I was sure that the answers would come to me naturally as time went by.

"At any rate, the fact that one problem has been resolved, even if it's a small one, is good news to me," Chabashira-sensei said. "I'm not exactly very happy about the situation in class."

I couldn't help but feel like seeing her like this, with her worrying over the class as their homeroom teacher, was out of character for her.

"What's with that look?" she asked.

"Nothing. Anyway, it's true what you've said, sensei. The class is unstable right now. I was planning on forcefully correcting some things, but that might not be necessary."

"What do you mean?"

"Please watch over the class now," I said, "so that every student in your class will grow, as an individual."

Chabashira-sensei seemed a little bit disgruntled at that, but she nodded silently.

Chapter 3: An Unavoidable Path

ONCE AGAIN, the class was facing multiple difficulties simultaneously. There was no way that the leader could simply sit by and watch as things continued to deteriorate here and there—that would be simply unacceptable. She probably wanted to solve everything by herself. There was nothing wrong with wanting to do something yourself, of course, but if it was beyond your capabilities to do something, then that attitude was simply idealism. No, actually, even if you did have the skill to solve the problem, there were some things that you just couldn't handle alone. What she needed now was to rely on her friends.

And, at the same time, through cooperation, she had to choose the path that would correct the situation. As for me, I hadn't made any substantial effort to lend a hand before today. After I finished checking the news on my phone, I decided to get up from my seat, leaving a little bit after other students who were once again heading off to have fun after class.

Just then, someone who had been waiting for just the right moment ran after me in a hurry. I figured that if he were panicking and couldn't find a solution, he'd reach out to me. He seemed to be a little concerned about all the students around us right now, but he leaned in close, and whispered something to me.

"Um, excuse me, Kiyotaka-kun," Yousuke said. "I was wondering if you could make some time for me this evening? There are a few things I want to discuss with you."

"I have plans to meet with Kei tonight," I replied. "Can't we just talk about this now?"

I didn't actually have any such plans, but I wanted to see his reaction to my lie.

"Well..."

There was no way he'd just immediately say yes, of course. Yousuke had club activities, so he didn't have free time after class. And since club activities would be temporarily suspended when the Sports Festival got closer, he probably wanted to participate as much as he could for the time being.

"I'm messing with you," I told him. "I'll talk to Kei. We can have our date another time."

"Th-thank you."

"Just double-checking, but you're sure you want to talk to *me* about whatever's going on?" I already knew the answer, but I asked the question anyway.

Yousuke nodded, not finding anything strange about it. "Yes. And I thought that it should be as soon as possible."

"All right. Then if you're fine with meeting in my room, I'll set aside time tonight for you."

Yousuke's face relaxed and he gave me a childlike smile when he heard my answer. "I'd greatly appreciate it if Karuizawa-san could be present as well, if at all possible," he added. "Would that be all right?"

"You want Kei there too? I'm sure she'd be happy to be there, but wouldn't she be in the way?"

"There are a few things that need to be worked out, and I could really use her help."

Kei practically had an information network with the girls in the class. Having her around would make a big difference. I didn't need to ask what Yousuke was talking about. He was referring to matters with Kushida, Shinohara, and Haruka.

"Then, in that case... Can we do this at about seven-thirty?" I asked.

"Of course, that's no problem," Yousuke said. "I'll be there, and not a minute late."

He smiled with his whole face, with even his eyes squinting. Yousuke then walked away in a hurry, most likely to head to his

club. Whenever anyone had a problem, Yousuke would immediately reach out.

"That's problem number two for the class, I guess," I muttered.

Since I always was the one that lent a helping hand to Yousuke when he was in trouble, I supposed this happening was unavoidable. It wasn't easy to break something that you've built up over time.

At that point, I figured I needed to contact Kei and tell her to come to my place around 7:30.

3.1

IT WAS 5:30 IN THE EVENING when I got back to my room and was waiting around patiently for Yousuke to arrive. Suddenly, I got a notification on my phone.

"Can I come over to see you now?"

It was a message from my girlfriend, Kei. She included a cute cat sticker with her text. We were scheduled to meet with Yousuke at 7:30 tonight, but it looked like she wanted to come rather early.

"And also, how about we have dinner together while I'm there?"

She sent another message before I could even reply. Apparently, she had an ulterior motive for wanting to come earlier: having dinner. In response to Kei's message, I simply sent a short response to tell her that was fine.

"Now I guess I'll have to make something," I muttered.

I supposed I could just serve leftovers from yesterday, but if I could think of something I could quickly whip up that Kei liked, then... But just as I opened up the fridge and stared at its contents, my doorbell rang. When I went to answer it, I found Kei standing there, grinning at me. I was a little surprised, but I casually invited her in without getting flustered. Now that our relationship had become public knowledge, there wasn't much need to worry about having her in my room.

"That was fast," I remarked.

Kei took off her shoes and stepped into my room. Her movements showed that this was all rather familiar to her and a well-loved routine.

"That's 'cause I texted you right before I got on the elevator!" she teased.

It looked like she had already been planning to come visit me anyway—my plans and where I was at the time were

secondary concerns. I gave up on cooking for the time being and sat down on the floor by the table with Kei.

"Maybe it's because I've been here in your room so often lately," she said, "but y'know, it's like I'm getting used to it here. Like it's my own room."

"I'm glad," I said. "On the other hand though, you've never invited me to come to your room, Kei."

"H-huh? W-well, because it'd be a little embarrassing, and... I dunno, maybe someday, when I feel up to it, I will!"

She didn't give me an honest, immediate affirmative response, but I figured there must have been a lot of things to consider when it came to bringing someone to a girl's room. I decided to not push the matter too much.

"That reminds me, what are people you know saying about our relationship, anyway?" I asked.

"You mean the other girls? I think they're being surprisingly casual about it and just kind of accepting it outright. It's like... Eh, never mind."

Kei was trying to say something, but she got evasive near the end. I was a little curious, so I decided to try pressing her.

"What?" I asked.

"Well, it's...you know. Let's just say that people like Hirata Yousuke are really popular out there in the world, right? Lots of girls say that not being with him is a shame."

I see. Basically, she was saying that the girls didn't understand the point of Kei purposefully breaking up with a guy like Yousuke to go for a guy who wasn't popular at all—a loser. It certainly wasn't any surprise that they were being so frank about the comparisons between me and Yousuke, though.

"In a way, I've kind of been made a victim of this whole thing too," she sighed. "I was the one who broke up with Yousuke-kun, but now the other girls wonder if I actually got dumped."

Well, if she was jumping from a guy like Yousuke to someone unpopular like I was, then you couldn't blame them for having that interpretation, I guessed.

"But you know, that's only part of what they're saying. Truth is, your reputation has been, like, rocket-skying or whatever lately."

"I think you mean 'skyrocketing,'" I teased. "What kind of slipup *was* that?"

It was the kind of mistake that made me suspect it was done intentionally. I then noticed that Kei was grinning at me.

"Hey, I at least know *that* much, I'll have you know," she said.

"I'll bet your tutor is exceptional," I joked.

"I'm always grateful to him," she replied with a smile. "Thanks to our secret, private lessons, my scores are going up."

Kei had been improving in her academics little by little, and had reached a score of 48 in academic ability at the beginning of September, which counted as a C. She had finally attained what you could call an average level of knowledge as a student. After a few minutes of silly chatter, I sat up and headed back to the refrigerator.

"I was thinking of making omurice. Would you eat that?" I asked, not turning around.

She immediately shouted back happily. "Yes, absolutely, I would! Oh, and please go a little heavier on the ketchup, Chef!"

This wasn't the first time I served Kei a home-cooked meal. I regularly had the opportunity to cook her meals in my room like this since we started dating. So far, Kei had shown little inclination to cook on her own, but I didn't particularly mind. I figured that whoever wanted to cook should be the one to cook— gender had nothing to do with it. I didn't dislike cooking, and Kei was happy to eat it.

Kei liked to talk, but I wasn't so good at it. However, she would talk to me while I cooked to liven things up. By supporting

each other in this way, I felt that we struck a good balance. I pulled some eggs, ketchup, chicken, and butter out from the refrigerator. After grabbing some cooking oil from the shelf, I had everything ready to go. I took out some leftover rice that was still frozen and started defrosting it in the microwave.

Meanwhile, I got the onions out. I had really wanted to add some carrots, but unfortunately, I was totally out of them. I placed the onions on the cutting board and picked up a kitchen knife, but I felt someone come up behind me. Kei was getting in close, snuggling up against my back.

Since it was a little dangerous for her to be so close while I was chopping, I stopped what I was doing and asked without turning around, "What are you doing?"

"I'm just watching, that's all."

That's what she said, but there was no way she could actually see what I was doing with her face at my back.

"You can ignore me," she said. "I'll stay perfectly still."

"That so? Okay then."

For the time being, I just did as I was told—I ignored her and continued cooking. I cut the onions into roughly five-millimeter cubes on the cutting board. The whole time I was dicing them, Kei was snuggled right up against my back and didn't pull away, not even once. I put the knife down and reached for a bowl so that I could crack some eggs, but right at that moment, Kei put her hands around my waist and hugged me tightly.

"What are you doing now?" I asked.

"Hm...? I'm just watching."

"It doesn't really seem like you're just watching. Does it? If anything, it's more like you're trying to sabotage me," I answered.

That wasn't me trying to warn her or reprimand her or anything. It was just a comment about the slight drop in work efficiency.

Kei didn't seem bothered by it at all. "Ah, this is happiness. What else could make me this happy?" she murmured. Kei then

started to hold me even more tightly than she did before.

She actually seemed quite satisfied by this.

"That's some pretty cheap happiness," I teased. "I'm sure there are lots of other, more amazing kinds of happiness out there. Buying things you want, watching things on TV you want to see..."

"Those aren't enough to make me happy," said Kei.

"I was just messing around and saying something random, but it's true, isn't it?"

"No, those wouldn't make me this happy," she insisted. "Even if there was true happiness in it, I wouldn't need it. This happiness right now? That's enough for me."

If she was satisfied with this, then I figured there wasn't really anything more to say.

"Can I get back to cooking now?" I asked. It was extremely inconvenient trying to continue working in this position.

"Hmm? What should I do, I wonder?" Kei peeked at me, occasionally looking into my eyes with a broad smile on her face. "I think maybe I'd like some kind of reward for being quiet and obedient. Maybe?"

"There's chocolate in the fridge," I told her.

"Boo. That's not what I meant, y'know..." she said, trailing off. "I think there's something kind of off about you, Kiyotaka... Oh well, that's just how you are, though, huh? I'll wait quietly."

She must have been satisfied somehow, because she walked away from me and sat down on the bed. Well, I supposed that meant I could give my undivided attention to making the omurice for the time being. While Kei waited for the food to be ready, she alternated her attention between her cell phone and the TV.

Once the food was ready, we sat around the table and ate. We ended up finishing our dinner a little earlier than usual.

"That reminds me," Kei said, "there's also this whole thing with Shinohara-san."

I hadn't said anything in particular to initiate discussion on that topic, but Kei started talking about it regardless.

"That whole ordeal was bad for me too, but it's like, it does seem like Shinohara-san was especially hurt by it. She won't even talk to me."

"I guess that's to be expected," I said.

When it came to physical appearance, whether someone was attractive or unattractive depended on an individual's likes and sensibilities, but generally speaking, those who were considered superior would make condescending remarks about those they considered inferior. That in itself wasn't unusual and was something that you could see happening anywhere. There were many cases where a person was simply saying what they thought, without any real malicious intent behind it.

"Do you and the other girls dislike Shinohara, Kei?" I asked.

"No, not at all," Kei protested. "It's like, Shinohara-san's the funny girl, you know? People like her because she livens things up."

"I see. So that's why you were unintentionally making fun of her, talking about her relationship with Ike and so on."

"...I guess, yeah," Kei admitted. "Me and the girls were chatting and laughing, saying the kind of stuff that would hurt if she heard them." There was an air of regret to her voice, which made me think she was reflecting on what happened. "Are you going to hate me now? Since I said mean things about people?"

"People say bad things about each other," I said. "I'm not going to deny that it happens. Even if people do it to different extents, it'd be more difficult to find a person who didn't speak ill of others at all."

There should be a time and a place for people to complain about things. Things like "I don't like the senpai in my club, they're so pushy," or "I hate bossy teachers." While it might be excessive for people to make fun of others' physical appearance or deliberately point out people's academic shortcomings, it wasn't weird for people to say those kinds of things about others.

"But basically, you just have to avoid letting the person in question hear about it," I added.

"Yeah," said Kei.

"I'm sure it must've been a big shock to you that Kushida blabbed about it when everyone thought she was the exception to the rule about this kind of stuff. But talking to someone always means taking a risk," I added.

It naturally hurt Shinohara deeply when Kushida told everyone about how Kei and the other girls were making fun of her appearance. But that wasn't all it did. People with a positive impression of Shinohara—her friends, her boyfriend Ike, and Ike's friends—would naturally think poorly of Kei and her friends after that. They might even go around talking badly of Kei, Matsushita, and Mori now, out loud for people to hear. Once this negative cycle started, it would take a lot of effort to stop it.

"So, you're not just leaving it at the fact you feel bad, right? Did you try to do anything?"

I'd heard a brief explanation from Matsushita on the subject already, but I needed to hear it from Kei as well.

"Well... I tried talking to her a few times," she said. "I tried to say that it wasn't... I tried to admit that it wasn't a misunderstanding, and I tried to make up for the hurtful things we said. But it just feels like she's totally wheeled off right now."

"You mean walled off," I corrected her.

"Yeah, that... Th-that was on purpose."

She definitely said the wrong word there by mistake. Anyway, it sounded like Kei and her friends had at least been attempting to repair their broken relationship with Shinohara, in their own way.

"So, hey, how do you think I can patch things up with her?" Kei asked.

"You're asking me?"

"Of course! Knowing you, I bet you'd come up with a brilliant strategy."

I hadn't found a breakthrough for this issue as of yet, but Kei had the same problem as Yousuke of coming to me with something.

"I'm thinking on it still," I told her. "Give me a little time."

I figured I'd tell her that for the time being, so I could postpone giving her an answer.

"Hey, I know this is a change of topic," she said, "but can I ask you something kind of weird?"

Despite asking, she didn't hesitate before going ahead with her question. She looked up at me with an intense, curious look on her face.

"Kiyotaka, you expelled Sakura-san in the last special exam on the basis of her OAA scores, right? So, hypothetically—"

When our eyes met, Kei stumbled over her words and suddenly stopped.

"Actually, never mind. Forget it. It's nothing."

"You're wondering what I would have done if, hypothetically, you had the lowest score in OAA?" I asked, finishing her question.

Kei's eyes went wide at how easily I determined what she was thinking.

"As I said before, when I explained why I wouldn't expel Ike, even if you had similarly low scores, the difference in your friend groups was overwhelming," I said. "I wouldn't have expelled you."

"Then, what if I didn't have any friends?" Kei's anxious feelings started bubbling to the surface, her words spilling out in rapid succession. "What if I was the lowest rung on the ladder among the girls?"

"That argument is pointless," I told her. "If we were making that assumption, that would mean we're talking about a version of Karuizawa Kei who was a totally different person. If that were true, then you and I wouldn't have developed the kind of relationship that we have now."

"...Well, that's... I see. I guess you might be right, but... If, um, hypothetically, if I were that other person, and if you and I weren't dating, Kiyotaka, you would have had me expelled?"

Even though she understood it was a pointless discussion to have, it seemed like she couldn't help but ask anyway.

"In the scenario you've just described, then yes, I would have," I answered.

"Oh..."

"Look, I can understand how that might hurt your feelings, but that person wouldn't be you," I insisted. "It's a totally different person. You were bullied and hurt, and in high school, you took hold of your social status among the girls so that you could turn things around. You used Yousuke, and then we met, and you started going out with me. That person is Karuizawa Kei."

When I said that though, Kei pursed her lips in an obviously dissatisfied pout.

"You know the correct answer was for you to say that you'd protect me, no matter what I was like. Right, Kiyotaka?"

"...I see," I said.

She had wanted me to declare that I would protect her, even if we were talking about a different Karuizawa Kei. I was learning that there was no need for logic when it came to this kind of thing.

She laid down and rested her head on my lap, and I gently stroked her head to try and put her in a better mood. After having spent a few minutes curled up on my lap like a cat, she seemed content.

Kei spoke up again from her position. "Hey, Kiyotaka? I actually think it's fine that you got rid of Sakura-san. There's nothing wrong with what you did. But was Horikita-san keeping Kushida-san around really the right thing to do? She'll definitely be an obstacle...right?"

Kushida Kikyou was the person responsible for creating deep divides in the class. Kei felt that the downsides of not having

Kushida removed were significant. That wasn't a strange answer to come to, and instead was a natural reaction. Everyone had their doubts, but it wasn't easy for them to voice them out loud back then when the clock was running out. At that point, they all were most likely thinking that it was fine as long as they were safe in the end.

It was probably during the two days off we had after the exam that things started to cool down. Some people would start wondering if what happened that day was really a good thing, while others would still just be glad that they didn't get expelled themselves. On top of that, there were also those who feared that they might be next.

"There's something Kushida has that Airi didn't," I said. "Do you know what that is?"

"Huh? Um, you mean like skill at academics and sports, right? Kushida-san is pretty amazing, all around. She's good at everything."

"That's the superficial reason, sure. But that's not what's actually important."

"...What does that mean?" Kei asked.

"She could be an important asset to helping Horikita Suzune awaken as a leader. Kushida, not you or Yousuke, might very well become someone that Horikita can call a partner."

"Kushida-san could...?"

"Horikita herself might not fully understand it yet. She may have just trusted what her intuition was telling her when she was under the pressure of the clock ticking down."

"So, that's what Kushida-san has that Sakura-san doesn't..." said Kei.

"There's Kushida's point of view, which only she has, along with her thought processes, and the things that only Kushida can say," I explained. "Those are things that Kushida can bring to the table whether she's popular or not. And that was what drove Horikita to do what she did."

Kei understood what I was saying, at least to a certain extent, but she probably wasn't immediately on board with that train of thought. Was that a natural reaction too? Well, it was based on an uncertain future, I supposed. What I said was nothing more than hypothesizing, based on the assumption that Horikita was correct in making the choice that she made.

"I'm sure that Horikita knows full well that Haruka and the people close to her will resent her over it," I added. "But still, it's not like Horikita's choice is going to start yielding results after just a day or two. All anyone can do is be kind, patient, and wait."

"But doesn't Hasebe-san resent you even more, Kiyotaka?" asked Kei.

"Yeah."

You had to consider the difficulty in reaching a unanimous decision in that situation, when time was about to run out. No matter how many other candidates Horikita might have proposed, it would've been nearly impossible to reach a unanimous decision in time. And getting Class Points taken away would have been a difficult outcome for us to accept. As such, there was no other way Horikita could have been saved except by me taking action.

"If people could just talk about the results, the conclusion, the answers, then it'd be simple. But the reality is that they can't."

"You're talking about Horikita-san?" asked Kei.

"Let's suppose that there's a hurdle in front of you that's so high, you aren't sure if you can actually jump over it," I said. "That is to say, it's a risky situation. Say that you try and fail. You might simply fall to the ground, and that'd be it. Alternatively, you might fall and come away with some scrapes on your legs. If you're unlucky, you might even break a bone."

The situation that had faced Horikita was exactly the kind of scenario. There was a hurdle blocking her path ahead, one that was too tall for her to jump over with her own level of ability.

"What do you think you'd need to do to make absolutely sure that you'd get over that obstacle?" I asked Kei.

"Eh? U-uh... Practice a lot before making the jump...?"

"And what if you can't practice?"

"You mean like just doing it right on the spot, without any warm-up or anything? Like, right then and there? I guess that'd be all you could do then, in that situation..." said Kei.

"It was exactly like that in Horikita's situation. She couldn't stop running, and she had to try and jump right over the hurdle that was in front of her."

"So, you're saying that Horikita-san tried and failed, and she fell?" asked Kei.

"No, I'd say she made the jump, and her foot hit the hurdle a bit," I answered. "How badly was she hurt? Will she fall? And will she be all right in the end, or seriously injured? All those questions are yet to be determined."

Avoiding the hurdle would have been easy. All she would have had to do was not jump and take a little detour instead. That choice was another thing that made me want to keep an eye on Horikita. I found myself wondering once again about these sorts of things. It was strange—I would have never imagined her doing those things when we first started school.

"I guess that makes sense, yeah," said Kei. "But still, I just can't agree with Horikita-san's decision. She broke her promise. She even said she'd protect Kushida-san."

While it was true that Horikita meant it as a threat, it was also a fact that order in her class had been too lax. Horikita knew that her personal safety would not be guaranteed after causing such a stir. That meant, of course, that trust in her had been significantly shaken, but she was going to make up for it in the special exams ahead. At least on the condition that she continued in pursuit of the goal of getting closer to Class A, that is.

While we were talking, I realized that it was now after seven o'clock in the evening. I put away the dishes that we used for dinner and went over to the kitchen to wash them while I had the time.

"Hey, come on, let's keep chatting over here," said Kei.

"I'm going to start washing dishes, so later."

"Huh? But if we wait until later, it'll be seven-thirty in no time," pouted Kei.

I could hear the dissatisfaction in her voice, since once Yousuke arrived, that meant more serious discussion would begin. I started washing dishes anyway. Kei sat quietly for a while, but she gradually grew impatient and started making demands again.

"Hey, come on, don't be shy. Come over here. Okay? Please?" Kei lightly patted the bed three or four times with the palm of her hand.

"Guess I don't have a choice," I said.

I least wanted to wash the dishes before Yousuke arrived, but I gave up on that. When I sat down in the spot Kei had directed me to, she proceeded to gleefully poke me in the right cheek with her index finger.

"Your skin is, like, almost unfairly smooth for a boy. What do you do?" she asked.

"I just use lotion," I said.

Considering the burdens that came with your skin in your teens, I figured that anything beyond that was basically unnecessary.

"Hmm..."

Even though Kei seemed convinced, I wasn't sure if she really cared whether it was true or not. She seemed like she wanted to keep touching me though because she wouldn't stop poking my cheek. I grabbed Kei's hand, pulled her in close, and stole a kiss from her lips. I was expecting her to be surprised, but actually, it seemed like she had been waiting for it.

She smiled bashfully back at me. "I was waiting for that ever since I came to your room today," she said.

"...Is that so?"

I had to admit that I was still a little bit naïve and unable to pick up romantic cues. Afterward, our lips met again and again, with almost no words at all. Our repeated kisses tasted like our omurice dinner, a somewhat unusual experience.

"I love you..." said Kei, breathlessly.

I gently embraced her as she held me in her arms, and a quiet stillness enveloped us. It wasn't awkward—instead, it was a very pleasant moment. I wondered how many minutes passed as we sat there, just holding each other tightly.

Then, without warning, the doorbell rang, breaking the silence in the room. Kei was immediately snapped back to reality, and, in flustered embarrassment, she hurriedly moved away from me. There wasn't any need for her to rush since the door was locked, but... Well, I supposed I could understand how she felt. After giving her a little bit of time to settle down, we both welcomed Yousuke to my room. He had shown up still wearing his school uniform.

"After club, I went to Keyaki Mall with some of my senpai," Yousuke told us, noticing that we were looking at his attire.

"Welcome! Come on in, don't be shy!" said Kei, ushering him inside as if it were her own room.

When Yousuke saw Kei, he smiled happily. I could tell he was really overjoyed to see how cheerful and pure Kei looked right now, and precisely because he had been watching over her more closely than anyone else since they started coming to this school.

"All right then, sorry for the intrusion," he said as he stepped in.

After he carefully set his shoes down, came inside, and sat down, I served him some tea.

"Thank you," said Yousuke.

"So, what is it you wanted to talk about?" I encouraged him to go ahead and get right into it, since there wasn't any point in drawing this out over a long period of time. Of course, I already had a hunch about what all of this was about.

"Yeah, okay," he said. "It's about the situation in our class. I'm sure that Karuizawa-san is well aware of this too, but I was thinking that it would be, well, troubling, if we were to head into

the Sports Festival with things as they are now. I was thinking it'd probably be difficult in particular for the girls to coordinate."

Yousuke glanced over at Kei, figuring that she would know more about the situation.

"I was just talking with Kiyotaka about Shinohara-san earlier, actually," she said. "To be honest, with where we're at right now, I'm not so sure we can handle competitions."

That was because first, they needed to repair and re-establish their relationship as friends.

"I was wondering if you had any good ideas," said Yousuke, looking at me. "I need your help, Kiyotaka-kun."

Kei had asked me for help in a similar fashion earlier, and now she too turned to look at me with pleading eyes. I decided I wouldn't hold back now and tell them what I thought.

"Yousuke, did you bring this discussion up with anyone else besides me?" I asked.

"Huh? No... You're the first, I just started this now," he said. "I thought it wouldn't go very well if I just carelessly brought it up and let people know that I was trying to repair the damage."

I was sure that Shinohara would be happy if she felt that Yousuke was sincerely trying to help, but if she knew that he was actually working as a go-between, his efforts might backfire and cause her to become even more guarded. She might suspect that there was some ulterior motive behind his kind words.

"And?" I asked.

"I guess I just want some direction from you, after all, I think," said Yousuke.

"In that case, from this point on, I'd like you to talk to Horikita, the class leader first," I told him. "Not me."

"I feel like Horikita-san has her hands full dealing with the matter of Kushida-san right now. Bringing up problems with another classmate now would be—"

"All right then," I interrupted him. "If I were handling Kushida instead, would you have come to Horikita then?"

"Well, I... I'm not so sure," admitted Yousuke. "I think I might have come to you anyway, Kiyotaka-kun..."

So after imagining how things would go in that scenario, he still would have likely talked to me.

"Horikita is doing well," he added. "But knowing you, Kiyotaka-kun, I thought you'd be able to see the bigger picture, and you'd make the right decision."

"I think so too, you know?" agreed Kei. "I mean, if we leave it to Kiyotaka, he'd give us the perfect answer."

"I believe I told you this during the last special exam, but you can't rely on me all the time. Even if you have some concerns, you have to talk to Horikita first. You have to follow the process."

"But—"

"You're telling yourselves things like, 'Oh, it'll be a bother,' or 'There's no guarantee she'll come up with a solution, so I won't rely on her, I can't rely on her,'" I guessed aloud. "And yet you think that Horikita can still become a true leader? What if we were talking about a leader like Ryuuken, Sakayanagi, or Ichinose? Even if they were in the middle of dealing with something else, wouldn't you think it was odd if they *weren't* the very first people that their classmates went to?"

The important thing here was that the leader relied on their class, and they were relied upon in turn. Horikita and her class were on the verge of a growth spurt now through their repeated successes and failures.

"Failure is experience," I went on. "Everyone starts from the bottom, solving basic problems like one plus one. Of course, Horikita isn't at that level anymore, but even so, she's still overwhelmingly lacking in experience."

Before looking for solutions for this specific problem, they needed to address the lack of an established process of going to Horikita to discuss things and finding solutions through her.

"So, in this situation, I would want you to first talk to Horikita. If she tells you she has her hands full with Kushida, *then*

you come talk to me," I concluded.

"...I see," said Yousuke, nodding a few times. "I understand what you're trying to say, Kiyotaka-kun."

He was clearly taking what I said seriously, processing the meaning behind my words in his head.

"It's important to gain experience from failures, yes, but this situation is different from something like test scores," he added. "I don't think this is the kind of situation where you can say something like, 'Oh, I got a bad score, so I'll try harder next time'. This is a serious matter of a student's heart. If a fractured relationship is broken apart thanks to a hasty decision, then... Well, that's a problem that you can't take back."

This sort of thing was Yousuke's arena, for sure. It didn't seem like he came to me to talk about this simply because he thought he would get an easy answer.

"It's the correct decision," I said. "I think your view is a little naïve, but yes, it's true that there are cracks in the friendships between classmates. And it's also true that misunderstandings, fights, and back-and-forth insults between friends can lead to irreparable issues."

If things escalated, going from insults to harassment, silent treatment, or bullying, that could lead to a worst-case scenario. But that was only in truly extreme cases.

"Kei," I said, turning to her. "Is your feud with Shinohara really that intense?"

"Um, well... If I had to say anything, I guess it's like we're having an extended fight," she answered. "It's hard for me to just come out and say anything to her though, since I'm one of the people who hurt her. I'm on the offending side, right? We're not really, like, harassing each other or anything. And I don't think there are any girls in class who *hate* Shinohara-san and all."

My view of the situation was that by taking this matter too seriously, they were causing unnecessary anxiety. That was my view of the situation.

"And you're not planning on having Horikita solve this alone, are you?" I added.

"Of course not," said Yousuke. "If there's anything I can do to help, I'll do it."

"Good," I said. "Then I expect that if you two can handle things well, with Horikita leading you, you should be able to make it through most anything."

I was sure that those words alone wouldn't be enough to completely assuage their anxieties, so I decided to add something important.

"I'm sure that there will be things that you can't solve, of course, even if you work with Horikita. And in those times, I'll lend a hand."

With the right backup, Yousuke and Kei would be able to act without hesitation. They appeared convinced, but, judging by the fact that his face hadn't quite perked up yet, Yousuke still had something on his mind.

We continued exchanging information for a while after, but when eight o'clock approached, I urged them to head back to their rooms. On their way out, though, Yousuke seemed like he couldn't quite leave things the way they were and suddenly spoke up.

"Um... If you don't mind, Kei, I was wondering if Kiyotaka-kun and I could chat privately for a minute." Apparently, he still had more to say.

"Sure," said Kei. "All right, then, I'll head on out first."

With that, she left right away. Once she closed the door behind her, Yousuke turned back to look at me.

"Kiyotaka-kun. I'll talk to Horikita-san tomorrow about all this, but I just want to ask you privately, right now... Is there a clear path forward here?"

"To be honest, I don't have any ideas for an immediate solution regarding matters with Haruka and Kushida," I admitted.

"I'm hoping that you guys can discuss the issue more and steer things in the right direction."

"Since you put it that way... I take it that means you do have an idea for how to approach things with Mii-chan?"

"More or less. It'll take time, but there's a chance things can be improved. If you need to hurry, though, there's no reason why you couldn't take some forceful, drastic measures."

"Drastic measures? If there's something I can do, then I think I should do it."

Even when the subject was a girl who had feelings for him, Yousuke spoke in the same manner as always.

"I said they were *drastic* measures," I reminded him.
"I don't recommend it."

"What kind of thing are you talking about, exactly?" he asked.

"For you to go see Mii-chan and reciprocate her feelings," I said.

Yousuke's reaction was one I wasn't expecting.

"So, if I go to Mii-chan," he said, "and tell her something along the lines of 'Actually, I like you too. I want to go out with you,' then she'll come back to school tomorrow?"

I was a little reluctant to even suggest it, but that really was the only solution I could think of right now.

"If it wasn't you who'd be involved, then I wouldn't suggest such nonsense," I told him. "But I thought it might be possible for you to pull this off since you have experience with this sort of thing, considering you faked going out with Kei at her request."

"That's true," muttered Yousuke, though his face hadn't brightened at all. "But the reason Karuizawa-san and I agreed to make it look like we were dating was because there weren't any romantic feelings between us. That's not the same as pretending to reciprocate Mii-chan's feelings and going out with her. It would only cause serious pain later."

"I'm not saying I'm endorsing this idea, but you're wrong about something," I said. "Although it's unclear when exactly Mii-chan fell for you, it's undeniable that she, and perhaps other students as well, developed romantic feelings for you since you came to this school. In other words, the cost of you protecting Kei from being bullied by dating her was that you indirectly rejected any other girls from connecting with you because of that lie, and you might have hurt them because of that."

"Well, I..."

If Kei and Yousuke had been serious about their relationship, that would've been a valid reason for keeping others away. However, as long as that wasn't the case, then there wasn't much difference between the situation with Kei and with Mii-chan, even though the circumstances were different.

"What if Mii-chan came crying to you right now and told you that she couldn't go to school anymore unless you went out with her?" I asked. "Would you really be able to refuse her?"

Yousuke choked on his words. He probably wouldn't be able to make a choice like that.

"If you couldn't refuse her in that scenario, then you have two options. You can either tell her that you don't like her but will go out with her anyway, or you can lie and say that you like her too and go out with her."

And if true love could blossom in the process, then that could bring things to the best possible conclusion.

"I still...don't think I should do that," said Yousuke.

Even though he could understand what I was saying, it seemed like his emotional side was getting in the way.

"Anyway, that's just the most heavy-handed solution," I said. "It's going to take some time, but right now, we're basically just sowing the seeds."

"I understand... Anyway, I have to say, you really are strong, Kiyotaka-kun. You don't even seem the slightest bit bothered over the fact that Sakura-san got expelled."

Yousuke's quiet voice showed no indication of sadness or anger.

"I still...can feel that sensation from back then, in my hands." Yousuke stretched out his arms and looked down at his palms. "The sensation in my fingertips as I held my tablet and pushed the button to vote in favor. I'll never forget it."

Yousuke worked tirelessly day and night for the sake of his classmates and didn't often show weakness. However, he felt he was in the same position here, sharing responsibility for Airi's expulsion, and was suffering because of it.

"I know what you were thinking at the time, Yousuke," I told him. "There was no way you would've normally agreed to expel someone in that exam who hadn't done any harm, like Airi. But even so, you held on there. You could have spoken up at the very last minute and declared that you didn't agree, but you held yourself back from saying it."

If Yousuke had turned to his classmates back then with a pleading look in his eyes, telling them that we were being unreasonable, then even they would've regained their composure. But if he broadened their perspectives after the pressure of the clock running down had narrowed their field of vision, then he could've made coming to a unanimous decision impossible.

"I know we said that the most important thing was...for us to get to Class A..." said Yousuke.

Even though he knew it, he still couldn't agree to it. That was likely what was going on here.

"Hasebe-san, Kushida-san, and Mii-chan have been absent," he said. "I have to wonder how long that's going to go on. Our classmates are terrified after seeing the reality that students with lower grades will be discarded. The class has fallen completely silent now. It's like the cheerful group we had up until last week was a lie."

Even though he was moving toward a solution, he was likely suffering, asking himself the same questions over and over again.

"I know that you're not happy with the choice that Horikita and I made," I told him, "but you just have to accept it. You need to grin and bear it and understand just how capable the class is right now. That's exactly why Horikita needs so much support. Sometimes people choose the right path, and sometimes they choose wrong. And sometimes they choose an uncertain one."

I was sure that even though I told him that, he wasn't going to be able to really digest everything I said.

"I..." he started. "I still think I should have chosen to let time run out... I think..."

Yousuke's shoulders trembled slightly as he lost his composure, unable to stand it anymore. He couldn't even think of something like sacrificing someone. Even so, the fact that he had been able to make a decision in that situation could be seen as a clear sign of growth.

"...Have I grown stronger?" he said. "Or have I been broken? If another situation like that were to happen again, I don't know what kind of decision I'll make, and it scares me."

I couldn't see his face because he was looking down, but he quickly rubbed his eyes with his sleeve and looked back up at me.

"You're the one who is suffering the most here, Kiyotaka-kun. I'm sorry for being so weak, complaining to you like this."

"It's all right," I said. "You've saved Horikita and I many times over in the special exams. We can expect that there'll be even tougher battles in the future. I hope that you'll continue to lend your strength to the class as you always have."

Yousuke nodded. He was still heartbroken, but even so, he had a slight smile on his face. When he reached for the front door though, his hand stopped for a moment.

"...Thank you for everything today," he said.

"Do you resent me for getting Airi expelled?" I asked.

Unlike other students, Yousuke wasn't showing it outwardly, but it wouldn't have been surprising to me if he did resent me.

"On that point alone...yes, I do. But I still believe in you." Even though those were his own words, he must not have been satisfied with how it came out because he quickly corrected himself. "...No, that's not it. I *want* to believe in you."

If it was just blind faith, then I should've considered Yousuke's thoughts dangerous. But there was determination behind his eyes. He was demanding something of me, saying, "*I believe in you, so don't betray me.*"

"Well then, have a good night," he said.

I might have succeeded in taking away some of Yousuke's burdens, but on the other hand, I may have given him a new one. It would've been convenient if I could've taken this opportunity to cut out some of that resistant rot, but... I wondered how much of a change I could expect to see. At any rate, I'd likely need to follow-up on this, step by step.

3.2

THE NEXT DAY, as expected, the three empty seats remained empty. And, of course, the chaos in the classroom still showed no signs of calming down. The first major prerequisite for a fundamental solution to the problem in this class was for those three students to return to school, after all.

I sat at my desk, fiddling with my phone as I waited for the next class, when Sudou called out to me. "Hey. Head to the bathroom with me?"

Now that was an unusual invitation. He said "bathroom," but he had a serious look on his face. I was sure that the need to go to the bathroom to do his business was just a pretense; he had a purpose beyond that in asking me to come. He was no different from Yousuke and Kei in that he wanted to come to me first with whatever this was about.

"Sure. Okay," I replied.

I didn't really have any reason to refuse his offer, so I got up from my seat. The two of us discreetly left the classroom together to head over to the bathroom. I was always grateful for the convenience of my seating assignment whenever something like this came up. However, another student followed after us as we walked out.

"Hey, Sudou-kun. Can I talk to you for a second?"

Apparently, that student had some business with Sudou, and she had been waiting for him when he stepped out into the hallway.

"What's up, Onodera?" he asked.

Only now noticing that I was next to Sudou, Onodera started stumbling over her words.

"Oh, uh... Ayanokouji-kun is with you. You guys must be talking about something already."

It sounded like me being there was inconvenient for her. Unfortunately, since Sudou was the one who asked me to join him during the break period, it wasn't like I had chosen to be here.

"We were just heading to the bathroom," said Sudou.
"What, is it somethin' urgent?"

"Um, well, I'm not sure," said Onodera. She must not have wanted me to hear, because she seemed somewhat hesitant. "Is it okay if I just wait here for you to get back? I kinda wanted to talk to you as soon as possible."

She had decided that if we were only going to use the bathroom, then we'd probably be back right away. However, Sudou looked somewhat uncomfortable and awkward at that. I figured that was because if he *did* have something to discuss with me, it would probably take more than just a minute or two.

"All right, well, just tell me right now," he said. "Ayanokouji can wait for me for a sec."

Onodera was puzzled by Sudou's unexpected response—she had already told him that she was fine with talking to him later. She still seemed somewhat hesitant, but she came out with what she wanted to say regardless, scratching her head lightly as she spoke.

"Well, you know how they're gonna give separate scores for guys and girls in the upcoming Sports Festival, for individual rewards? I'm guessing that you're obviously going to shoot for first place in the boys' category, Sudou-kun. Right?"

"Hell yeah I am," he said confidently, as if she didn't even need to ask. "The Sports Festival is my best chance to show off what I got."

Hearing Sudou's self-assured reply, Onodera nodded in satisfaction.

"To tell you the truth, I'm going to put a lot of effort into this Sports Festival too," she said. "If I can get first place in the girls' category, that'll get us one step closer to Class A. There aren't that many opportunities where you can really compete in your area of expertise, y'know?"

Although we already knew Onodera was an excellent swimmer, in last year's Sports Festival, she also demonstrated that she was a good sprinter. Her OAA physical ability score was impeccable, and she had an extraordinary talent for sports in general. Onodera was expected to be skilled enough to adapt to a variety of competitions and win.

"Knowin' you, I bet you might get first," Sudou said. "I'm seriously rootin' for ya."

"Thanks. But even though we can win some individual competitions, there's no guarantee that we can get first place overall, right?"

"Whaddya mean? If you just keep gettin' first, then—"

He wasn't wrong in thinking that if you just kept placing first in competitions, then that might be good enough. In reality, there was the possibility that you could lose unexpectedly.

"It's because of the high scores for the team competitions, right?" I said, interrupting Sudou.

Onodera's face stiffened once again when I spoke up, but she nodded in agreement. She seemed to distrust me. Well, I did toss aside a friend from my own group in the Unanimous Special Exam, so it wasn't any wonder that some students would react that way toward me.

"Well, yeah, for sure," Sudou said. "If some team keeps gettin' first in the team competitions, that could be bad news. Still though, it ain't like we can just come up with a team that easy, right? Suzune kinda said somethin' about this already, but if like, we have five or six dudes group up but they suck at workin' together, that could just hurt us. Besides, I hate to say this, but I kinda don't like the idea of gettin' five or six people together and competin' as a team either."

If everyone Sudou teamed up with was on the same level, then he'd probably be satisfied. However, it was more likely there'd be students in the group who would just drag him down, and it was quite possible that Sudou's team would lose

competitions as a result. That was what team competitions were about.

"Yeah," said Onodera. "I wasn't really thinking about putting a large group of people together either, but... What if we were talking about a competition where just two people could compete and take the win? There are some competitions that allow boys and girls to compete as a pair."

Even Sudou was starting to see what she was trying to say at this point.

"You and I wouldn't have any trouble working together, Sudou-kun," she went on. "And if either of us were going to team up with somebody, I figure we'd both want to pick the best partner we can. Right?"

It would get the class points, and them teaming up wouldn't be a hindrance to either of them aiming for first place in the men and women's divisions individually.

"So, that's why you came to me," mused Sudou. "I guess you might be right about that."

"Exactly. But only if you don't have any objections about being partnered up with me, of course. Besides, the vibe is kind of bad in class right now, isn't it? Sakura-san's been expelled, and Hasebe-san and Wang-san are both absent too." Onodera shot a brief glance over at me, but she quickly turned back to Sudou. "But that's exactly why we've got to pull the class forward," she said.

Sudou didn't seem to dislike the invitation since it was based on her recognition of his abilities, but he still didn't seem to be jumping at her offer.

"Am I not good enough?" asked Onodera.

"Nah, that ain't it at all," he assured her. "There's no way anybody could complain about your skills, Onodera."

Even though he had absolute faith in her physical abilities, it sounded like he had other concerns.

"You mean you don't want to partner up with anyone other than Horikita-san?" asked Onodera.

"Huh? N-no, that's not..." he stammered.

Guess she hit the bull's-eye, eh, Sudou?

Sudou appeared uncomfortable now. Besides looking for someone with physical ability, pairing up with the person he liked might've been an important consideration for him. As long as they couldn't participate in any swimming competitions, then there likely wouldn't be that much of a difference between Horikita and Onodera.

"Well, there's Kouenji too, for example," said Sudou. "I don't wanna admit it, but he's even better than me."

"Yeah, it's true he's really capable," Onodera conceded. "But I can't trust Kouenji-kun. More importantly, though, I don't like him."

Onodera clearly rejected the idea of partnering with Kouenji. Her appeal to Sudou was genuine, coming right from the heart. How would Sudou respond, I wondered?

"If I turned you down... What'd you do then?"

"Well, if there's somebody else in our class who's trustworthy and has the skill, then... Well, I guess Hirata-kun comes to mind, but inviting him to pair up with me might be a little tough. I don't want people to get the wrong idea."

If she partnered up with Yousuke, someone who was extremely popular with the girls in the class, then it was possible one or two people would get jealous.

"So, I guess if you refuse my offer, Sudou-kun, I'll just see how far I can go on my own."

She wasn't saying that as a threat—it was simply a straightforward statement of the facts. If that happened, I could imagine her getting first place overall in our grade would be a less certain prospect. Sudou was shaken after hearing Onodera bring up Horikita's name, but he looked at Onodera again, quickly regained his composure, and came to a decision. He ultimately

realized that he was trying to turn down Onodera's offer for a trivial reason.

"...All right, Onodera," he said. "Let's pair up."

"Really?" exclaimed Onodera.

"Yeah. Let's use our strength to support this class." With that, Sudou held his arm out, asking Onodera to shake his hand.

After looking back at him, she responded with a firm handshake. "Let's give it our best, Sudou-kun. We'll take first place in the men and women's divisions for sure."

Feeling that their deal was set, she must have been satisfied because she then returned to the classroom.

"Well, that kinda took an unexpected turn, but I did the right thing, right?" Sudou asked me.

"I think so," I said. "I understand that you wanted to partner up with Horikita, but it's better for you to work with Onodera and give 100 percent than to risk letting your mind wander."

"Yeah... You're right, dude."

Even though we only had about five minutes remaining in our break, we headed over to the bathroom as originally planned.

"Anyway, dude, what I wanted to talk to ya 'bout was... That thing with Kanji and Shinohara, all that stuff."

"Related to what Kushida did?" I asked. "When she exposed people's secrets?"

"To be completely honest, their relationship is really awkward right now. I don't think they're doing too good."

"But wouldn't it be more fun for you if they split up, Sudou?"

"I mean, I said that kinda stuff before, but I was just messin' around," Sudou said. "I really want it to work out well for them. For real, dude."

I asked him that question to test him, but it sounded like he was genuinely worried.

"Unfortunately, I don't have much of a connection with them. There's nothing I can really do about this," I told him.

"Can I at least just get some advice or somethin'?" asked Sudou.

"They can't solve this problem without talking about it," I told him. "I think that whether what Kushida said before is true or a lie is a separate matter at this point. They might just need to both come out and say what they're really feeling, deep down."

"But...isn't that gonna be bad? I mean, it could just make stuff worse than it already is," said Sudou.

"Yeah, it could," I agreed. "Perhaps they need someone who can control the conversation. Someone who can listen closely to both sides and can calm the conversation when things are about to get chaotic."

"B-but dude, that's *impossible* for me!"

"In that case, you'll just have to ask someone who can."

I wasn't going to directly tell Sudou the answer. I wanted to make him think about it.

"Normally, I guess Kushida would've been the one to handle this kinda stuff, huh..." said Sudou.

"Yeah, but you can't use her now. So, if you can't rely on Kushida, it's gotta be another student."

The answer was so clear that it barely even qualified as a question.

"Hirata?" he asked.

And of course, even Sudou could immediately find the answer. Sudou and Yousuke weren't exactly the best of friends, but this wasn't the situation to be concerned about that.

"All right. Guess I'll go ask for his help then," decided Sudou.

Sudou and Yousuke had kept their distance from one another, but perhaps this incident could bring about a change in their relationship.

"Thanks, Ayanokouji," said Sudou.

"I didn't do anything," I said. "You came up with the answer on your own, after thinking about it on your own," I replied.

With that, we headed back to class.

3.3

LATER THAT SAME DAY. Each class in our grade—no, rather, the entire school—was fully committed to preparing for the Sports Festival. Since this event happened last year too, we already had an idea of what some of the competitions would be like. Students made time to start training hard, going at it as if it was the real thing. They utilized the fields and the gymnasium during their lunch breaks. They couldn't help wanting to devote as much time to practicing as possible, especially for team competitions that involved two or more people.

When I went to the gymnasium to scout things out, I could hear a great number of energetic voices.

The school had carefully organized the gymnasium in such a way that would allow all students, from first-years to third-years, to be able to practice fairly. There were clearly divided sections that could be used freely by anyone, to a certain extent. The second-year students seemed to be playing volleyball and ping-pong today.

However, the first thing that I noticed was just how many people there were from a certain class. There were a lot of them, and all had an extremely high level of enthusiasm, too. Though the students were speaking pretty loudly, they seemed to be proactively discussing the competitions back and forth.

I had brought Yousuke with me to the gym.

"You can see how serious Class A is," he said.

"Yeah," I replied. I then calmly offered my analysis of the students. "Pure, class-based sport competitions don't appear to be Class A's area of expertise."

"I agree. For better or worse, there are a lot of students with just an average level of physical ability. And only a few students will be able to win the top prizes."

Class A's students knew that they were at a disadvantage in terms of overall strength, and that was precisely why they were

working together to try to quickly improve their skills. It looked like they were planning to focus on competitions where they could earn points by practicing a lot beforehand and building their skills. Although I couldn't confirm who exactly their key players would be, I was sure that this directive must have come from Sakayanagi.

There were students from Ichinose and Ryuuuen's classes here too, but they just seemed to be fumbling around. On the other hand, there were no students from Horikita's class here. I expected that at least one or two would have shown up, but given the circumstances, even if they did, they would have just been standing in the corner, unable to do much.

"We still haven't gotten past the Unanimous Special Exam," Yousuke commented. "It's not easy to come together and practice under such circumstances."

"There are still some causes for concern, true," I said, agreeing. "But it's not all doom and gloom."

I proceeded to tell Yousuke that Sudou and Onodera agreed to team up, planning to shoot for the number one spots for both the men and women's divisions in our grade. His face relaxed into a small smile just from hearing that little bit of good news.

"If the two of them take first in enough individual and pair competitions, then they should have a good chance of finishing on top," I reasoned.

"Knowing those two, I'd say they have a good shot at winning," said Yousuke.

Their skills gave the class a lot to hope for, but even so, two people alone wouldn't be enough for the whole class to win. What the class needed right now was a system that would allow people to work together temporarily, even if it was a patchwork system full of holes.

"That reminds me," said Yousuke, "Sudou-kun said he wanted to meet me after school today, before club activities. Could you by any chance have been involved with that, Ayanokouji-kun? From behind the scenes?"

"I didn't do anything," I insisted. "Don't you think Sudou just thought about it himself and decided to ask you for your help?"

"I'm sure that this has something to do with Shinohara-san, though," said Yousuke.

"He probably figured that he just couldn't leave things as they are."

"And what about Mii-chan?"

"I'll try something to deal with her."

"You will, Kiyotaka-kun?"

If I told him to just leave the situation alone or to let the right person for the job handle it, Yousuke wouldn't approve of that. I suspected that the reason he was so fixated on Mii-chan despite all the turmoil was probably that he felt like it was his fault, more so than any other students. Of course, what happened wasn't Yousuke's fault at all. While I was carefully observing the situation, I had decided that Mii-chan just needed a little help from me. And one of the reasons for that was because I couldn't use Yousuke as a key.

Chapter 4: Still, We Gotta Do It!

THE LAST TIME I saw Kushida-san was last week, during the special exam. It was now the end of class on the following Friday, and she hadn't shown up once during this entire week. She wasn't the only one: Wang-san and Hasebe-san hadn't come to school either. They were absent from Monday to Friday, and it had already been five days.

In the meantime, though, the world continued to move around us; day-to-day life wouldn't stand still and wait for us to catch up. Structured meetings and research for the Sports Festival. Student council work. Everyday studies. I felt like if I kept facing these oncoming waves head-on, my knees might give out and I'd fall over backward. But I couldn't allow myself to fall right now. I had no right to wallow in self-pity when I declared that I would absolutely bring those students back to class. But despite repeated attempts, I hadn't had any success.

I had thought about contacting Ayanokouji-kun several times but stopped myself from doing so. If I went to him for help, the chances were that he'd accept, and there was a possibility that he'd give me the answers that I was looking for. But, in this case at least, this was something that I had to solve on my own.

"And thus concludes homeroom for today," announced Chabashira-sensei.

As soon as Chabashira-sensei left the classroom after the final homeroom session for the day, I followed after her.

"Sensei, I'm sorry, but might I have a moment of your time?"

"I don't mind... Sure, that's all right," she said. "How about we walk while we talk?"

Many students would leave their seats to go to the restroom during this time, so I knew we'd stand out if we stayed in the hallway. Perhaps Chabashira-sensei understood my intentions, since she suggested we walk as we chatted.

"Kushida-san, Wang-san, and Hasebe-san have been absent for five days now," I said.

"Indeed. Wang and Hasebe are, ostensibly, sick. However, even though they called in to the school to say they're sick, they apparently haven't gone to the clinic for a check-up like they were supposed to. As for Kushida, she has only said that she'd be resting. I haven't heard any other details."

There was no way she was simply recuperating. Her extreme absence felt like some kind of punishment aimed at me.

"Is it possible that there could be severe penalties if this situation continues?" I asked.

I assumed the teacher wouldn't be able to provide me with a concrete answer, but I thought I should try asking anyway.

"Don't worry so much about it," Chabashira-sensei told me. "The rules are designed to provide a long grace period, especially for honors students like Wang and Kushida. As for Hasebe, she's not exactly a troublemaker, so it won't be a big deal for now. If they had no accomplishments under their belts, or they were students who typically had bad behavior, then it would be a different story."

"So, are you saying that...thanks to how they usually act, they're okay?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Besides, there are healthy, cheerful students who can play hooky quite cleverly, and there are students who have hurt feelings who could carelessly just skip an entire week. It's difficult to tell the difference. The only way we can judge them is to look at their past behavior and performance in school."

I could feel the burden on my heart begin to lighten just from hearing that.

"And besides, it's not like school officials are monsters," added Chabashira-sensei, in a soft tone. "They wouldn't want to break a child's heart by forcing them to go to school. At any rate, those three students have never been late before, and they've

always been on their best behavior in class. They are more than qualified for a grace period."

She seemed so different now, almost like she was a different person entirely. I wondered if there was something behind it. Rumors had been going around among my classmates that she had changed because of the special exam, and perhaps it was really true.

"More importantly though, the school officials understand very well that we conduct strict special exams," she said.

Because of that, they felt that it wasn't strange for students to say that they just needed to rest or take time off. That was why they were allowing this situation to go on right now, then...

After confirming that there was no one else around though, Chabashira-sensei stopped and said more. "However, the time limit is almost up. If their absences continue into next week, then those 100 points that you fought so desperately to earn will be snatched away without mercy."

Her statement had a hidden message. She was telling me to do something this weekend. But would I really be able to do something about this? I thought of asking her about the current situation, but little by little, my own weakness began to show its face.

"Thank you very much," I said. "You've been a big help."

"Wait, Horikita," said Chabashira-sensei. "Is there anything else you wanted to say?"

"...No. I couldn't possibly bother you any further, sensei," I replied.

"I won't know whether it's really a bother unless you ask me. We still have a little time. Just talking to someone about it can make it a little easier, don't you think?"

Chabashira-sensei must be able to see right through me. I'd be lying if I said I didn't hesitate at all, but I decided to gather my courage and say something.

"I earned Class Points by having Sakura-san expelled. Was that the right course of action?" I asked.

"Do you regret your decision?"

"I thought it was right at the time. But...to be honest, I'm feeling shaken right now."

"I wish I could show you the answer," Chabashira-sensei sighed, "but I can't help you."

"I understand," I replied. "As a teacher, you're not able to answer that."

"That's not it. All I can say at this point in time is that I can't show you any evidence that you made the right choice. It's certainly true that your decision was somewhat dictatorial and self-serving, and I'm sure a few students might have seen it as such. Your reputation among the other students has taken a hit, and you're beginning to feel that you chose incorrectly."

That hurt to hear. I couldn't say anything in return.

"However, that's just because it was that important of a decision, right?" Chabashira-sensei continued. "Besides, no one is perfect right from the get-go. Even if we're talking about problems of simple addition and multiplication, people make mistakes. But they learn and improve. Even I've gone through life making lots and lots of mistakes."

"You too...?" I asked.

"Yes, and even when I took that special exam. Forget about whether I made the right or wrong decision—I wasn't even able to cast my vote in time. On that point, you showed me one answer, and I think that you did well. No one can get full marks on something without knowledge or experience. At the time of the special exam, you were recognized as the leader, and you were empowered. You were prepared to get rid of someone, and you protected Kushida. It's not up to you to make your classmates recognize that it was the right thing to have done."

Her words were typical of a teacher. I was a little puzzled, though, since she never really said such things before.

"You didn't have to go for the 100 points at this current stage," she added. "You had two choices. You could have either

rationally cut the lowest-ranked person in OAA, or you could've accepted the inconvenience that came with favoring your promise."

"Yes, that's true..." I knew that. I knew that, but even so, I still felt doubt.

"But still... I think that I might have been blind to what was going on around me," I admitted. "I can't help but think that if I just listened more, then I might've found an answer that was better, that was even more correct."

"We sometimes lose sight of our surroundings," said Chabashira-sensei. "And later, when things cool down, we agonize over whether we've made the correct decision."

I hadn't had any experience with that kind of thing before. Frustrated, I unconsciously clenched my fist tightly.

"Up until now, to put it nicely, you've just done things the tried-and-true way," Chabashira-sensei told me. "Or, if I were to put it a little less nicely, you've simply been taking the easy way out, right? But that's normal. It's just that the peculiarities of this school made you seek new alternatives for the very first time."

"Yes..." I conceded.

It was powerful advice, but even so, I still couldn't come up with an appropriate answer. I was sure I must've looked pitiful, but there was no dismay on Chabashira-sensei's face.

Instead, she looked at me gently. "You fought within the rules that the school has set, right?" she asked.

"Yes, but I broke my promise not to expel anyone but the traitor," I answered.

"Did you intend to protect Kushida from the very beginning? Was the promise you made a lie in order to get the class to vote in favor?"

"No!" I replied. "I really was prepared to do it, at the time... I was."

"In that case, there's no problem," said Chabashira-sensei. "Yes, it's important to honor your promises, but even adults sometimes make mistakes when they promise something. You

changed your mind, sure, because I know that you acted after realizing keeping Kushida was the correct decision. You're free to disrespect or ignore anyone who mocks you now. Some will follow you, others won't. Bringing a class of nearly forty students together as one is something that not even the likes of Ryuuen, Sakayanagi, or Ichinose can do. Other students might be yes-men on the surface, but you never know what they're thinking deep down."

She gently placed her hand on my shoulder. "Don't be afraid of failure. I don't want to be the kind of adult who can't accept or forgive a child's failures."

"But sensei, I haven't failed yet."

"...You're right, you haven't. I'm just saying that you need to see the choices you made all the way through until the end."



Chabashira-sensei had a somewhat sad look on her face, but then she looked me in the eye once more. Her words had been stern, yet polite and loving. They almost made me choke on what I was about to say a little.

"You've changed, Chabashira-sensei," I remarked.

I hadn't intended to actually say that, but the words just came out. I suppose that was because it was just how I truly felt.

"Is it strange that I'm playing the part of a teacher now, when I've been so cold and dismissive up until this point?" she asked.

"I'm a little surprised, but no, it's not strange," I said.

"Is that so? That's good."

Perhaps she felt she had said too much, because she cleared her throat, and changed the subject.

"Anyway, has Ayanokouji done anything about Kushida?" she asked.

"Ayanokouji-kun...? He hasn't really done anything," I replied. "If I had to guess, I get the feeling that he's waiting to see what I'll do."

"I see," said Chabashira-sensei. "So he thinks that you're the one who should fix this, then...?"

"Maybe he just can't deal with what was simply selfishness on my part," I answered.

"I'm not so sure about that. It was Ayanokouji who took a bold action on the matter of Kushida. I can't imagine that he'd leave you alone to handle it if he didn't trust you."

"You seem to have quite a high opinion of him," I said. "I recall you once saying that he was the most defective student there was."

"You have a good memory, recalling things I said so long ago."

"He's even better than his OAA ranking indicates," I told her.

"It sounds like he's earned a lot of trust and appreciation from you then," replied Chabashira-sensei.

"You had said that he had some character issues, but they're not limited to him... What exactly did you mean by that, anyway? Or were you mistaken, by any chance?" I asked.

He was undeniably brilliant, and he was much calmer and more collected than I was. I couldn't even begin to imagine ridiculing him with a label like "defective."

"You know, you don't need to take every single one of your teachers' comments absolutely seriously," huffed Chabashira-sensei. "After all, you've spent far, far more time with him than I or others have, right?"

"Even so, I just wanted to ask."

"...All right. My evaluation hasn't changed since then. Well, no, actually, I feel like my evaluation has become even *more* credible since then," Chabashira-sensei said. So, she *did* think he was defective. But no matter what she said, that didn't change the truth. "It's far too early to be dwelling on that right now though. There are other problems that you need to solve as soon as possible," Chabashira-sensei reminded me.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," I agreed.

It was true that I was concerned about it, but it was also true that I could put it off until later. What I needed to do now was to get Kushida-san, Wang-san, and Hasebe-san to come back to school.

"Kushida is a tough nut to crack, huh?" said Chabashira-sensei.

"To be honest, right now, it feels like a waste of effort," I said. "No matter how many times I go to her, and no matter how long I wait, she doesn't open the door."

"That's rough."

Weekends aside, Kushida-san could just go to the convenience store and buy supplies as many times as she needed while I was in class. It would be pointless for me to try starvation

tactics. I tried to reach her on her phone, but she was keeping it turned off.

"I get the feeling she's enjoying this though, whenever she senses me pacing about back and forth all confused on the other side of her door."

"I suppose I can't say with certainty that she isn't," Chabashira-sensei commented. "But even so, if you don't do something, the situation won't change, and things will just gradually get worse."

"Yes, I understand..."

"If you can't do something on your own, you can always ask someone else for help," said Chabashira-sensei.

"But which of my classmates could possibly be willing to help me persuade Kushida-san...?" I wondered aloud. "Hirata-kun's the only one who comes to mind, and right now, he doesn't seem to have the time for it either."

He was providing support for the situation with Wang-san, as well as working on Shinohara-san and her circle.

"It's true that knowing Hirata, he'd be a... Well, actually, I'm not so sure about that, when it comes to Kushida," mused Chabashira-sensei. "He tackles things head-on, is mindful of others, and is a good person. I can't imagine it would be easy to get her to open her door by bringing someone like him over once she shut herself off."

"I think I understand what it is you're trying to say, sensei. It's because Kushida-san isn't being honest with how she feels, right?"

"Unfortunately, I can't think of anyone who would be right for the job at the moment, but it might not be a bad idea for you to look beyond your own classmates," suggested Chabashira-sensei.

"But persuading Kushida-san would mean getting her to address her true feelings," I said. "It would be a considerable disadvantage for us to let an outsider know."

"I suppose you need to weigh the advantages and disadvantages. However, it's not as if you're forbidden from telling anyone about it. For example, a few teachers already knew about Kushida's past. And some of the other teachers would probably choose to keep it a secret. Personally, I think that secrets aren't particularly useful."

If only there was someone who could move Kushida-san's heart... No, even if they couldn't move her heart, if they could even just help with some kind of breakthrough, then...

"It's about time I head off," said Chabashira-sensei. "But let me say just one last thing, even if it might just sound like I'm being a meddlesome busybody. The most important thing is what *you* want to do with Kushida. Think about that long and hard."

What I wanted to do with Kushida-san... Hmm.

"Thank you very much, sensei," I told her. "I feel like my resolve is a little stronger, thanks to you."

I still hadn't found any answers yet, but I could feel the energy to make another desperate attempt surging within me.

"Don't worry about it. As a teacher, it's the least I... I mean, it's what I naturally should be doing."

With that, Chabashira-sensei headed back to the faculty office. I continued to watch her from the stairs as she walked away, until she was no longer in view.

4.1

WHEN I RETURNED to the dormitory building after finishing my shopping at Keyaki Mall, I found Ibuki-san standing near the elevator door, scowling at me. When I ignored her to press the button, her anger exploded like water breaking through a dam.

“Don’t just ignore me!” she shouted.

She rushed me, coming in so quickly and getting so close that it felt like her spit was about to land on my face. I was fully prepared for the battle that was about to begin, but just what in the world was happening here? It looked as though she was going to get into the elevator and continue following me, so I had no choice but to stop and look away from the elevator, just as the doors opened to welcome me inside.

“Ignore you?” I repeated. “Do you have some business with me?”

“This! What is this text supposed to mean? Answer me!!!”

Glaring, she shoved her phone in my face. With the screen right in front of my eyes, a blinding light from the screen filled my vision and all I could see was white light.

“Are you an idiot?” I asked. “It’s way too close, I can’t see anything. Can you please pull it back a little?”

“Ugh! Fine, there!”

She actually only pulled it back slightly, but even so, I was then able to read it. I could understand the message more or less immediately from just a glance.

“A very well-crafted and impressive message,” I concluded. “No doubt it must have been written by an intellectual.”

“Don’t flatter yourself!” Ibuki huffed. “And hold on, what part of THIS screams intellectual?!”

“Maybe if you read it aloud, you’ll understand?” I suggested.

“What? It says, ‘If you get expelled because of something I had nothing to do with, that obviously means you’ll have lost to

me. Don't do anything that idiotic," She read aloud. "So...what about that says intellectual, huh? Actually, forget that. Tell me what it's supposed to mean!"

"You didn't understand it even after reading it?" I asked.

"Not one bit. I've been thinking about it all week long and I couldn't make heads or tails of it. So, what?" She crossed her arms with a derisive snort.

I hadn't expected that she wouldn't have taken simple advice as, well, just that: advice. Well, actually, I hoped it might have been a little effective...

"There's no point in going into it anymore," I told her. "It doesn't seem like there were any problems."

"Huh? What does that mean? Explain this in a way so that I can understand better, right now."

This girl was extremely slow on the uptake. I wondered if all of her brain power was devoted to her athleticism and fighting sense...

"I came up with a secret plan to keep you from getting expelled," I explained. "You don't seem to be well-liked by your classmates, and it was possible you could have been in danger if there was a task related to expulsion. I deduced that if I provoked you in such a way, you would decide to stay in school even if you didn't want to. Does that make sense?"

"No way... You were worried about me?" Ibuki-san didn't sound surprised. Rather, she made a face like she was shocked and absolutely sickened to her core.

"Don't interpret what I did in such a self-serving way," I said. "It's simply because there are matters that I'll still need your cooperation with. It would be inconvenient if I were short on help, and besides, even if you had been tossed out in the last special exam, Ryuuken-kun's class would have only gained 100 points and wouldn't suffer much from your absence. If you're going to get removed from this school eventually anyway, it'd be far better for me to have you go out in an exam where there's a penalty."

In spite of my explanation, the look on her face said that she wasn't convinced in the slightest.

"Well then, I think that's that," I told her. "I'll be going now."

Ibuki-san made way for me to pass, giving me a silent, sidelong glare full of anger. I pressed the button once again to call the elevator. As I got inside, I noticed she wasn't following me.

"You're not going back to your room?" I asked.

"I don't feel like riding the elevator with you," she retorted.

"You're such a child. We've ridden together several times already, haven't we? Just by sheer coincidence?"

"I don't feel like getting on right now."

"I see. In that case, do whatever you want," I said.

I pressed the Close Door button on the elevator and headed to the floor where Kushida-san's room was. Now, I just needed to keep stubbornly pestering her until she opened the door for me. As the elevator ascended, I wondered if I could really find a breakthrough at last. If I didn't try something else, nothing was going to change. In that case, then what I was about to try would be nothing more than a waste of time. Once I arrived at my intended floor, the elevator door opened.

But I found myself unable to take that first step to exit the elevator and walk onto the floor. I went completely stiff. *How? How can I talk with Kushida-san...?* Time passed while I did nothing, and the elevator doors closed. Before I could press the Open Door button, the elevator started moving again, and began to descend.

"This is hopeless," I muttered.

Even if I could face Kushida-san with all of these thoughts swirling around in my mind right now, I couldn't assume that I'd be able to persuade her. I felt ashamed, like I had wasted Chabashira-sensei's warm words.

The elevator headed straight back down to the first floor. When the door opened, Ibuki-san took a step forward with eyes lowered and looking directly at her phone, took a step forward, failing to notice that I was still on the elevator. When she noticed

that there was someone already there at last, she looked up slightly, and saw me.

"Wh-why are *you* here?!" she sputtered.

Well, it certainly made sense that this was a shock to her.

"Didn't you want to get on?" I asked.

"I told you I didn't want to ride with you, didn't I?! What is this, harassment?"

I shook my head no and reached for the Close Door button. As I did so, I looked over at Ibuki-san, who was averting her eyes, and something clicked in my mind. Instead of touching the Close Door button, I slid my finger over to the Open Door button and stared at her intently. She looked over at me, likely suspecting that the elevator would continue to stay open forever.

A breakthrough might very well come from an unexpected place. Perhaps this was the moment I'd be able to put Chabashira-sensei's advice into action...

"What."

"...I was just thinking that I was going to ask for your help," I replied.

"Huh?" she blinked.

It would be quite a gamble, but this could very well be just the thing to break through this stalemate. It might be an unseen development, a surprise ambush to break through the situation. Despite feeling like this was foolhardy, I decided that, for the time being, I had to try anything I could.

"Get on," I told her.

"How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not riding with you?" she snapped.

"Enough already. Get on."

"...The hell is your problem?"

Even though she was irritated, she still got on. Once I was sure Ibuki-san was on board the elevator, I pressed the Close Door button.

"There's something I'd like to talk to you about," I told her.

"Say WHAT?! Me? Oh no. No way. I am NOT doing this," she protested.

"You got on the elevator, didn't you?"

"You *told* me to get on, remember?"

"It's perfectly fine for you to talk to me about something then, isn't it?" I asked.

"That doesn't make any sense!"

"What I'm asking isn't a bad deal for you. So, anyway, here's what's going on—"

"Don't just selfishly launch into whatever this is," Ibuki-san growled. "The fact that you're asking me for help with something is bad enough already."

While Ibuki-san and I argued back and forth, we arrived at the floor where Kushida-san's room was. I got off first and turned back to look at Ibuki-san. She was still on the elevator.

"Get off too. Just in case. We don't know how many eyes and ears are around, after all."

"I don't care. I'm going back to my room. I have no idea what you're going on about."

Ibuki-san pressed the Close Door button to try to leave, but the doors didn't budge.

"It seems like the elevator wants you to get off too," I remarked.

"It's 'cause you're pushing the button on the outside to keep me from leaving!!!" shouted Ibuki-san.

"By the way, do you have a favorite thing?" I asked.
"Something really special to you?"

"...That's got nothing to do with this."

"Just answer the question."

She made a noise. "...Mph."

"Mph'?"

"No, not... Ugh, what the hell?" Ibuki-san sighed. "Fine. I can't really think of anything at all right now, but I guess, like strawberry stuff."

"I've just found out something surprisingly cute about you... All right then," I said. "Just forget about this."

"What the hell did you ask me that for, out of the blue?!" she demanded. "Scratch that, just cut it out and take your hand off the button already!"

As Ibuki-san's mood became worse and worse, I decided to just cut straight to the heart of the matter. I realized that it would be better for her if I just shared what this was all about and moved on.

"I'm going to go meet with Kushida-san right now," I informed her.

"And? You can go see her on your own, whatever," she snapped, repeatedly slamming the Close Door button. It was pointless, of course.

"No, I'm afraid I can't," I said. "I haven't even seen her once over the past week, and she has missed a lot of classes. I went to her room to visit her, but I haven't seen any sign of her even coming out. I need you to get her to come out of her room. Understand?"

"Huh? Hey, wait, why do *I* have to do anything?"

"It'd be an act of mercy."

"Don't care. Why would you think I'd ever help you with your class when I don't even help my own?"

As I'd anticipated, there was no way Ibuki-san would simply accept my request right away. But if there was a benefit for her, that would be a different story. The elevator was held open the whole time, and a warning beep was starting to go off.

"Very well," I said. "If you succeed, I'll give you a reward."

"Don't need one," she replied. "If you think I'll work for money, you're sorely mistaken."

"I know that. That's why I decided my reward for your success should be something that you desire strongly."

"...I can't imagine you can give me anything like that."

Ibuki-san's heart would not be so easily swayed. But if I were to present her with a certain something, then she would take a 180-degree spin on things.

"We're able to pre-register for up to five events of our choosing at the Sports Festival," I said. "We are free to choose our groups and which competitions we would like to participate in. The main purpose of the registration system is so students can clear a required number of events, and also so that they can avoid encountering strong opponents if they wish, but...on the other hand, it's also a system where you can fight against the opponents you want to face."

As I explained, Ibuki's previously listless eyes lit up.

"I know you haven't been putting in any reservations. You've been waiting for a chance to fight with me, haven't you? But unfortunately, I'm not planning on deciding anything until the very last minute. Depending on how things go, there's a very good chance that I'll be going after the final openings that are available. In other words, the opportunity for you to fight with me will never, ever come, even if you're waiting for me to sign up."

"So...you're saying that if I help you, you'll fight me?" asked Ibuki-san.

"Yes," I replied. "I will fight you in one competition of your choosing. Of course, I won't go easy on you at all since you're not in my class. You won't earn any points as a result. But if you're all right with that, then yes."

"Pfft," she snorted. "Well, isn't that interesting. But just one isn't enough to satisfy me. It's gotta be at least three. If you make it a showdown, best two out of three, then I'll cooperate."

"Three? Now that's just being greedy..."

As the elevator alarm continued to beep, I thought about her counteroffer.

"It's nonnegotiable," said Ibuki-san, firmly.

I supposed as much. I had to agree that we wouldn't really be able to find a clear winner if we were to only have a showdown in one competition. If we were to compete in two or four, however, there would be the possibility of a draw. I'd been expecting from the very beginning that we'd ultimately decide on three competitions, but, if that was the first offer I made, she might well have come back demanding that we compete in five. If she was willing to accept three, that was well within my expectations, so I could call it there.

"...Very well," I said. "I will participate in three events against you. Is that all right?"

"Duh. There's no taking it back later though," said Ibuki-san as she stepped out of the elevator.

When I pulled my hand away from the button, the doors slowly began to close.

"Of course. However...I'm going to need your help with this matter until it's ultimately resolved."

"Tell me exactly what your goal is here," said Ibuki-san.

"That Kushida-san comes to school starting Monday. That's it."

"That sounds simple though. I mean, Kushida's just resting, so what's the big deal? Everyone gets sick sometimes, right?"

Chabashira-sensei had said that in Kushida-san's case, secrets wouldn't do us any good. But even so, it wasn't a good idea to just carelessly divulge the truth. I decided to follow her advice and tell Ibuki-san everything. If Ibuki-san was the sort of student who would go and blab about it to everyone else, that would just mean I wasn't good enough to see it coming.

I needed to make a breakthrough right now, even if that meant pushing myself harder. I decided I was going to tell her all about Kushida-san. I wasn't going to make any awkward attempts to cover anything up. I was sure that even Ibuki-san knew what Kushida-san usually was like at school. But I would now explain, in detail, Kushida-san's true nature, her way of thinking, and what led to her current situation.

While I was talking, Ibuki-san listened with apparent disinterest, looking off into the distance as I spoke. Normally, I would've been annoyed by such an attitude, but strangely enough, it almost came as a relief.

When I finished telling her the true reason Kushida-san was absent from school, Ibuki-san sighed in exasperation. She didn't show any interest in hearing about Kushida-san's real nature. Instead, she nonchalantly expressed how she truly felt.

"This is stupid."

"You don't seem surprised," I said. "Did you know?"

"No. It's just, I don't believe there's anyone who's straight-up a good person. That goes for Kushida, Hirata, or even Ichinose. I mean, usually the ones who claim to be good people have the darkest sides to them."

"That's an interesting way of thinking." Surprisingly enough, I felt that some of what she said could be exactly right. "Then does that mean you have a high opinion of people like Ryuuuen-kun? Since, on the surface, he's... Actually, no, disregard that. He is not a good person at all, inside or out," I replied.

"I hate him even more," said Ibuki-san. "And while I'm at it, I've also started to hate people who look like they're harmless to everyone else, like Ayanokouji. He irritates the hell out of me."

If she'd go that far, I had to wonder if there was anyone on the opposite end—anyone out there who Ibuki-san found likable.

"Anyway, I don't really hate dragging people like her out into the open," she conceded. "If anything, I kinda want to ask her how it feels to be exposed after everyone saw her as such a good person all this time."

If Ibuki-san took things too far, I might have to stop her. On the other hand, I supposed there might be some things I needed to learn from someone like her, who could be that forceful.

"So I just gotta drag Kushida out from her room that she's shut herself up in?" asked Ibuki-san.

"Yes," I replied.

Ibuki-san, looking quite confident, strolled over to Kushida-san's door with light footsteps.

"Are you planning on doing this all yourself?" I asked.

"Just shut up and watch," she snapped.

All right, then. In that case, let's see what you've got, Ibuki-san, I thought.

As she reached Kushida-san's door, she suddenly clutched her middle and keeled over.

"Ah...ow, ow! Owwww!!!" she wailed, letting out an agonizing scream that carried through the hallway.

I stared at her in shock. I couldn't understand what she was doing.

"M-my stomach...just suddenly started hurting... A-ah, it's no use! I can't make it back to my room...!"

Huh... A stomachache? Don't tell me that was the plan you came up with. Seriously?

Was her plan to make Kushida-san open her door to let her use her bathroom? Setting aside the fact that it was an entirely cliché plan, her acting was devastatingly bad...

This wasn't even Ibuki-san's floor in the first place. Even if we were on the same floor, it would've been faster for her to just head to her own room anyway.

"B-bathroom! Lemme use your bathroom!!!" Ibuki-san quickly and repeatedly slammed the doorbell to try and get her to answer the door. This continued for about ten seconds, but there was no sign that Kushida-san would open the door.

Things were already going haywire before I even tried to do anything...

I had obviously chosen the wrong person for the job, and it made me want to hang my head in shame. Ibuki-san kept up the performance for half a minute longer. Then, her expression abruptly returned to normal, and she shot straight up and walked over to me.

"Maybe she's not in after all?" she asked.

"No, I'm fairly certain she's in her room," I replied.

"Really? Huh. Well, if she didn't fall for my act, I guess that means Kushida really isn't a good person after all."

"I-I suppose..."

She sounded like she was being serious, so I decided it was best if I didn't touch that statement. I instructed her to come over by me, and I opened the box on the wall with the built-in electricity meter for Kushida-san's room.

"You see this circle here? If it's moving slowly, then it's likely that the person inside is out. Alternatively, if someone is in their room and using their TV or a computer, the rotation is faster." Right now, the circle was spinning somewhat quickly. "So, can you understand that this means it's highly likely that she's in right now?"

"This is the kind of stuff a thief would know..." commented Ibuki-san.

"I learned quite a few things while I was waiting for her over the last week and the weekend," I explained. "Don't abuse what I just told you."

She shot me a cold look, as if to say, "*Uh, no, I obviously won't.*"

"Do you have any other ideas?" I asked. "If not, then I'm afraid there's a chance I'll have to simply declare our deal is off, and—"

"I just went about it wrong," said Ibuki-san, cutting me off.

"Huh?" I blinked.

"Look, it's all or nothing, right? I'll force her to come on out."

I felt like I wanted her to provide me with some rationale for this, but seeing how fired up she was, I decided to just let her try once more. I stepped back, and Ibuki-san walked to Kushida-san's door again. Once she was there, she opened her mouth to speak, and...

"Hey, Kushida. I've heard a lot of things about you. I heard that you've just been pretending to be all innocent up until now. A

wolf in sheep's clothing. And you got found out during the exam, huh?"

As I wondered what Ibuki-san was going to do, she launched into a tirade, insulting Kushida-san. For a moment, my mind raced. I wondered if I should halt her, but I realized there wasn't any point in doing so. Even if I stopped her now, Kushida-san must have already heard what she said.

"I mean, serves you right, I guess," Ibuki-san continued. "So, how's it feel? You know, going from being the most popular person to being nothing? Oh, wait, hold on... I guess in the ranking of good people, Ichinose was still better than you. So, what's it like then? Falling from number two?"

Her technique in agitating people was far, far more impressive than her attempt at acting earlier. This was definitely going to make Kushida-san absolutely furious, probably because it was coming from Ibuki-san. But there were still no sounds from the other side of the door. Perhaps I shouldn't have resorted to such drastic measures after all... But Ibuki-san, still standing outside the door, didn't seem like she was going to stop talking, and the look on her face hadn't changed either.

"Come on. Show me your ugly side." Suddenly, Ibuki-san kicked her door with some force, striking it with the edge of her right foot. "I got a lotta stress because of Horikita earlier, and I just wanted to get rid of it."

Ibuki-san's real intentions had never been to save Kushida-san, not in the slightest. She just wanted to rail against Kushida-san, who was probably on the other side of the door.

"You know...kicking down someone's door might not be that bad after all. I kinda understand how Ryuuen feels."

Ibuki-san repeatedly kicked the door—*thud, thud*. It seemed like this was now more for her own sake rather than any other goal. But after she banged against the door a number of times, I heard a sound coming from within the room. Ibuki-san ignored it and was about to start kicking the door more and more anyway, but the door was suddenly unlocked.

Kushida-san appeared, clad in her personal attire. "...You're bothering me. Can you please stop, Ibuki-san?"

I had never imagined that Kushida-san would react that way to Ibuki-san's violent behavior... I was a little shocked. *Why had all of my efforts over the past week just amounted to...?*

"All right, you came out," said Ibuki-san. "You really *are* that kind of person after all."

Now that Ibuki-san knew about Kushida's true nature in detail, she might be able to understand some things about her.

"Your misunderstanding is really ticking me off," Kushida-san replied. "Can you stop already?"

"Huh? What part am I misunderstanding? I like you a lot more like this than when you're trying to act all innocent."

"I've never once liked you. And the same goes for Horikita-san over there too."

Since she had addressed me with the honorific "-san," I could see that she was in a calm state of mind. Since there wasn't any point in hiding anymore, I stepped in front of Kushida-san's door without hesitation.

"If you don't mind, would you let me into your room?" I asked. "I've really grown tired of waiting."

"I mean, even if you tried to shut the door now, it'd be pointless," added Ibuki-san.

Ibuki-san firmly planted her foot in the gap between the door and the frame so Kushida-san wouldn't be able to close it.

Kushida-san stared down at her foot before stomping down on it as hard as she could.

"OW!!!" wailed Ibuki-san.

Kushida-san kept stomping down forcefully, like she was trying to grind Ibuki-san's foot into the floor, but Ibuki refused to pull it back.

"You're right. It won't close," said Kushida-san.

"That's...enough!!!" shouted Ibuki-san.

When Ibuki moved to force the door open, Kushida-san immediately stepped back and welcomed us inside with a straight face.

"Come on in then. This will probably be the first and last time, so take your time, I guess."

That was already implied, of course, but by saying so, Kushida-san was admitting that she was really willing to go through with this. It wouldn't bother Kushida-san at all to keep this up forever and continue making trouble for the class. She must have invited us inside precisely because she had made up her mind on that. Which meant that...this was my first and last chance to do something.

I could tell from a glance that Kushida-san kept her room beautifully clean. I got the impression that she was even more fastidious than I was.

"Wh-whoa. Well, well, looks like you keep it pretty tidy in here." Ibuki-san looked around the room with both admiration and surprise.

Kushida-san took notice of that. "I'm guessing that your own room is a mess, Ibuki-san. Perhaps you just have dirty clothes scattered all over the place."

"Ugh... Y-you haven't even seen it, so what do you know?"

No matter who you asked, it was obvious that Kushida-san had hit a bull's-eye with that comment.

"Sit," Kushida-san told us. "I'm not going to offer you anything to drink or snack on or whatever, but I'm guessing that's fine?"

"I don't mind, it's all right," I replied.

Ibuki-san and I exchanged glances and sat down some distance apart. Kushida-san sat at the other end of the table, opposite us.

"So, you've been making a big fuss outside my room for a while. What are you after?" asked Kushida-san.

"Don't you already know?" I said. "You've been absent for a week. It's about that."

"Ugh." Kushida-san let out an indifferent sigh. "Do you *really* think I can go back to school after what happened? And I can't say I'm particularly surprised, but you told her about me, huh? I guess you did that out of spite too, to take a dig at me."

"It's not like that," I informed her. "She wouldn't carelessly talk to other people about it."

"Oh? You trust me?" Ibuki-san asked.

"I don't. You simply don't have many people to talk to."

"Hey!"

Ibuki-san slammed her fist on the table at that and glared at me, but I ignored her. I knew what I said was the truth.

"Even if that's true, you're not thinking about how I feel. I'm hurt," said Kushida-san.

"Do you really have the right to say something like that?" I asked.

Her reply was sharp. "Even if I don't, there's no reason for you to not consider my feelings, Horikita-san."

"Let's get to business," I insisted. "I understand full well that I've done some careless things myself. But you were the one who initiated hostilities first and came after me. Isn't that right?"

Kushida-san was just a classmate, but even from the very beginning, she viewed me as someone who needed to be expelled.

"I'm not going to deny that," she said, "but there was no way around it. I just couldn't stand it."

"What was I supposed to do?" I asked. "Even looking back now, I can't see a clear answer as to what I should have done."

"Well, I thought about it many times over," Kushida-san began. "Eventually, I came to one conclusion. You should have just dropped out of school voluntarily, for my sake, since I couldn't stand you, you know?"

"Can you stop saying such ridiculous things?" I scoffed.
"That's not a conclusion—that's an irrational rant."

"A rant, hm? That's all I could do, though."

Although she was answering my questions, I'd be hard pressed to call this a friendly conversation. But even so, these probably were Kushida-san's true feelings.

Ibuki-san had been trying to listen along at first, but the color seemed to drain from her eyes more and more as time went on. She looked bored.

"I'm hoping that we can put the past behind us and that you'll cooperate with me," I said.

"I knew you were going to suggest something like that, but really, don't make me laugh," replied Kushida-san.

"It's just that I know you're that capable and that valuable. I want you," I replied.

"I'm aware," Kushida-san said immediately, without even the pretense of modesty.

"Talk about a super-inflated ego..." muttered Ibuki-san, absentmindedly.

"Really? I don't think so," said Kushida-san—not correcting her, but just responding.

Ibuki-san clenched her fist. "Yeah, no. I don't think you're all that capable," she said. "What do you say we throw down, right here?"

"You're an even bigger idiot than I imagined, Ibuki-san," Kushida-san said. "That's clearly not what she meant by 'capable.' Why don't you have a look at OAA to understand? In this school, how capable you are means how good your scores are. I'm guessing that the difference between you and me is probably even more significant than you expect. So?"

Ibuki-san was irritated and immediately whipped out her phone as if she were responding to a showdown. She quickly checked OAA. As she compared her overall ability score and Kushida's, she went pale and silently turned her phone back off.

"I want you to use your high level of ability for the benefit of the class," I pressed on. "But if you continue to miss class without permission from the school, you will eventually lose your place."

"I've already lost it. I mean, of course it's gone, right? Horikita-san, you were against my expulsion and prepared for whatever came your way because of it, right? That means you're the one who'll be in trouble if I'm not useful. I can understand why you'd be this desperate to convince me to come back."

I was sure that even Kushida-san knew what was going on in class right now.

"I lost," she continued. "There's no place for me anywhere anymore. But the reason I've been so quiet since the Unanimous Special Exam was just to hurt you as much as possible. If I keep refusing to come to class, the school will punish the class that caused those students to be absent, right? And the blame for that punishment will fall on you."

It was true that if Kushida-san continued to be absent like this, our class would keep suffering. It was like we had swallowed poison. It was possible that her strategy of remaining absent could eventually be put on hold if there was a special exam, but by doing this, Kushida-san was able to get her revenge against me quite brilliantly.

"There's nothing for you to gain from this," said Ibuki-san.

Kushida-san dismissed her. "It's too late for that. I don't have anything more to lose. Isn't it normal for me to want to take you down with me?"

"Huh? No, it's *not* normal. Don't get carried away just 'cause your OAA scores are kinda good."

"I invited you in partially for the fun of it, but I guess I really did make the right decision. You're funny, Ibuki-san. If it was just Horikita-san and I, this would've been a boring conversation. You're probably right that I was wrong to describe myself as normal. If anything, I guess 'normal' to me must be something abnormal."

"So what, you're admitting that you're a psycho?" said Ibuki-san.

"I can't be satisfied unless I'm number one," Kushida-san said. "I can't tolerate anything that's inconvenient for me."

"Gross," huffed Ibuki-san.

"There's nothing I can do about it. I can't change the way I think. I was simply born that way."

I wouldn't mind particularly if she said that she was venting her anger, or if she were just holding a grudge. But Kushida-san was making me even more uneasy than usual right now with the way she was calming herself down, as if she had achieved some kind of enlightenment. She was much a more formidable foe at this moment than she was back in class when she was shouting and exposing people's weaknesses.

"I'm going to continue being absent until the school does something to force me to do otherwise." Kushida-san continued to speak in a detached, indifferent manner, almost as though she felt she were invincible. She was going to keep doing as she was, prepared to go all the way without surrender.

"So? What are you going to do?" she asked me.

"What *can* I do?" I replied. "I have no other choice but to continue talking to you like this."

"In other words, you have no plan," she concluded. "You're very different from Ayanokouji-kun."

Ibuki-san's ears perked up when she heard Ayanokouji-kun's name mentioned.

"I had thought I had the upper hand over him," Kushida-san went on, "but he wasn't panicking at all. On the contrary, he was actually planning to use everything against me the entire time. I really shouldn't have made an enemy of a guy like him."

"He's... Yes, I suppose you're right," I said. "He might have the ability to see into the distant future. It's only recently that I've come to realize that."

"Same goes for me," said Kushida-san.

"I see."

There was a short period of silence.

"You're a huge moron too, Horikita-san," Kushida-san eventually said, after a while. "It would've been much easier for you if you just got rid of me."

"You're right, I might be a moron," I agreed. "It was baseless intuition. Unfounded confidence. It's fair for people to interpret what I did that way, but there is absolutely no doubt that you are an excellent student. Although your actions toward me and Ayanokouji-kun have caused some harm, and people now know about your past, that still doesn't change the value of your contributions to the class over the last year and a half."

She had achieved a great deal. I thought she should feel proud of what she had accomplished and continue to do well.

"If causing trouble for the class really is your top priority, then yes, your continued absence might just work as a form of revenge. But are you really okay with that?" I asked.

"What are you trying to say?" she asked.

"I'm asking if that's enough to satisfy you," I replied.

"It's plenty. There isn't anything I want more than that right now. No matter what you say, no matter how many words you use to try and persuade me, I'm not going to agree to it."

Persuade. When I heard that word, I felt like there was a small bone lodged in my throat. It was certainly true that I wanted Kushida-san to come back to class, but that was because I wanted to prove to everyone that my choice hadn't been a mistake. Kushida-san knew that better than anyone else. However...what I was doing was just for my own sake. I couldn't really say it would be the best answer for Kushida-san.

"Perhaps I was mistaken," I said.

"What do you mean?" asked Kushida-san.

"I came here with the intention of trying to *persuade* you. But I was wrong. Ultimately, I was just doing this for my own sake,

or for the class's sake. I hadn't actually taken your feelings into consideration."

"What? Now you're going to try to make me take pity on you?"

"I just realized that it was a mistake to bring you to school when you don't want to go."

"In that case, this conversation is over. If I drag my feet, then you'll fall by default. I hope that you'll suffer at school without me for a long time," said Kushida-san.

"Don't worry about me," I assured her. "But you know, at the same time, you're going to suffer too."

"Me?" she asked. "What are you talking about?"

"Because you still have a place to return to and you're going to lose it."

"Now you're just selfishly spouting off whatever you like. There's no place for me to go back to anymore."

The more I thought about her, and the more I focused on her, the more one certain emotion welled up within me.

"I get so frustrated, just looking at you," I said.

"...Huh?" Kushida-san blinked at me.

"I try to get close to you, but I can't do anything because you're a child. You made all the wrong choices. This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't tried to get rid of me. I don't go around telling people's secrets, and I don't even really care about your secret anyway. And the same goes for Ayanokouji-kun too."

"I already told you. I just couldn't stand it," said Kushida-san.

"And that makes you a child. You couldn't deal with it, and you lashed out... That's exactly what a child does."

The first person to react to my words was Ibuki-san, who had been silently listening along until that point. She unconsciously burst out laughing. Kushida-san looked visibly irritated.

"You just have to endure that much," I went on. "You're a high school student, remember? All you have to do is walk to class,

and you can't even do that. Don't just lay on the ground forever, throwing a tantrum. Stand up on your own two feet and walk already."

"Hah," Kushida-san scoffed. "That's easy for you to say, Horikita-san. I'm just a poor girl who's hurting right now. If I go to school now, our classmates are going to ostracize me. There's no way I can carry on like before. You're awful, trying to make me go back to such a painful place. You're not trying to 'get close' to me at all."

"It's not my place to speak for the others, but you are absolutely a mess right now," I told her.

Kushida-san was silent at that.

"The class already found out about your past and they know it now. You can't change that, there's no longer any way to smooth it over. But even so, you're still making trouble. You looked like a child before when you were bawling in class, but now, you really *are* just a child. No, maybe even younger. I feel like I'm dealing with a toddler right now," I remarked, laying into her.

"Don't make fun of me!"

Kushida-san raised her hand and mercilessly took a swing at my cheek. I calmly caught her arm, holding it forcefully.

"You make me want to make fun of you," I told her. "You made trouble for me and for our classmates, all for your own amusement, and made something like that your top priority. That makes me see you as nothing more than a toddler."

"So, what, I'm supposed to be the only one to be bitter and just endure it, helping you and the rest of the class?" she snorted.

"Don't twist what I'm saying. Listen. You're clever. In that case, use what you've got for your own sake. The people around you don't matter. If you can do this for yourself and get into Class A yourself, then that would undeniably be your own achievement. And then you can do whatever you want with the privileges that come with being in Class A. If you want to do the same thing you were doing before, then just go to some place where no one knows about your past."

Kushida-san was glaring at me, but I continued speaking.

"We only have a year and a half left at this school. It shouldn't be that hard to finish, right? You've been putting on a good face for your classmates for the past year and a half. This will be easier than that. You don't think you can do that, with your skills?"

I could feel Kushida-san's hand trembling with anger as I held onto her. But I had arrived at another conclusion.

"This is the only time I'll be visiting you here. All that's left is for you to think this over. If you still want to be my enemy, even after all I've said today... Well, then there's nothing more I can do for you. Stay a child for the rest of your life."

"And you're saying that...while I'm standing still right here, you'll keep moving forward," said Kushida-san.

Even though I hadn't stated that specifically, Kushida-san could see what the situation was.

"You'll be expelled," I replied. "And I'll be achieving my dream of graduating from Class A. That's a big difference, I'd say."

The highly prideful Kushida-san closed her eyes, imagining the future of the person she despised. If you looked at the bigger picture, our time as students here only made up a small percentage of a long life.

"And...you really think there's a chance I can make a comeback if I come back to school?" she asked.

"That depends on you," I said. "Decide if you're going to put your fist down or not, after you've raised it at me."

I still held onto her arm tightly. But over time, I gradually relaxed, and let her go.

"I'll at least listen to what you have to say," she conceded. "Tell me what strategy you have in mind, Horikita-san."

It had taken us various twists and turns to get here, but we had now arrived at a moment when Kushida-san would listen to me. But I couldn't try and smooth things over just to try and make her feel good about this. I had to convince her that my plan was

for the sake of her own survival. By reconsidering several tentative solutions and putting them together, I arrived at an ideal answer right on the spot.

"There's no use planning on trying to play innocent anymore, now that—"

"I'm not," she interrupted. "Besides, it'd be pointless, right? Our classmates saw my real face. There's no changing that fact, is there?"

"That's right. But if we were to put that another way, that means it's possible for you to play innocent in front of people who haven't seen your true nature yet, isn't it?"

Kushida-san gestured that she was considering the matter, and then muttered under her breath, "I'm not so sure about that." She then continued speaking. "Until now, only very few people knew the real me, like you and Ayanokouji-kun, Horikita-san. Before, I wouldn't have hesitated to try and smooth things over and keep up the act, but now, there are more people in class that know. And not just the smart people either. There are a lot of useless, moronic students among them too."

Kushida-san had a point. But before I could even react to what she said, Ibuki-san cut in.

"Ugh, that's mean!"

It sounded like Ibuki-san had an overly sensitive reaction to what Kushida-san said about some students being moronic and useless.

"I'm not talking about you, so why do you care?" asked Kushida-san.

"Ibuki-san, if you're not going to be quiet, you can just go back to your room, okay?" I added.

"Oh. Okay, fine then. I'll go," she huffed. "And I expect this means you're gonna keep your promise you made to me. Right?"

Just as she tried to stand up to leave, I told her something I thought I needed to, just in case.

"No," I said. "If you leave right now, I'll consider that to be an abandonment of your duties before the job is done. Our agreement would be void."

"Whaaaat?! You've gotta be freaking... Ugh. Fine. I'll stay quiet, so just hurry up and get this over with," sighed Ibuki-san.

"Agreement? Now that's interesting," said Kushida-san.

"I simply promised her that I'd fight her in the Sports Festival if she helped me bring you to school." I figured I ought to offer an explanation as to why Ibuki-san was even here.

"So that's what's going on. I was wondering why Ibuki-san was around, but now I understand."

"At any rate, Kushida-san, I was able to get in your room thanks to her efforts. So, I suppose there was some point to it after all."

Ibuki-san was making a face like there was a lot she wanted to say back to that, but she held it in. I respected her spirit—that she wanted to compete against me so badly she was willing to put up with this.

"Going back to the subject at hand," I said. "Is it fair for me to interpret it that it would be painful for you to continue playing the part while people knew your true nature?"

"Yes. Even if I could do my best if there was some meaning in my performance, I can't really do that if it's useless," said Kushida-san.

Up until this point, if she had gotten me and Ayanokouji-kun expelled, there would have still been meaning for her to continue the performance. However, it would be all but impossible to get the entire class expelled. When Kushida-san had been put in a similar situation in junior high, she destroyed her class and put an end to everything. That was why she tried to do the same thing this time, and that was how we had reached this point.

"If you don't want to, you don't have to spend time hanging out with our classmates like you used to," I told her.

"Oh?"

It seemed this statement came as a surprise not only to Kushida-san, but to Ibuki-san as well; they both reacted similarly.

"Even if I forbade people from talking about the issue to a certain extent, there's no absolute guarantee it would stop them," I said. "It's inevitable that the rest of class will continue to believe that you, Kushida-san, are two-faced and a problematic student."

That would mean the weapon known as Kushida-san had lost half of its effectiveness. She was capable when it came to academics and sports, but she wasn't anywhere near the top in either category. She was, at best, an honors student. Even if she was superior to Sakura-san in terms of her core abilities, she lacked charm in other areas.

"I'm not trusted by anyone," Kushida-san agreed. "I can't imagine that anyone would be happy with someone like me. Right?"

"It's true that you won't be able to do things the way you used to," I said. "But I have to wonder if we can really say for sure that you've completely lost everyone's trust. What do you think, Ibuki-san?"

Ibuki-san didn't say anything.

"Ibuki-san, answer me."

"You told me to be quiet and now you're telling me to talk?" she snapped.

"I give you permission to speak," I replied.

"Oh, for the love of... Telling me to be quiet one minute and to speak up the next? I'm not your henchman, you know?"

"Don't you want to compete against me?" I reminded her. "In that case, if you don't answer my question, I—"

"Ugh, whatever, FINE!!!" squawked Ibuki-san, scratching her head vigorously. "Okay. Kushida-san, you've been playing the part of the good girl for way too long. I don't think there's anyone out there who is purely good. In fact, I remember thinking you were suspicious as hell before. If I had to choose who I trusted more between the person you used to be or the person you are now, I'd say the person you are now is more honest."

Ibuki-san spoke quickly, saying what she thought. I supposed it must have come off as very honest and straightforward to Kushida-san since Ibuki-san was lacking when it came to pulling off trickery or wit.

"Ah ha ha ha," Kushida-san laughed. "That's an interesting answer. I mean, that's a pretty unusual line of thinking... But not everyone is as unusual as you, Ibuki-san. In fact, normal people would hate me."

"It's certainly true that Ibuki-san isn't normal, yes," I said.

"Hey!"

"But even so, although it might be to a greater or lesser extent, everyone has two sides to them. And Ibuki-san values your true self—that part of you that makes you want to act for your own sake above all else. That's because your true heart will never change."

Besides, the idea of trying to get someone to change their true nature was wrong in and of itself.

"Besides, if you just speak like you always have with the same mannerisms and tone, when you're dealing with people outside our class, it would be difficult for those who haven't seen your true face to imagine what you really are like," I went on. "No matter how much someone tries to explain it in words, you have to experience it firsthand to really understand."

"What do you mean?" asked Kushida-san.

"Let's say... Ah, I've got it. Let's take Ichinose Honami-san," I said. "She's considered to be a truly good person, even more than you, Kushida-san. So, if I were to tell you that in truth she's a violent, foul-mouthed person who loves seeing other people fail more than anything else, would you believe me right away?"

"I'd honestly find that hard to believe," Kushida-san answered after a pause. "She really *does* seem like a genuinely good person."

"I still have my doubts," remarked Ibuki-san.

"But in your case, it isn't really about Ichinose-san," I pointed out. "It's because you doubt the existence of good people in

general, right?"

"Well... I guess I'd have to actually see someone face to face to really be sure, yeah," admitted Ibuki-san. "I mean, I didn't get a real sense of what Kushida-san was like just from hearing about it from you, Horikita-san."

"Exactly my point. Ichinose-san has continued to be a good person for, at the very least, the past year and a half. So, hypothetically, even if someone were to make a claim like that, no one would believe it. Of course, if everyone in her class were to say that Ichinose-san was that kind of person, we'd naturally start to be suspicious. But still, even then, you probably wouldn't be able to clearly picture something like that in your head, would you?"

Ichinose-san as a violent person who hurled insults at people? No matter who told you something like that, there was no way anyone could fully believe it. Even if you started to suspect it, you wouldn't be able to fully believe it if you hadn't seen that side of her with your own eyes.

"I guess it might really be true, then," said Ibuki-san, "that you don't know something until you experience it yourself. In martial arts, even if someone tells you about a technique and warns you that it's real crazy, it still might not click with you at all. But when you actually get hit with it for real? That's when you understand how awesome it is."

"It is just like you to use martial arts as an example, Ibuki-san," I remarked.

"But as long as there's some doubt, they won't trust me completely," said Kushida-san.

"That's where your skills come in. From now on, you'll just have to handle yourself well and make it work. At the very least, it's a fact that your communication skills and your ability to cultivate a sense of emotional closeness are better than the average person's."

Whether or not Kushida-san would be able to gain people's trust again in the future was uncertain at this stage.

"Even if that would work with the other classes, what about our classmates?" argued Kushida-san. "Shinohara-san, Wang-san, and Hasebe-san especially must all hold grudges against me. Do you really think you can unite the class on this issue?"

"It might be impossible to get everyone on board," I replied. "But if you just try your best and use your abilities, we will be able to produce results."

Even if Kushida-san only managed to continue getting higher-than-average scores, the students who earned scores lower than hers wouldn't be able to complain about her so easily.

"If people not trusting you becomes a problem, I'll step in to help," I added.

"...Do you think I can honestly believe something like that?" said Kushida-san. "It sounds too good to be true. Won't they assume that I'll betray them?"

"I don't mind you doubting me. And I'll listen to their resentful complaints if that happens."

Kushida-san had already fallen once before; for someone in her position, there wasn't anything left to be afraid of. Whether or not she would stand again depended entirely on her own decision now.

What followed my last statement was the longest period of silence in our conversation thus far, and Kushida-san closed her eyes. She started mumbling something, but I wasn't able to hear what it was. Eventually, she opened her eyes again, liking having come to a decision.

"All right," she said. "I'll fight and contribute to the class for the next year and a half. But I'm just doing it for me. I am not fighting for you, Horikita-san, and not for our classmates. Is that okay with you?"

"There are no complaints from me whatsoever," I agreed. "All I want is for you to produce results."

Kushida-san stood up, and this time, she didn't throw her fist. Instead, she reached out to me with her left hand.

"It's the opposite of what happened that time," I mused.

The last time I had offered Kushida-san my hand, she refused to take it.

"I just learned this recently, but apparently, shaking hands with your left expresses hostility," Kushida-san informed me.

"...Is that so? What hand did I offer to you when I went to shake your hand back then?"

"Your left," she replied immediately.

She seemed to remember what happened back then very clearly. She was deliberately asking me for a left-handed shake with that in mind. I got up and took her hand, meeting her in that left-handed shake.

"This is like a commemoration of our hostility," I remarked.

"That's rather fitting for us," said Kushida-san. "Don't you think so?"

"You might be right about that."

She gripped my hand more tightly, and in response, I gripped hers.

"That reminds me... There's one thing I've wanted to try doing to you, Horikita-san. May I?" asked Kushida-san.

"A request? What is it?" I asked.

"Well..."

Smiling broadly, Kushida-san slowly extended both arms to reach for me. Her hands came up and neared my face. Just when I thought that she was going to gently caress my cheeks, a jolt of pain suddenly shot through both sides of my face at once like electricity. I immediately realized that it was pain—she was pinching and pulling on my cheeks. Hard.

"Whad aww y—?!"

"I really, truly loathe you, Horikita-san."

With that, she started pulling on my cheeks even harder.

"I've been pissed off ever since you showed up today, and I'm *still* angry, even now that we're in cooperation," she said.

"When I think about how I'm going to be keeping this up for a

long, long time starting on Monday, it stresses me out beyond belief! I need to be able to get it out at least a little, like this."

It seemed like she was putting more and more force into her grip with no signs of stopping.

"I-iz thidz enuf?" I mumbled back, my speech distorted by her actions.

"No, absolutely not," Kushida-san said. "This is nowhere near enough."

I had intended to take what she was dishing out, at least for a little bit, but Kushida-san was getting carried away. She wouldn't stop pinching and pulling on my face. If she had no intention of backing off, then I had an idea. I reached out with both of my arms and responded in kind, pinching and pulling on her cheeks too.

"Ngh?!"

"Don'd yew thind it'sh time to stop?" I asked.

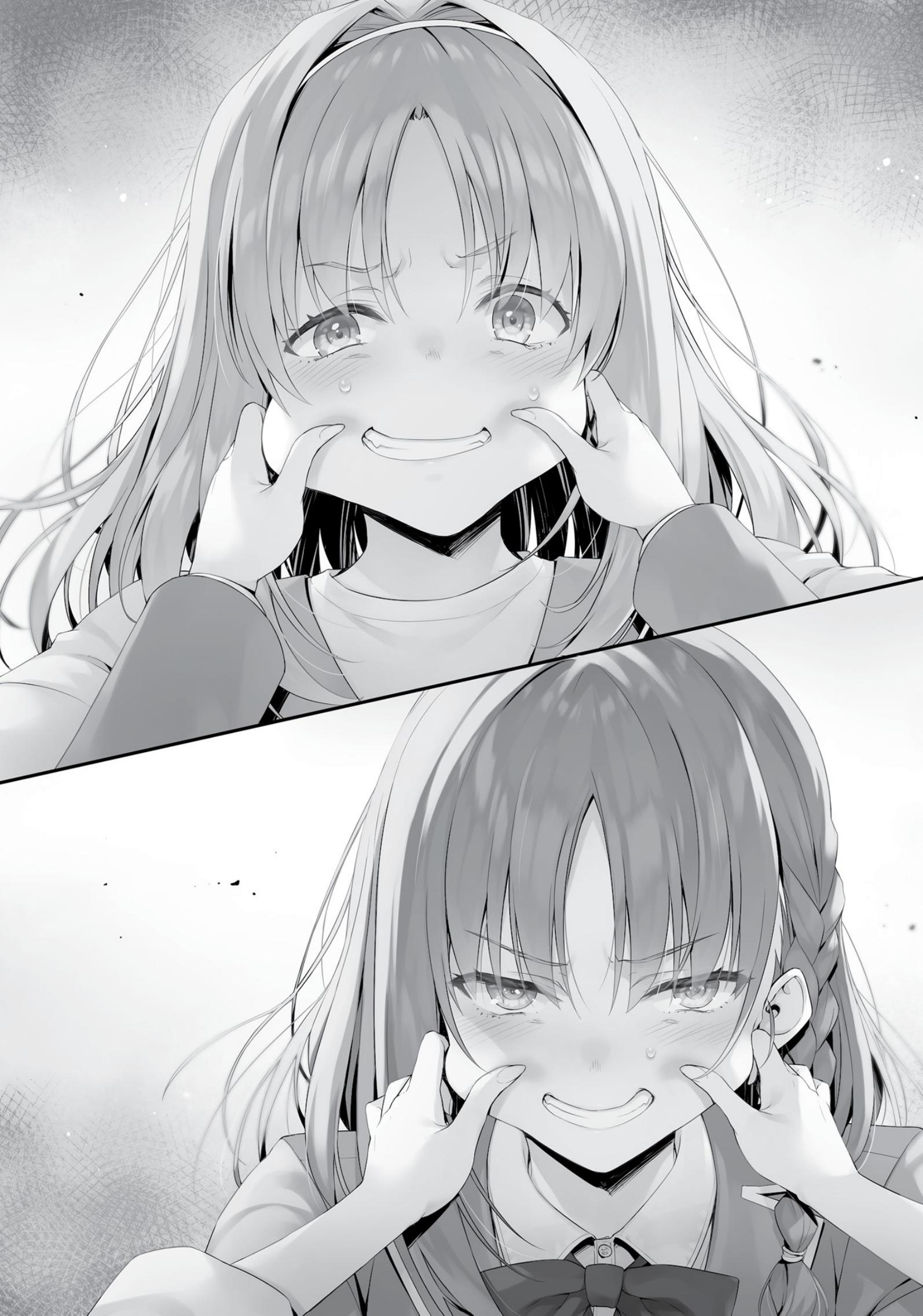
I assumed that she'd let go once she felt the pain, but she didn't.

I didn't hold back either, putting enough force into my fingers that I felt like I was going to rip off her cheeks.

"A fha fha!" she laughed. "Nife joge! But thad ugly fafe you're making izh funnier!"

Kushida-san didn't back down in the slightest. She was responding with so much force I thought she must be going beyond even her limits.

It was a battle of wills.



Ibuki-san was the one calm person left in the room. "Why don't you two keep this up until you both rip each other's faces off? Anyway, this is totally stupid, so I'm leaving," she announced, before promptly heading for the door and leaving.

We continued this battle of wills for about two or three minutes after she left, until the pain and numbness became too much. Once we realized that we were just making ourselves look stupid, we both let go. When I saw how bright red Kushida-san's face was, I figured that mine must have looked the same.

"Come to school on Monday," I commanded.

"God, you're pushy," Kushida-san huffed. "Will you just leave already?"

She started pushing me from behind, like she was trying to toss me out of her room.

At last, I left her room and stepped out into the hallway. "Good grief..." I muttered, rubbing my sore cheeks.

When I looked to the elevator, I spotted Ibuki-san getting on.

"Were you waiting for me, by any chance?" I asked as I walked over.

Ibuki-san stuck out her tongue at me and pushed the Close Door button on the elevator.

"Maybe I really do have a gift for making people angry... Huh," I remarked to myself.

But the fact remained that it was thanks to Ibuki-san that I was able to talk to Kushida-san. Now I just needed to give her exactly what she wanted and make the difference between us crystal clear at the Sports Festival.

4.2

I RAISED MY HEAVY HEAD and slipped out of bed like I was falling out of it. I didn't have a fever, but I had this lingering mild, dull ache. The cause was obvious: it was because I felt so badly about skipping school for five whole days. I had never missed a single day of school before, except when I was actually sick. Feeling tormented by guilt, I thought about trying to do something else to dispel what I was going through, but I couldn't push it from my mind. Of course, I was able to get rid of this feeling so easily, then I wouldn't have skipped five days of class...

I decided I should do something to take my mind off of things and I grabbed my phone. Leaving several incoming messages unread, I tapped on my photos folder and pulled up the first pictures I had taken. As I scrolled through the shots and looked at them, I began to reminisce.

The first photo I stopped to take a closer look at was one I took right after I enrolled in this school. It was from back when I still didn't have anyone that I could really call a friend.

It was the first and only picture I had taken that had just two people in it. It was a picture of me standing right next to Hirata-kun, who was smiling warmly beside me. At that time, I still wasn't able to smile all that well. Well, I still wasn't very good at smiling now either, but I had the feeling that I improved a lot since then.

"This takes me back..." I said to myself.

At that time, I didn't know the first thing about attending school in Japan. Hirata-kun was the first person to get me to relax, when I was feeling overwhelmed by anxiety. At the time, I was still unaware of my romantic feelings too. I just thought that he was cool, kind, and a nice person. Back in China, people were highly competitive, and students were held to high academic standards. I didn't have the time to fall in love, so I didn't realize what was happening. I wasn't sure when exactly I noticed my change of heart, but since the day I discovered it, I hadn't been able to put my feelings into words.

Hirata-kun was popular. He wasn't someone a person like me could reach. If I ever expressed how I felt, even by mistake, it'd only embarrass him and make him feel awkward. That was why I kept my feelings buried deep in my heart. I was content to just be by his side.

"But..."

Just thinking about it again made me feel ashamed and scared. Tears started to well up in my eyes.

"What should I...?"

My entire class found out that I had a crush on Hirata-kun. They must have also noticed that I tried to be placed next to him when we changed seats too, right? I didn't know how I could face everyone again if I did go back to class...

As that thought hit me, however, I was overcome with another wave of guilt.

Back then, when Sakura-san was expelled, she showed Hasebe-san both kindness and anger. Hasebe-san's anguish must have been immense. I couldn't even begin to imagine it. And yet here I was, so preoccupied with thinking about myself that I pushed the button to vote in favor of Sakura-san's expulsion right away. I was just wishing that the exam would be over as soon as possible.

"I'm the worst..."

I hated myself for being such an awful person. I was being consumed by sadness and pain. I mean, my tiny, insignificant worries were...

Just as I was about to turn my phone off again, not wanting to look at my awkward smile anymore, I remembered the email that I had received from Ayanokouji-kun on Monday night. I wondered how Ayanokouji-kun was feeling right now. Was he still able to keep going to class after he expelled a dear friend with his own hand?

If he was going to school, then how did he...? I wanted to meet him in person and talk.

As those thoughts swirled around in my mind, I read his message.

"I want to meet you in person and talk."

"Oh..."

Ayanokouji's message was like it was linked to my very own feelings. He even included his phone number and room number, just in case. Would he talk to me then?

There were several people aside from Ayanokouji-kun who were worried about me and had sent me messages as well.

"Are you okay?" "Want to talk?" "You don't have to stress, okay? Take your time."

While I was grateful to receive such kind words, I wasn't confident I could arrive at a solution if I responded to any of them.

But, knowing Ayanokouji-kun, maybe... I wanted him to listen to what I had to say. I wanted him to hear.

"Maybe I'll...go see him..." I murmured to myself.

It was only 5:30 in the evening now. It was too early for dinner. I figured that it wouldn't be too rude if I were to visit him suddenly now, at this time. Time continued to pass as I paced back and forth in my room, agonizing about what I should do. Eventually, I made up my mind and decided that I'd pay Ayanokouji-kun a visit. I picked up my phone, and even though I was nervous, I gave him a call.

It rang five times, six times... When it rang for the tenth time, I wondered if I should just hang up. But just then, Ayanokouji-kun picked up the call.

Now completely flustered, I tried to speak up. "Ah! Um, uh, this is Wang! I-is this, um, Ayanokouji-kun?" I asked.

"You called me, didn't you?"

I could faintly hear the trace of an echo from Ayanokouji-kun's voice, as well as the sound of a running shower.

"Y-yes... I haven't been able to leave my room for a long time, and I've been worried about things, but I feel like...I can

leave, now... So I was wondering if, maybe, you wouldn't mind talking to me for a little bit, um, Ayanokouji-kun..."

"Now?"

"Is now uh, inconvenient for you...? I'm sorry for calling you so suddenly... I'm just so hopeless, I..."

Maybe it really was a bad time. Maybe it was just pointless, no matter what I tried to do.

"It's not like that. Can you give me a little time though? I need thirty—no, twenty minutes," said Ayanokouji-kun, maybe because he knew that I was feeling down.

"Th-thank you so very much! Well then, I'll, um, come see you in twenty minutes! Sorry for the bother!"

Strangely anxious, I couldn't take it anymore. I immediately hung up the phone.

"Phew... I was so nervous..." *Maybe it's because I haven't spoken to anyone in a week...*

Anyway, while I waited until it was time to go, I cleaned myself up and made myself presentable. About twenty minutes later, I finished getting ready and left my room. And when I opened my front door, which felt heavier than usual—

"Oh, again..." I muttered.

I spotted a plastic bag next to my door.

"I guess they came again today."

There were several things inside like a gelatin dessert, tea, sandwiches, and so on. This had started happening on Monday night. I quietly slipped out of my room to head to the convenience store and noticed something outside. At first I thought someone must have put it there by mistake, but then I noticed the plastic bag contained a small piece of paper with my room number on it. Unfortunately, there wasn't any name, so I didn't know who it was from.

"Oh, there's a salad in it today too... But...I don't really like that though..."

It was a salad with chicken tenderloin, packed with lots of protein. Still, I felt like it was kind of the person. They included a slightly different assortment of items each day.

"I wonder who this is from?" I asked myself.

There was no receipt in the plastic bag or anything else that might have given me a clue. Though I was grateful to this nameless person, I left the bag at my doorway, and took the stairs to the fourth floor where Ayanokouji-kun's room was located.

I'm a little nervous about going to a floor with boys' rooms though...

As I was thinking that, I opened the door leading from the stairs to the hallway. But at that very same time, one of the room doors opened. It looked like it was Ayanokouji-kun's room, but the person who stepped out was...

I wondered who it could be, but I realized it was Karuizawa-san. She didn't have her hair done up in her usual beautiful ponytail; instead it was down and completely straight. Then I spotted Ayanokouji-kun, dressed in casual clothes. Maybe they were on a date in their room? I wondered if maybe I had been a huge bother earlier when I called him...

I felt like I was going to start feeling depressed again, but I couldn't turn and run away again now that I had come this far. Karuizawa-san immediately looked around and scanned the hallway. When she looked my way, our eyes met, but just briefly.

"Oh, uh, speak of the devil or something, I think," she said.
"See you later, Kiyotaka!"

Nervous, I took a deep breath. For whatever reason, I noticed that Karuizawa-san took a deep breath too. It sounded like she even took two. Maybe she'd tell me something about Hirata-kun?

"B-bye-bye!" said Karuizawa-san.

"H-huh?" I sputtered.

I was bracing myself for more, but all she said was a simple polite goodbye before walking right past me without making eye contact.



"Um, excuse me, Karuizawa-san!" I called to her as she hurriedly walked past.

"Wh-wh-wh...what?"

"I'm, um, sorry about calling Ayanokouji-kun so suddenly," I apologized. "I'm sure I was a bother..."

"Oh, no, not at all. Really."

"But..."

"You wanted to talk to him about something, right? Kiyotaka told me. He said that if you didn't come now, he'd make you use your newfound courage to leave your room again."

It sounded like my feelings had been conveyed well over the phone. Karuizawa-san came to a stop, came back, and smiled gently at me.

"I think you should just go ahead and talk to him," she said. "Don't be shy. He looks like he'd be a smooth talker, but he's actually real clumsy with his words. But I think he'll give you some answers."

"...Okay."

I had come this far already. I had to get out everything that was in my head or it'd be my loss. Karuizawa-san helped me come to that realization, that I needed to be that prepared.

"Well then, I hope I'll see you on Monday," said Karuizawa-san.

After that encouraging pep talk, she walked straight over to the elevator and repeatedly tapped the button. When she realized that the elevator wasn't going to be coming any time soon, she walked off, heading back to her room via the emergency stairs.

"Thank you very much, Karuizawa-san," I said aloud.

At the very least, she didn't seem to have any issues with me. I had always had the strong impression that she was an angry, scary person...but today, she seemed gentle and kind. Anyway, I didn't have the time or headspace to even think about anything else right now, so I hurried over to Ayanokouji-kun's room. After I pressed the doorbell, the door opened about thirty seconds later.

I immediately got flustered again because Ayanokouji-kun was completely silent when he welcomed me inside.

"U-um... I called you...because... W-well, um, I wanted to talk...!"

4.3

MII-CHAN ARRIVED at my room at almost exactly the scheduled time. I really wanted to send Kei back to her own room a little earlier, but Mii-chan was in kind of a hurry. Perhaps I should have asked for a few more minutes before we got started with this discussion, but I had to be careful and not give Mii-chan an opportunity to change her mind. I didn't really have any other choice but to stick with it.

"It's all right. Come on in," I told her.

"Sorry for the bother...!"

She couldn't hide how nervous she was at all, but she showed no sign of turning back either. Even with just a glance, I could tell she was trying desperately hard to get back on her feet. Unlike Kushida and Haruka, she didn't want to stay where she was.

"Want something to drink?" I asked.

"No thank you, I'm all right. Thank you for your kind offer, though."

After politely refusing, she shyly sat down on the floor. I sat across from her, showing that I was ready to begin our conversation.

"I'm guessing you came here to talk about what Kushida said in class. About Yousuke?" I asked.

Her shoulders twitched when I said his name, but she nodded quietly.

"That, and I'd also like to know how things are going in class," she said. "Like about Shinohara-san, Matsushita-san, and Hasebe-san. Those people are hurting much more than I am. And I wanted to ask about you too, Ayanokouji-kun."

I didn't expect her to bring up my name, but it actually wasn't all that surprising. From an outside perspective, it would look like I made the painful decision of throwing one of the people from my friend group away.

"I would've thought that plenty of people would be calling and texting you, though?" I asked.

"...Thankfully, there are a lot of people who seem to be worried about me, yes," said Mii-chan. "But, for some reason, I just can't look at their messages. I felt like if I looked, then I'd have to respond, so I just...couldn't."

She couldn't simply leave those messages on read without sending a reply. In that case, then the only thing she could do was simply not read the messages at all.

"All right, then," I said. "You don't have to put your questions in order or anything. Anything you want to ask me, feel free to go ahead and ask."

The two of us had rarely ever talked alone like this. It wasn't necessary for her to get everything out smoothly and eloquently or anything, but if she continued being shy, she wouldn't be able to solve the things that could be solved. It'd be better for her to find a way to open up, even if just a little.

"Well, um, okay, I'll go ahead, then... Oh, um, but, before that... I wanted to ask you something, just to be sure. Were you the one who bought all those things for me and left them outside my room, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Seeing that I didn't know what she was talking about, Mii-chan explained that someone had been delivering food to her once a day since she began missing school. There was a piece of paper with Mii-chan's room number included in the bag, but there wasn't anything else that could help identify the sender. For a moment, Yousuke came to mind, but I hadn't heard about anything similar being done for Kushida or Haruka. Hirata treated all of his classmates equally, so he would have done the same thing for everyone if he was the person delivering food to Mii-chan. On top of that, he would have told me about it one of the times we had met.

"Sorry, but that wasn't me," I said. "And I have no idea who it could have been either."

"I see... That person has really helped me a lot... I was thinking it'd be nice if I could show them my thanks."

"Whoever it is, looking at your situation since you've been absent, there are people who care about you, Mii-chan."

Some students sent her messages, several tried calling her, and someone was bringing her food. There were probably a lot of other students that were worried about her too, even if they hadn't reached out.

Mii-chan nodded somewhat happily and proceeded to ask me another question. "Ayanokouji-kun, you've been able to go to school...right?"

If she hadn't been in contact with anyone this week and hadn't heard anything, it made sense that she didn't know if I had actually been attending class. That being said, if someone was holed up in their room, sleeping, and unwilling to see anyone, they probably wouldn't say they were open to meeting to chat like I had.

"I went to school this past week, yeah," I replied. "Same as any other week."

"Wasn't it hard for you though...? No, I mean, of *course* it must've been hard. But didn't you maybe not want to go?" she asked.

"You're asking me if it was hard, say, in general? I'm guessing that's because I haven't ever done anything like trying to lead our classmates before. I suppose anyone would've been shocked to see me driving Kushida into a corner and getting one of my friends expelled."

"Yeah... You were so different from the Ayanokouji-kun I knew. It was a little scary."

Mii-chan was being straightforward and honest. She told me straight out how she had really felt. I decided there was no point in talking about things like relative merits and the order in priority of our friends and classmates right now. That was something that I'd already explained back in the special exam, and I didn't need to go digging that up again.

"All I was doing was trying to fool everyone, covering up my cowardice by acting intimidating," I told her. "And no one noticed

because I've never been good at expressing my emotions very well. The reason why I've been able to keep going to school without taking a day off is just because I thought I would've looked lame if I stopped coming."

"I thought a little bit about that too," said Mii-chan. "I didn't go to class because I didn't want people to know that what Kushida-san said was exactly right, and that I was hurt. Actually, on Monday morning, I changed into my school uniform and got as far as my door, but I just couldn't take that first step outside. Then, the door felt like it kept getting further away and too heavy to push, just because I had missed that one day of school. And... And I started thinking that it's all my fault, and..."

She must have been thinking back on what happened because she then lowered her head. "I'm so sorry for missing a week of school because of this."

"I don't think you need to be sorry, though," I said. "I'm sure it took quite a bit of courage for you to come here and talk to me. And I take it this also means you haven't given up on going to school altogether, right?"

"Of course I haven't! I really want to get back to school right away. Even I know that I have to go. But it's just... I'm so ashamed, and I feel so pitiful..."

Her feelings, which she had kept hidden, had been exposed in a public place. No matter how many students had become aware of them, it was completely understandable that a person would suffer deep emotional scars from having their private feelings shared.

"I can't say that I can understand the position you're in, or that I can change it," I said. "But at the very least, I know that your classmates are worried about you, Mii-chan."

"I understand..."

"And it's also true that you're causing trouble for the class right now."

It was like I had suddenly pressed a knife to her throat. She gasped and went stiff at my words. It would've been easy just to

tell her nice things she wanted to hear, like "Don't worry about it," or "We'll wait for you, as long as it takes." But in reality, that would only result in dragging things out. What I said might've seemed harsh to an outsider, but I knew it would stick in her mind.

"Fortunately for you, that fact hasn't really come to the surface yet since Kushida and Haruka have been absent from class too," I went on. "But we don't know what next week will be like. What do you think would happen if you keep staying here while those two go back to school? Get what I mean?"

Imagining your own hypothetical situation was something that even an elementary schooler could do. Terror must have been welling up inside her because her arms trembled slightly as she nodded. I was planning on adjusting what I said if it came off too aggressively, but surprisingly, I wasn't seeing any warning signs. She was small and easily frightened, but she was relatively strong at her core. She was determined not to break.

"Just come back to school with a nonchalant look on your face. Act like nothing's wrong," I told her. "There's no need for you to say anything special to Yousuke."

"But... I, um... I sit in front of Hirata-kun, so...we're close together, and..."

"Oh, come to think of it, I do remember you calling dibs on a seat near the exact middle of the room pretty quickly, before anyone else did. That was an unpopular choice of seat. Was that because you thought Yousuke would take the seat behind you?"

"Uh...!"

I could tell that I was correct without her even needing to tell me directly, because of her completely obvious reaction.

"I should've guessed," I said. "You watch Yousuke closely and understand him well."

"Ugh. I'm so embarrassed..." She lifted up her knees and grabbed hold of them tightly, hiding her face. She shook her head from side to side. It looked like her shyness was an even bigger issue.

"H-has Hirata-kun...said anything about me...?" She then brought up the thing that she had probably been curious about for quite some time. Since her face was hidden from view, I couldn't really see what she was thinking.

"He's worried about you, of course. Much, much more than he is about Kushida and Haruka."

"That's just because he feels annoyed with me though, I bet... Right?"

Considering Yousuke was at the center of Mii-chan's issue, it was only natural that she was more concerned about him than anything else.

"It's not like he's annoyed with you. Actually, he feels bad about it. He feels sorry, like he's the one who caused you to stop coming to school, Mii-chan."

"But that's... Hirata-kun didn't do anything wrong though...!" she sputtered.

"I know that. But, you know, that's just the kind of guy that he is, and I'm sure you know that very well, Mii-chan. You knew that well before me or anyone else."

Yousuke was someone who could rejoice in someone else's joy as if it was his own. But at the same time, someone else's unhappiness felt like his own too. That was the kind of person he was. Ultimately, that meant Yousuke was suffering as well because Mii-chan shut herself up in her room. Getting her to understand that point would be the most effective and most important measure in breaking through her current situation.

Mii-chan slowly raised her head and looked at me. Her eyes were a little red, but she didn't appear to be crying. She then lowered her knees, which she had been clutching tightly, back down.

"It wasn't like I never thought about that," she said. "I thought that Hirata-kun might have been suffering alongside me. But, even so, I put myself first and tried not to see it..."

It looked like I didn't have to go over everything from the beginning with her. Just giving her that push seemed to be

enough. When I looked at her, as a second-year student now, I felt it was fair to say that the student known as Mii-chan was almost a fully complete person.

"You've got a different look on your face now than you did a few moments ago," I remarked.

"Thank you very much. I feel much better after talking about all of this stuff. It's all thanks to you, Ayanokouji-kun."

"I didn't do anything major. I just happened to be here with you as you got back on your feet by yourself. That's all."

"That's not true. It's because I really thought I might be able to solve my problems if I met with you Ayanokouji-kun," said Mii-chan. She was now speaking loud and clear. Then, she bowed deeply. "I... I will definitely go to class starting Monday."

"I know. If you really do catch a cold or something, you should honestly stay in bed though."

"Well, at least on Monday, I'll definitely go to class, even if I have to crawl to get there."

I felt like we were kind of going in circles with our discussion right now, but if she was that motivated, then that was good enough for me.

"However, I'm still concerned about whoever has been dropping food off for me," Mii-chan added. "I made them do quite a bit of shopping over the past five days... I guess they must have spent close to 10,000 points total on me."

If it was just one person doing all of that, then that certainly would have been a hefty price. While she made her way to the door, she started thanking me once again, so I basically had to chase her out of my room to finally get her to leave.

"I guess that's probably a result of how her parents taught her to act. I feel like it's a little excessive, though," I muttered after she left.

She was overly polite, even to her classmates. I supposed that was one of Mii-chan's virtues, though. At any rate, now that I solved one problem, I figured I needed to finish tidying up my room since I hadn't been able to beforehand. More and more

students had been coming to my room lately and I couldn't afford to be inattentive. After all, Horikita, Yousuke, or someone else could arrive at any time.

Shortly after I started to clean up, my doorbell rang once again. I quickly glanced at my phone, but there weren't any notifications indicating that Kei or any of my friends had sent me a message.

A visitor without an appointment, huh... What horrendous timing.

I thought about staying perfectly silent for a while. Depending on how the situation played out, I supposed I could just pretend to be out...but about thirty seconds later, my doorbell rang again. It was dusk now, and the lights were off in my room. I decided to slide the cover off the peephole on my door and look out into the hallway, while making sure to conceal my presence at the same time.

The very last person I wanted to see right now was standing outside my door—Amasawa Ichika, a first-year student. Come to think of it, something like this happened some time ago. I recalled what happened the day she came to visit me. That visit was also at a bad time, when I didn't want her to show up.

She was wearing her uniform despite the fact it was Saturday, so I had to wonder if she went to the school building today. Could I view this visit as her merely making an appearance to stop by and say hello? Or did she have some other intent? When I thought about what happened last time, I couldn't help but suspect that there was some contrivance this time too. She obviously came to visit me on the assumption that I was in.

While I was mulling over the situation, my doorbell rang a third time.

"Hello, senpaaaai! I came to hang out!" announced Amasawa sweetly, still waiting for some kind of response from me.

"Sorry, but I'm kind of in the middle of something right now. Can we do this tomorrow?" I asked.

"Absolutely not. I came here to investigate because people have been saying you brought girls to your room to do *bad* things, senpai. If you don't open this door, we're going to have a problem!" declared Amasawa, her voice echoing down the hallway.

She was trying to force me into opening the door for her. If I continued to let her spout off this selfish nonsense, then my neighbors were eventually going to start hearing the commotion. I decided that I had no other choice but to open the door and talk to her.

"And where exactly did you hear that I brought girls to my room?" I asked.

"I was the source of that information. Me!" she exclaimed.

"That's a completely unreliable source."

"That's not true, I *am* reliable. Karuizawa-senpai and Wang-senpai came to your room today, isn't that right?"

That wasn't simple intuition on her part. She clearly said both names without hesitation. Even if she could've guessed that Kei was here, it was unlikely she would've guessed Mii-chan came to visit too. She clearly knew what I had been up to.

"Oh, and by the way, I'd just like to point out that I didn't plant listening devices or anything else in your room, okay?" she added. "The school seems like they inspect for that sort of thing rather thoroughly."

It made sense that we probably couldn't purchase something so troubling, even online. But I knew there were still ways that Amasawa could get her hands on those types of things.

"Considering your connection to Tsukishiro, I wouldn't be surprised if you still had one or two," I pointed out.

Despite my saying that, she didn't stop smiling as she looked at me. "Anyway, can I come in? Oh, thanks, sorry for the bother!"

Even before I gave her permission, she kicked off her shoes and walked into my room. Then, without showing any kind of restraint, she began to look around the place.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, me? I'm just doing a little investigating to see if you were having sexy time."

I would've liked her to provide me with an answer as to *why* she felt it was necessary to check my room, but oh well. Amasawa continued to scour my room without hesitation. Once her gaze fell on my bed, she approached it.

"You're curious about how I was able to correctly guess that Wang-senpai came to your room, aren't you?" she said. "You're probably wondering if I just so happened to see her coming or going by coincidence, or if I found out through some other means. Right?"

"Did you really barge into a person's room so you could brag about your information network?" I retorted.

Amasawa didn't deny that. Instead, she quickly confirmed it, putting her hands on my bed. While she fixed the wrinkles in my sheets, it looked like she was searching for something. Her fingertips ran all over my bed from corner to corner. I sat down on the carpet and watched, figuring she would just continue conducting her search until she was satisfied.

"Your girlfriend has long hair, doesn't she, senpai? That means you like girls with long hair like that, right? That's why I'm starting to grow mine out now."

I hadn't even asked her about that. As she told me about her hair for some reason, her hands and eyes continued to move. I couldn't do anything to make her stop, so all I could do was watch. But then, she suddenly froze. She picked something up off my bed from near my pillow and lifted it up between her index finger and thumb.

"What is *this*?" she asked.

She held up a single strand of long, shiny golden hair triumphantly, like it was some major achievement.

"It's probably Kei's," I replied. "She's come by a lot lately."

"I'm sure that's true. But what does the fact I found this near your *pillow* mean?"

"I can think of a lot of possible reasons, but do you need me to list them all one by one?" I asked in return.

"Oh no, no," she said. "There's no need to do that."

Then, she got down on all fours on the floor and looked around. It was like she was a forensics expert with the police, searching for something. I didn't know what she was expecting to find, but I doubted that whatever she was after was there.

"Did they teach you ways to scour people's rooms in the White Room too?" I asked.

When I mentioned the White Room, Amasawa stopped in her tracks.

"Don't you ever wonder, senpai?" she said. "About us? We were sent to this school in order to get you expelled. But even now, after we've started our second semesters here, we've just slipped into normal daily routines without raising a hand against you."

"Well, in your case, at least, it seems like you've been branded as unfit and unnecessary by the White Room," I replied.

"I'm not going to deny that, but what about the others? Aside from me?"

"Not interested."

"Well, I suppose you aren't. And if you continue to remain vigilant, no one will do anything careless," said Amasawa.

"I recommend that you just enjoy being here at school and not worry about me," I answered.

"I agree. I think I should too, actually..."

After a slight pause, Amasawa went back to checking my room. She had her back to me, with her butt sticking in the air. Since the skirt of her school uniform was short, I could see a little bit of her underwear. I'm sure she must have known, but she continued to crawl around without giving me any indication that she cared that I could see. When she moved to look underneath my bed, she was even more exposed.

"Your eyes are glued to my underwear. You're naughty, senpai."

"Sorry, but it's not like I'm trying to look at it. I'm more worried about what you'll do to me if I stop watching you."

As I kept my eyes locked on her, Amasawa pulled her head out from under my bed and turned around to face me. Exuding an air of maturity that I wouldn't expect from someone a year my junior, she crawled straight toward me.

"I think a certain someone is going to start acting recklessly," she began. "And I have a feeling that certain someone is confusing the ends and the means. And that certain someone is more concerned with getting you expelled than they are about getting back to the White Room."

She was very close as she muttered those words—our lips were only a few centimeters apart. A whiff of something sweet reached my nostrils.

"That sure sounds like a bother," I replied.

"For you, yes, I'm sure it does. You know, I've been thinking about something a lot recently. I've been thinking that maybe I should just tell you who that certain someone is and have you finish that person off."

"Maybe *I'd* be the one who'd get finished off though," I replied.

"Ah ha ha ha! That's hilarious!"

It wasn't hilarious at all.

She pressed further. "What do you think? Want me to give you a name...?"

Amasawa drew about another inch closer to me and stopped, waiting for my response.

"I appreciate the offer. But I'll pass," I told her.

"Is it because you're not confident that you can win once you've heard their name?" she asked.

"If that person's identity is discovered, the very first person they'll suspect is you, Amasawa. What would you do then?"

"Yes, you're right," she agreed. "I'll probably get a finger pointed at me right away."

"I don't need to jeopardize your school life just to find out who that person is."

If she stood in my way as my enemy, then I wouldn't show her any mercy. But right now, Amasawa wasn't showing any sign of doing that.

"You're kind, senpai," said Amasawa.

Besides, carelessly trusting her too much would also be a problem. If she was taking action while keeping several strategies in her back pocket, then I couldn't deny the possibility that her statements right now were meant as a trap.

"Well, I've been rejected, so I'll be leaving now," she declared.

"Did you come all the way here just to tell me that?" I asked. "Or was searching my room your main purpose for coming?"

"Hmm, who can say?"

With a devilish grin, Amasawa immediately headed toward the door, but on her way, she turned her attention to the bag of burnable garbage in the kitchen. There wasn't very much in it.

"You know, I've visited your room several times now, but I can't help but notice you never have very much trash," she observed. "I thought you'd be the type of person who filled the bag to the brim before taking it out."

"There was a lot of food waste, including vegetables and fish," I said. "I just didn't feel comfortable leaving it all until next week, that's all."

"In that case, how about I take out your trash for you on my way back to my dorm?" she offered.

"Sorry, but we're not allowed to take out trash before eight o'clock at night."

"You're a stickler for the rules, I see."

Amasawa's visit was unexpected, but that was at least one mystery solved.

"I can more or less see why you came here today," I said.
"You came here to offer me that proposal just now. You examined every nook and cranny in my room because you were checking to make sure no one else was listening in."

The pretense of ransacking my room and trying to find out my private business was all just her being cautious. Amasawa would have been wary that the White Room student might have already set some kind of trap.

"Senpai, knowing you, I'm sure that you'll be fine. But if by some chance I'm expelled, just know that it'd mean that something unexpected will be coming for you." With those parting words, she made her way out of my room.

After that, I decided to check my phone to see if there had been any changes. I saw that I had a new text from Akito.

"Haruka will be coming to school starting Monday."

Some good news, at least for the time being. Apparently, Akito had successfully managed to persuade her as a mutual friend in their friend group. The problem, however, was that this message wasn't posted in the group chat including the whole Ayanokouji Group. After I stared at my phone screen for a while, I saw that I got another message.

"Please watch over Haruka for a while. Quietly."

The message was innocuous enough, but "quietly" was clearly emphasized. She was going to come to school, but she didn't want to talk to me. If I carelessly tried to strike up a conversation with her, there was a risk she'd stop coming to school again. That's what the message was getting at and why it was phrased that way, and the reasoning was easy to understand. As long as she was returning to school, then I had no complaints.

"Got it. I'll be very careful," I replied.

"Thanks. I hope things can go back to how they were before," he answered.

For a little while afterward, I received a few more somewhat encouraging texts from Akito, but once the time was right, I brought the conversation to a close.

"Guess that's one more problem solved," I muttered to myself.

This wasn't really a true solution. It was better to look at it as a tentative comeback on Haruka's part and nothing more. After these past few dizzying hours, I was feeling far more drained than usual.

"Think I'll go to bed early tonight," I thought aloud.

However, I needed to make sure I didn't forget to take out the garbage.

4.4

MONDAY WAS HERE once again. Saturday had been quite a full day with Mii-chan coming to see me and Akito reaching out to let me know that Haruka would be returning. Even so, there wasn't any guarantee that either of them would show up—it all came down to how strong their determination was. And as for Kushida, I hadn't heard anything from Horikita all weekend. Even if Kushida did some to school, it was impossible to determine how she or our classmates would react.

I arrived at school at the same time as usual. I took my seat and waited for the three of them to arrive. Once about a quarter of the class's students had arrived, I noticed that the girls were greeting someone with smiles on their faces.

Mii-chan, looking timid, had arrived.

"G-good morning..." she said.

Mii-chan had come to class, prepared to be made fun of, and looked up at everyone cautiously. In reality, there wasn't anything for her to worry about. The girls welcomed her to class without bringing up that sensitive topic.

"Good morning, Mii-chan," said Yousuke.

"G-good morning, Hirata-kun," she replied.

And even the boy in question met Mii-chan's return with a smile, just as always. At this point in time, there was no telling whether Mii-chan's love life would blossom or not, but even if it hadn't started, it at least hadn't ended either. Moving forward, it was possible that this could be a major turning point in both of their lives at this school.

After various greetings, even though Mii-chan was still looking somewhat nervous, the girls didn't leave her side. They all had fun chatting together, laughing about the things that happened at school last week.

Once almost the entire class arrived, Haruka showed up too. She was accompanied by Akito. It seemed like he wasn't sure if

she might run away at some point or not, so he followed her all the way to her seat, perhaps to stop her if she tried. Keisei was looking a bit hesitant too, but he worked up his courage, walked over to Haruka, and said hello. I had never imagined that there would come a day when I was glad that I wasn't beside those three once we had switched seats.

Haruka glanced at me for just a moment, but she immediately averted her gaze and looked down at her phone. Seeing that, Akito exchanged a few words with Keisei, and then the two of them went back to their own seats.

So, Mii-chan and Haruka returned to school. Both of them had friends who would support them when they were hurting. In Mii-chan's case, she had lots of female friends, and as for Haruka, she had Akito and Keisei. Even though they were few in number, they were certainly people she could call her best friends.

For the time being, it was safe to say that the prospect of our class suffering some major punishment from the school had been alleviated. However, one question remained: What about Kushida? Less than three minutes before morning homeroom was set to begin, Horikita arrived with a stiff expression on her face. After a quick glance at Kushida's seat, she immediately went to her own seat and then stared ahead at the blackboard. I guessed that Kushida probably wasn't in the lobby this morning. Horikita likely waited for her to come, but she didn't show up. Shinohara and some other students were most likely guessing the same thing as they looked at Horikita's back.

Eventually, the bell rang, and it was time for morning homeroom. Chabashira-sensei strode into the classroom and saw that all of the seats except Kushida's had been filled.

"It would seem that the two of you are feeling better now," she said. "You must have caught a nasty, extensive summer cold. Please make sure to keep a close eye on your health from now on, okay?"

Though she was reprimanding them gently, she was simply confirming that they were indeed present without condemning them.

"It looks like Kushida is still absent today. It appears that she's—"

In that exact moment, I heard the classroom door opening behind me. Kushida was there in the doorway. She was slightly out of breath and needed a moment to fix her uniform.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she announced, once she had caught her breath.

"This is the first time you've ever been late, Kushida," said Chabashira-sensei. "You've been absent for a long time. Are you feeling all right today?"

"Yes. I'll be sure to be careful from now on," she replied calmly without any panic in her voice before proceeding to go to her seat.

Kushida didn't say anything to anyone and simply looked straight ahead. A tense air filled the classroom, but because we weren't allowed to chat among ourselves now, everyone was silent.

"I know that a lot has happened, but this has been the first time in a week that you've all been back together." Though Chabashira-sensei was still feeling anxious about the state of affairs in her class, she nodded in satisfaction. "It's almost time for the Sports Festival. I'm hoping that you'll all make great strides and give it your best."

Later, once homeroom was over, the classroom immediately devolved into chaos. It went without saying that it was the result of Kushida coming back, of course. The students stared at her like she was a tumor.

Would Kushida remain silent, as this went on? Would she smile at them like she always did before? Or would she bare her fangs once more?

I decided to leave the classroom for the time being, quietly getting out of my seat and heading toward the hall. I gently opened the door to the hallway. I wasn't going to carelessly expose the inner happenings of this class to the other classes.

Just as I was thinking about that, I received a message on my phone.

"I'm watching. Don't worry."

I hadn't gotten to the hallway yet and was just peeking my face outside, but I noticed that Chabashira-sensei was there. She saw me and nodded. I supposed that meant Chabashira-sensei was following up on what she told me before, about how she was going to do everything she could as a teacher.

Right now in the classroom, anything could happen. No one could make a move. But just as Horikita was about to pull out her chair, Kushida stood up instead, as if she were trying to get a head start on her. She did it in one smooth action, without any wasted movements, as if to warn Horikita not to do anything unnecessary.

Once Kushida started to move, the first place she went was to Mii-chan's seat, which was close to hers. Mii-chan, who had just finally returned to class, froze in terror like she was a frog being stared down by a snake.

"Horikita-san told me that you were absent because of me," said Kushida.

"Oh, um, well, I..."

"Do you hate me?"

"N-no, I wouldn't say—"

"You don't have to like me, Wang-san. I can't change the fact that I told everyone your secret. And I'm not planning on trying to be friends with anyone either. ...Well, I guess that goes without saying."

She wasn't planning on being friends again. Although Kushida was speaking in a soft tone, her strongly worded message made Mii-chan tense up even more. The eyes of many of our classmates were filled with frustration, anxiety, and doubt as they looked at Kushida. Normally, that alone would have been painful for anyone to bear, but it appeared to have no effect on her.

"I'm not saying that I want you to understand how I felt at the time, but know that I did what I had to back then," she went on. "I apologize for making you one of my targets, Wang-san."

Her apology came off feeling more businesslike and impersonal than sincere, but at least I couldn't sense any ill intent behind it.

"Shinohara-san, Matsushita-san, and you other girls, I'm sorry that I made trouble for you too. It at least looks like you've made up though."

If you were to ask me, I'd have to say that Shinohara, Matsushita, and her group of friends looked like they were close with each other again. Yousuke and Sudou might have been working together during the time off to bring them back together.

"Do you think that apology solves everything?" asked Shinohara tersely and without pause, trying to forcefully rein Kushida in.

"It doesn't. But how else am I supposed to start but with an apology?"

"Well, sure, but...but, what about your attitude?" said Shinohara. "The way you're apologizing?"

"I dunno. This is just how I really am," said Kushida.

That false face she had been wearing all this time had come off. The angelic Kushida no longer existed. The fact alone surely had been conveyed to everyone in class without a doubt, and there was a general feeling of nervousness.

"I intend to keep up some semblance of appearances moving forward, just like I did in the past," she added. "That way, I'll be able to collect information from the other classes, depending on the time and situation. However, if anyone in this class says they want to interfere with me doing that, that's fine with me."

No matter how much Kushida smoothed things over with people outside of this class and could put on appearances, if people in our class got in her way, she wouldn't be able to build a relationship with them.

"I'll leave it to you all to decide whether you want to use the weapon I've developed or not," said Kushida.

If Kushida was someone who valued having friends and feared being alone, then isolating her would probably be a good

way of getting revenge against her. However, Kushida wasn't being passive here—she was on the attack.

"I won't show any mercy to anyone who shows me hostility either. The fact of the matter is that I only revealed *some* secrets during the special exam. There are plenty of other people who have things they want to keep hidden too. Understand?" Kushida muttered that nonchalantly, speaking as though she were threatening the entire class and not anyone in particular. "But I'll promise you one thing. I will not reveal any secrets unless it's a real emergency. Also, I'm not doing this for the sake of the class either—I'm doing this for me so that I can graduate from Class A. This is my last line of defense. I'm not going to lose my worth as a person."

As long as her classmates harbored feelings of resentment, dissatisfaction, or suspicion toward her, depending on the situation, Kushida could find herself in a position to be cut. In order to prevent that from happening, she said she wasn't going to divulge people's secrets further. However, if she *did* get stabbed in the back, she wouldn't show any mercy. She was letting them know that she knew how to protect herself, while at the same time promising to contribute to the class.

Kushida Kikyou's stats were high enough in every category to call her excellent overall. At the very least, she would not drag down the class when it came to matters of academic ability and physical ability.

"Hasebe-san, are you okay with that too?" asked Kushida.

Haruka didn't move from her seat, and she didn't even glance at Kushida.

Even after being directly addressed, Haruka didn't answer and simply kept staring out the window.

4.5

MY DAILY ROUTINE had started to change significantly since last week. The Ayanokouji Group hadn't met, not even once. Even now that Haruka had come back to school, that didn't change. Or rather, things hadn't gone back to how they were. Our gatherings had been routine before, but now that those had disappeared, the way we spent our days at school was totally different. During the ten-minute break period between classes, I now spent my time alone or talking with Kei.

I sometimes talked casually with people like Sudou and Matsushita too, but my opportunities to talk with Akito and Keisei noticeably decreased. Even though something felt off about this change in routine at first, the way things were now gradually seeped into my body and I eventually got used to it.

Lunch changed in a similar fashion. Whenever Kei would go eat with her friends, I'd pop into the library instead. This was a moment of rest for me, something that remained unchanged from before. It was a little bit disappointing, however, that Hiyori didn't seem to be going to the library much recently, so we weren't able to talk about books.

At any rate, that typical sequence of events continued even after class. Kei had contacted me ahead of time today to let me know that she was going to head back to the dorms with some friends so they could hang out. As a result, I didn't really have any plans after classes today.

I decided to head back to the dormitory as soon as possible that day, because I thought that if I stayed behind, it'd just place an emotional burden on Haruka right now. However, once she saw me go, something unexpected happened. I didn't expect her to come talk to me, but as I got up to leave, Haruka did just that.

"Kiyopon, do you have a minute?" she asked.

There didn't seem to be any real sense of impetus in her voice, but it was hard to tell. Perhaps the reason she had come to

school for the first time in a week was so that she could make contact with me like this in a public setting.

I answered her right away, without turning back to see the look on her face. "If necessary, I can make time," I replied, trying to give her the impression that I already had plans. I wanted to find out what she was after.

"Okay, then yeah, make time. Is that okay?" Even though there wasn't a sense of forcefulness in her voice, there wasn't any sign of hesitation either. "I already talked to Horikita-san too. I'll be waiting for you at the café in Keyaki Mall."

And with that, Haruka left the classroom. Immediately afterward, Akito came over, just like Haruka did earlier.

"Did she come back to school just to talk to me?" I asked.

"I'm not sure... This is the first time I've heard about her wanting to talk to you. I don't know what she wants to talk about," Akito said. "Considering the circumstances though, I don't think I can take your side in this."

He was apologizing to me sincerely, but honestly, I needed him to be on Haruka's side here.

"That's fine," I answered.

After wrapping up that conversation that was brief enough not to arouse any suspicions, Akito and then Keisei left the classroom as well. From the looks of things, the Ayanokouji Group members were all gathering together, and they invited Horikita as well. It was a certainty, of course, that this conversation was going to be about the one who had been expelled—Airi. After seeing that Haruka, Akito, and Keisei were gone, Horikita came over to me.

"I tried to ask if it would be all right if only I was there, but she said that it was absolutely something you needed to hear too," she told me.

Horikita had tried to be considerate of me and solve this problem on her own, but apparently that wasn't going to be possible. Horikita and I left the classroom and headed in the direction of the café where we agreed to meet them.

I figured I should check with Horikita about something that I was curious about first though, before we got thrust into a serious conversation.

"Looks like you succeeded in getting Kushida to come to school," I said. "I'm honestly impressed."

"Well, she's here at least," Horikita said. "But there are still numerous uncertainties. Things won't be the same as they used to be."

"Still, you probably can't ask for anything more right now."

Although Kushida's manner of speaking had changed dramatically, she was back, and her solution was the best thing possible under these circumstances for keeping a smooth relationship with the class moving forward. Horikita's advice had no doubt been a factor in her reaching that conclusion. And, fortunately, information leakage to other classes had been kept to a minimum. Even if word eventually did get out, it was possible that, by that point, enough time would have passed, and the issue would fade.

"How did you convince her, anyway?" I asked. "I can't imagine you were able to persuade her to come back with just a good suggestion or two."

Even if we were just talking about Kushida finally being back today, I was sure that there must have been various twists and turns along the way before things had gotten to this point. If anything, I was more interested in that part of it. However, there was a complicated look on Horikita's face, like she had mixed feelings.

"I did something childish and completely unbecoming of my age," she said. "I don't want to talk about it."

The fact she was avoiding getting into specifics suggested that it really was something she didn't want to discuss. Since it seemed unlikely that she'd give me an answer even if I pressed her on it deeply, I had no other choice but to give up.

"Still, considering who you were dealing with, you probably made the right choice," I said.

Horikita lightly stroked her cheek with her left hand, as though she were recalling what happened. "Anyway, it took a week, but we've finally got everyone back together, somehow," she said.

"That reminds me, it looks like the fighting amongst the girls has died down too," I added.

I had asked Yousuke to rely on Horikita, so she must have been involved in what happened there too.

"Hirata-kun took initiative with the matter of Shinohara-san and her friends. We all gathered at Keyaki Mall on Sunday," said Horikita.

"Meaning you were there too, Horikita?" I asked with a blank look on my face. I hadn't imagined something like that happening at all.

"Yes. As far as the bad-mouthing was concerned, they agreed to put it all behind them. Shinohara-san protested quite strongly for a while, but Ike-kun helped calm her down. That was a significant help."

Judging from the way Horikita phrased it, Ike had definitely played the part of Shinohara's boyfriend in the discussion.

"So many students are maturing without even realizing it," added Horikita.

"You don't sound so happy about that," I remarked.

"I am happy. It's just that I feel like I must look somewhat pathetic by comparison. It's precisely *because* they're maturing. I'm not sure whether I'm really growing at all myself... It makes me anxious," she said.

It was easy to evaluate others, but it was difficult to evaluate yourself. If you wanted to be lenient with yourself, you could be as soft as you wanted. Conversely, if you wanted to be strict, you could be as stern as you wanted too.

"I'm sure that a third party will eventually give you an answer, Horikita," I said.

"...Yes, you're right."

First, she was going to pour her efforts into rebuilding the class. The matter of her reputation would come after that, on its own.

"I also heard that you helped Wang-san when she was unreachable. Thank you," said Horikita.

"All I did was give her a little helpful advice. Even if I hadn't done anything, someone else would've rescued her sooner or later."

"Still, it was thanks to you that she got back on her feet so quickly. I was helped by so many people this time too. I feel like I've once again been reminded that I can't do everything on my own."

Horikita said that in a rather cheerful tone, when normally something like that would have made her feel depressed.

"Oh yeah, that reminds me," I said. "I wanted you to pass on a message to Student Council President Nagumo for me."

"Me? It feels like I'm always playing the part of the messenger. Well, all right, it's no problem. What do you want me to tell him?"

"Just tell him that I'm on board."

"On board'...?"

"That's all you'll have to say. He'll understand."

"Okay then. I'll go to the student council office later and tell him exactly what you told me just now."

I still hadn't decided whether I was actually going to participate in this upcoming Sports Festival or not, but since the deadline was already a week away, I figured I'd just have to say that I'd accept his offer for the time being. I was sure Nagumo wouldn't be satisfied unless he and I competed in some form or another.

"All that's left now is the matter of Hasebe-san," said Horikita. "To be honest, I can't really predict what she's going to talk to us about."

"Judging from the way she's been acting today, I wouldn't be surprised no matter what words come out of her mouth," I agreed.

"It'd probably be best for us not to be overly optimistic."

Mii-chan and Kushida had overcome their challenges and came back to school, but things were different with Haruka. It was highly likely that she'd become an obstacle in the future and stand in the way.

"While I was waiting to meet with Kushida-san, I also had the opportunity to get a sense of how Miyake-kun and Yukimura-kun were doing," Horikita added, "so I checked in with them a few times,"

I hadn't realized that while she had been paying attention to Shinohara and her friends, she was watching the Ayanokouji Group as well.

"Hasebe-san is the one who suffered the most as a result of the special exam," said Horikita. "I needed to follow up with her."

I noticed that the look on Horikita's face didn't lighten up as she walked beside me. It was probably because she hadn't achieved anything at all on that front.

"I met with her at the door, but she didn't say anything," she went on. "Miyake-kun told me to just leave her alone, so I decided to keep an eye on her for the week."

And that brought us to today, I supposed. I was sure that Haruka's arrival must have come as a surprise to Horikita.

"Still, in the end, Akito succeeded in persuading her to come to class," I said. "All's well that ends well."

"That would be nice, but...I don't think that's what's happening here," said Horikita.

With the two of us being summoned like this, it was normal to think that there was something else going on. It was unlikely that they'd arrange a meeting like this just to say that they were going to try their hardest and get along with everyone from here on out.

"I was the one who nominated Airi to be expelled back then and the one who pushed for it," I pointed out. "You can just say that you were going along with what I said."

"I can't do that. I'm equally responsible because I shared your opinion. No, actually, this is all because I went back on my promise. I have to accept responsibility for all of it."

Horikita seemed to have more presence of mind than she did back then, but I worried that she was being overly eager.

"Haruka is important, sure, but you also need to pay attention to the Sports Festival," I reminded her.

She had already spent an entire week working on fixing class problems. She couldn't afford to fall behind the other classes in the meantime, especially since she was starting to work on bringing the class together on the idea of getting to Class A.

"I agree," she said. "I have been thinking about how we're going to compete in the Sports Festival, of course. I think that I've got things figured out, to a certain extent at least."

Even though she had been dealing with the matter of Kushida and Shinohara and her friends, she apparently hadn't let that issue slip.

I thought I'd try asking Horikita what she was after. "All right then, let's hear it. What's the goal for the Sports Festival?"

"Is there any need to ask? We're shooting for first place. No, we definitely *will* take first place. We have to."

We were walking side by side, and I could see the look on Horikita's face from the side.

"Aiming high isn't a bad thing," I said. "We're not lacking in terms of capable students. So, have you come up with a strategy yet? Even though the Sports Festival involves battles between all grade levels, this is essentially going to be a competition for overall points within our same grade level. And Sakayanagi and Ryuuuen can come up with plans that you'd never think of."

"The rules state that if a student doesn't finish five events in the Sports Festival before it ends or they drop out, all of their points are forfeited," said Horikita. "Knowing Ryuuuen-kun, I

wouldn't be surprised if he purposefully injured one of our classmates while making it look like an accident, to try and force them out of the competition."

It wouldn't be a shock if Ryuuken made a cowardly move like that—exactly like what he did last year when he targeted Horikita. As for Sakayanagi, she would likely review all the participants for the competitions and guide her classmates toward the best possible placements.

"So, considering all of the possibilities, what are you planning to do?" I asked.

"Essentially, I'm planning a frontal assault. I'll have Sudou-kun and Onodera-san rack up points in competitions, while students like Kushida-san and I will earn points steadily as well. We just need to do what we need to do in order to win."

"If you could win just by doing that much, then there wouldn't be any trouble. However, there are just thirty-eight students in our class, which is a disadvantage for us."

Horikita nodded. From the looks of it, she had been expecting that response from me.

"Which is why I've decided to take just one risk," she said. "I'm getting ready for that right now."

"A risk?"

"I was wondering if you could accompany me for a bit after class tomorrow? I can get into the specifics then."

"Meaning you want me to help you?" I asked.

"No, I don't," she said. "You can just stay with me then and listen to what I'm going to say. And, afterward, I just want you to give me an objective answer of whether you think that it's worth the risk or not. That's all."

"That's really it?"

"I can't just keep taking advantage of you like last time," said Horikita.

Since she already had some idea about what she was going to do, she wasn't looking for counsel or advice from me. In that

case, I decided I'd just wait and look forward to whatever strategy Horikita came up with for the Sports Festival.

"All right. I'll listen to what you have to say tomorrow after class," I replied.

Eventually we arrived at the café where we found the three other members of the Ayanokouji Group already seated and waiting for us. They didn't seem to be chatting at all, and there were three untouched drinks on the table, just sitting there. As long as we were using the café as a place to meet up, we each needed to at least order one drink. After Horikita and I had each selected something to drink, not really caring about what we chose, we walked over to the table.

"Sit," Haruka urged us to take the two empty seats as soon as we arrived.

She started the conversation in a detached, matter-of-fact tone, without looking at either Horikita or me. "It seems like you tried to come talk to me a few times while I was resting, so I thought I'd call you here so I could ask you what you wanted to say."

It felt like she was addressing both of us, but Horikita was most definitely the main focus right now.

"What did you want to talk about?" asked Haruka.

"Well, that problem has already been solved, in a way," Horikita replied. "The issue at that time was that you were out of school for several days."

"I guess that means you were worried," Haruka said. "You were thinking that your reputation in class might have suffered."

"Well, sure, but that wasn't all I was worried about, of course," said Horikita. "I'm sure you had a good reason for taking a week off. Right?"

"I was sick. I told the school as much, so there shouldn't have been any problem, right? Miyacchi told me that there might be some kinda penalty for missing over a week though, so I returned to school today."

Haruka didn't show any emotion in her answer. She didn't say it out loud, but there was an implied, "*So, what's the problem?*"

"Sure. But being sick wasn't the reason you were absent," said Horikita.

"How can you say that for sure? Maybe I genuinely fell ill."

Horikita took a sip from her cup, not denying what Haruka had said. Whether Haruka's absence was due to her being sick was nothing more than a preliminary part of the problem. No matter what answer Horikita gave, it was unlikely that Haruka would be satisfied.

"It might seem doubtful to you, but it's true that I was sick," Haruka went on. "But I wasn't physically sick or injured. It was just...mentally, emotionally. I had a hard time getting up. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't go to school. So I just laid there."

Akito and Keisei appeared to just be listening calmly, but they weren't calm in the slightest. I could understand that they were suffering just like Haruka was, even though their pain wasn't as great as hers. That was why all they could do was stay silent and listen.

"Can you stop playing these stupid word games already and just tell me what you want to say?" said Horikita.

Instead of taking things slowly and modestly waiting for an answer, Horikita was deciding to take a heavy-handed approach. That kind of attitude could backfire, but Haruka was unfazed. I had the impression that Haruka was pushing her emotions deep down, keeping them locked up inside. I wondered if Horikita beside me realized the same thing, and if that was why she said something so excessive.

"Are you satisfied, now that you've gotten more Class Points from that special exam?" asked Haruka.

"I'm not satisfied, no. There's still a gap of over 500 points between us and Class A. And besides, the ideal situation would have been for us to reach Class A without losing anyone. That's

what I wanted, but... Well, there's no point in talking about that anymore, not at this point."

No one wanted others to be expelled. And yet we fought on, and we had nominated Airi for very compelling reasons. There wasn't anything more to it. We had already reached that conclusion.

"My best friend was sacrificed as a result of your selfish decision, Horikita-san. Are you aware of that?"

For the first time today, Haruka came out and said what she really wanted to say.

"Yes, I am," said Horikita.

Horikita had still been battling with her own feelings more than a week after the special exam had ended. You didn't have to ask her about that; you could tell that just from looking at her face every day. But still, that had nothing to do with Haruka. She wasn't going to forgive Horikita just because she was doing her best. And she wouldn't simply forgive Horikita if she produced favorable results either.

"Wow, you're *such* a great leader. You'll do *anything* to make sure our class wins," said Haruka.



"I'm still a ways off from being a great leader," said Horikita.

"You know I was being sarcastic, right?"

"Of course I do."

"Didn't you promise that you'd only go after the traitor? The one student that kept voting in favor the whole time?" asked Haruka.

"On that point, I think that my perspective was overly naïve," Horikita admitted. "But even so, I can't just act like that special exam never happened. All I can do is make the most of what I've learned for next time."

"Some mistakes cannot be forgiven," Haruka told her.

"I won't deny that. You're right."

"Do you really think that keeping Kyou-cha... I mean, that keeping Kushida-san in class was the correct decision?"

"It was because I decided that it was the correct decision that I moved to keep her in class. I was fully prepared for the students to antagonize me over it," Horikita replied. "I feel like I'm going to be having this conversation over and over."

"Yeah, I guess you will," snapped Haruka, her tone intensifying slightly after she saw that Horikita wasn't being apologetic or modest.

"I have no intention of making some half-hearted apology," Horikita went on. "No matter how many carefully constructed speeches I give, the fact remains that I changed my opinion about having her expelled, and I decided that we should keep her. You have every right to hold a grudge, and I know that one day, I might suffer painful payback for this. But I decided that Kushida-san can still be an asset to our class. And I am gradually becoming more and more convinced of that."

"But even if Kushida-san is so brilliant, there are other kids in the class who are worthless," insisted Haruka. "It didn't have to be Airi."

Haruka was arguing that someone else should have been cut, but Horikita had not come to that conclusion herself. Haruka

then continued speaking.

"I don't accept you. No matter how many people can accept you in the future, I never, ever will, Horikita-san."

Haruka was still keeping her emotions bottled up as much as she could but chose to show there was no sign of forgiving Horikita.

"Then I'll just have to do my best so that you can accept me," said Horikita.

"I literally just told you I never will," said Haruka.

"I am responsible for Sakura-san's expulsion. I won't deny that. I *cannot* deny that. But even so, what am I supposed to do? Do you want me to say that I'll drop out of school right now?"

That wouldn't bring back Airi, of course. The 100 points that we gained thanks to Airi sacrificing herself for the class's sake would be meaningless if Horikita did something like that.

"Or do you want me to get down on my knees and beg? Would that make you feel better?" asked Horikita.

It might have looked like Horikita was being aggressive and heavy-handed, but that wasn't true. Horikita was suffering. But even though she was, she was trying her hardest to put on a tough front and face Haruka. As I sat beside her, I could see the true meaning in Horikita's quivering gaze.

"Give me Airi back," said Haruka.

"I can't fulfill an impossible demand," said Horikita after a pause.

"That's all I want. I don't care about the class. I don't care about anything." Haruka grabbed a few stands of her hair and tugged as hard as she could, yanking them out. "You made the wrong decision back then."

"If you're so upset about it, then maybe you should have fought," said Horikita. Immediately after saying something that sounded close to a provocation, she kept talking without giving Haruka a chance to respond. "But that would've been pointless,

right? Even if you had fought, there was no way that you could've pushed back on what was happening."

"You're right," agreed Haruka. "I don't think I could've done anything either. Kiyopon, you took advantage of Airi's feelings and mercilessly pushed her into a corner. A normal person absolutely never would've been able to do something like that."

Haruka addressed me for the first time since this conversation started and was looking at me with contempt. However, it seemed she had no intention of actually discussing it with me because she turned her attention back to Horikita right away.

"Do you really think that Kushida-san is going to work for the class from now on?" she asked her. "She's probably just going to betray you."

"If and when Kushida-san drags the class down, then yes, I'd regret my decision."

There was truly no guarantee that Kushida would necessarily be useful to the class. And if Horikita made a mistake in the way she guided the class forward, there could come a day where she regretted the choice of having Airi expelled.

"But even so, if I were to go back in time to that moment with what I know now, I'm sure that I would essentially do the same thing," Horikita went on, reiterating definitively that she would not change her conclusion. "I would still decide to save Kushida-san and expel Sakura-san. The only thing I'd do differently is that I wouldn't have made that careless promise. That's it."

"Why? Why Airi...?" muttered Haruka.

I was sure that Horikita would have answered the question even if I stayed silent, but I decided to speak up and offer my own thoughts.

"It's an issue of perspective," I said. "That exam provided a strong stimulus for the students who were at the bottom of the rankings in OAA. If those students continue to hover near the bottom, then it's possible they could be expelled next. I think that

the fact that they're now more acutely aware of the danger is a positive thing."

That was why I had taken on the role of naming Airi.

"That sounds just like how Ryuuen's class works," snapped Haruka. "So what, if someone's not good enough, they get cut?"

"That's right," I replied. "I don't know what policy that Ryuuen has in place right now, but it's a fact that it's something like a reign of terror. So far, our class's policies have been vague and far too lax."

"That kind of reminds me of when we first started at this school," Haruka said. "No one could come together on anything, and everyone was just selfishly doing their own thing."

If someone asked if the situation in our class now and the situation back then were similar, then sure, you could say that. But even though the situations *looked* the same, they weren't actually.

"But it's different now," I told her. "It's inevitable that you'd want to prevent damage that doesn't need to be done. In this case, we just minimized the damage that *had* to happen."

"But—!"

That was the first time that Haruka raised her voice in this conversation.

"Horikita came to the conclusion she did because she sensed that Kushida would bring much, much more to the class than Airi would if Horikita made Kushida into an ally," I continued. "And it was because I could see that possible future as well that I decided to respect Horikita's opinion and offer her my help."

Generally speaking, there were no certain futures. You could only imagine and then grasp a future that you could see. People aren't all-powerful.

"Even though Airi's gone, when I look around, it's like the class has gone back to its usual routine," said Haruka.

"I understand your frustration, but I wonder... Did you feel the same way when Yamauchi-kun was expelled?" asked Horikita.

"He brought that on himself. This was different," said Haruka.

"It's the same thing," Horikita said. "You're just angry that it's someone you know who was lost this time."

"And what's wrong with that?" asked Haruka.

There was no clear goal to this discussion. Strictly speaking, there was no other solution to be found here other than getting Haruka to back down.

"I won't accept a reality like that," Haruka insisted. "I can't."

If Haruka didn't back down, then that would mean there was a big problem ahead of us.

"It's true that Kushida-san might have been a threat before," Haruka continued. "Sure, she's reformed now, at least on the surface. And she might be contributing to the class from here on out. But do you seriously think I'd accept that and cooperate with you?"

"I suppose you have a point. While you were out for the week, I had a feeling that your issue was going to be more long-term than anyone else's," said Horikita.

While Kushida needed to be dealt with immediately, Horikita knew that Haruka was prepared to fight a long, drawn-out battle. Since Haruka had lost her friend Airi in the exam, she had nothing to fear now.

"But even so, you came back to school," Horikita added. "If you just wanted to talk to us, you could have done that while remaining absent. Right?"

Horikita was feeling hopeful. If, somehow, Haruka was holding onto that same hope herself and that was why she returned to school, it would have been a development to be thankful for.

However, reality was not so sweet.

"I only came because I haven't found the answer yet," said Haruka.

"What do you mean?" Horikita asked.

"I came to school to look for an answer that I couldn't find while I was shut away in my room."

When Akito heard those words, he cast his gaze downward.

"I'm looking for an answer as to how I can get revenge on you, Horikita-san. And you too, Kiyopon," said Haruka.

Those were the coldest words that she had said to us during this conversation. The very nature of the words that left her somewhat dry lips were different from a simple threat or bluff.

"...You're serious, aren't you?" said Horikita. She had also realized the weight of what Haruka said.

"I just wanted to tell you that today," Haruka said. "I will absolutely make you regret expelling Airi."

Haruka then stood up and left, leaving her drink completely untouched. Akito followed Haruka, looking more like he was chasing after her.

Horikita wasn't the only one who watched them go in exasperation—Keisei did too.

"Personally, I don't think you or Haruka are wrong," he told us. "I know that's probably an overly diplomatic thing to say, but it's how I really feel. After all, in the end, the idea that 'as long as you save yourself, that's all that matters,' is at the root of all of this."

Though Keisei seemed like he was ashamed of himself, he told us what he thought without trying to hide it.

"Everyone feels that way," said Horikita. "It's not strange to want to save yourself."

"Which is exactly why I can't understand how Haruka feels right now," Keisei replied. "But I guess that's why I don't think I have any right to tell her to stop either. Even if it means causing trouble for the class."

Keisei weakly pressed his fist against the table and then got up from his seat.

"Our friend group has already been broken in half, more or less. But even so, I'm going to be useful to the class in my own way. I can't contribute to the Sports Festival, so I'm going to study even harder to compensate so I can contribute to the class that

way. But if I don't...the possibility I could get expelled won't be zero."

Even though Keisei excelled in academics, he lagged behind in athletics and in societal contributions. It was also clear that he had a particularly strong disadvantage when it came to the number of friends he kept.

Chapter 5: An Arrangement

I WAS IN THE KARAOKE PLACE inside Keyaki Mall, having come here to listen to what Horikita had mentioned to me yesterday. This was one of the best places to make sure that you had a private space aside from a dorm room. When I had set foot inside one of the rooms, I noticed that there wasn't anyone inside except for Horikita and me.

"If we're just going to talk, then it wasn't really necessary to come all the way to this karaoke place, was it?" I asked.

Considering the fact that Horikita and I had visited each other's rooms in the past, it shouldn't have been a problem having this conversation in either one of those places. The fact that she had chosen to meet here meant that someone else would be coming. I decided not to press that matter too deeply and instead let Horikita take the lead.

"We have a little bit of time before we're scheduled to begin... Want to sing something?" she asked. She picked up the microphone that had been lying on the table and held it out to me.

"No thanks, I'll pass," I said. "Why don't you sing, Horikita? If you do, I'll clap along and stuff."

"Absolutely not," she replied.

An immediate rejection. Did that mean she recommended someone else to do something that she hated to do...?

"It's because I'm going to study," she explained, silently pulling her notebook out of her bag.

With that, she began to review her notes. Tablets and other devices were provided in many of our classes at school, but when one was engaged in independent study, it was probably easier to learn by looking at your books and notes directly.

Since no one was singing, the room was rather quiet. Despite how weird this bizarre arrangement felt, I decided to just sit

quietly on the sofa and let time go by.

Before long, our meeting time had passed, and it was now 5:10 p.m.

Horikita had been checking the time on her phone every few minutes since before the start of the hour. She looked up and let out a sigh.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It seems like this might be a longer ordeal than I expected."

I didn't ask who we were going to be meeting with, but I could safely assume now that whoever it was, they were late now because the meeting time was supposed to be five o'clock. The fact that the other party hadn't contacted Horikita suggested that there might have been some unavoidable circumstances, or perhaps that this person was a bit fast and loose—or it was possible that this person was *intentionally* late. As we waited another fifteen minutes or so, I went down a mental list of various students it could be and dismissed them in my mind one by one.

At last someone outside the room slowly opened the door that hadn't budged an inch all this time. The person I saw on the other side of it was...not someone I had expected—Katsuragi Kouhei from Class 2-D. From what I had seen, I had taken him to be someone that was pretty particular about time, so this was a shock.

"I apologize for being late," he said.

"It's all right, don't worry about it," Horikita told him. "I'm sure you must have had your own share of struggles to deal with, right, Katsuragi-kun?"

"...More or less, yes," he muttered.

Then, Katsuragi urged a person who was looming behind him to enter the room as well, and that second person came into view.

"Y'know, Suzune, it's fine if you wanna go on a date with me, but there's a bunch of extra people here," he said.

Katsuragi, a former leader of Class A, was with the man who had pulled him from his old class: Ryuuen Kakeru.

"They're here because it would have been difficult to have a constructive conversation if you and I were to meet alone," Horikita pointed out.

Despite the wry smile on Ryuuuen's face, he didn't let his guard down in his sharp observations of Horikita. Now that the matter of Kushida had been settled and several distractions had been cleared away, Horikita had regained her usual composure. And since Horikita and Ryuuuen had shared little in the way of direct interactions since we entered our second year of school, it wouldn't have been surprising if Ryuuuen had sensed some change within Horikita at this point.

"I wonder, were you late on purpose to try and rattle me? Perhaps to get an edge over me?" said Horikita.

"Who can say?" replied Ryuuuen.

Before they could come together and join forces, the two started feeling each other out, each trying to make a show of force and be hostile to the other. It was probably safe to assume that even Ryuuuen and Katsuragi didn't know the exact reason why they had been called here.

"You said you had something you wanted to talk to us about... So, come on. Let's hear the details," Ryuuuen said.

"Could you sit down?" Horikita asked. "If this was something that could be wrapped up in one or two minutes, I wouldn't have gone through the trouble of asking you to come here."

Ryuuuen took a glance over at me and then sat down defiantly on the sofa. He proceeded to grab the tablet that was plugged into the wall charger and entered his order. His hands moved in such a way that showed this was a familiar process for him. He then roughly chuckled the tablet at the table.

Seeing that, Horikita reached over and picked it up. "Katsuragi-kun, would you care for anything?" she asked.

"I'll have an oolong tea," he replied.

After Horikita entered Katsuragi's order, she carefully returned the tablet to its original position on the charger.

"The reason I've called you here is to talk to you about—"

Horikita immediately tried to launch into the discussion, but Ryuuuen motioned for her to stop with a wave of his hand, like he was trying to take the wind out of her sails.

"Before that, there's somethin' I wanted to ask. How'd it feel to scrape off that dead weight in your class and get some Class Points for it? Felt pretty damn good, I bet."

Ryuuuen calmly and matter-of-factly asked Horikita something that, for her, might have been damaging. It was probably also a way for him to try and gain the upper hand in a situation where he didn't know what we were going to talk about yet. It was a given that Ryuuuen had used his allies to get that information for him. He was making this move based on the assumption that our internal affairs were still left unresolved.

Horikita, sitting beside me, wasn't fazed. "It's not as if problems haven't sprung up as a result, of course," she said. "But, unfortunately for you, things won't turn out the way you're hoping. Most of the major problems have already been resolved."

That was a lie, because at the very least, the problem of Haruka hadn't been dealt with. It was unclear just when that bomb would go off.

"Wow, you're sure spewing those lies pretty confidently, huh?" Ryuuuen had also determined that what Horikita said was untrue, which was why he made such a leading statement.

Horikita didn't care. "You can go ahead and think that I'm lying. I don't care. Besides, you're not the sort of person who would simply believe anything I said in the first place anyway. Isn't that right?"

"Who knows? Maybe I actually trust you more than you think. Ever think about that?"

"Even if you meant that seriously, no, even if you're joking, it's not funny either way."

Horikita sidestepped his provocations. Katsuragi stared at her as though he were analyzing her, and slowly crossed his arms.

"And what about you?" she asked. "I thought for sure that you would've expelled someone."

"Aren't you worried that you'd lose comrades?" Katsuragi replied. "You're the only one who made the wrong choice."

Three out of the four classes had opted to protect their classmates. Katsuragi was trying to give Horikita the impression that she was the only one to have chosen unjustly, who'd made a mistake.

"It's unfortunate that we were the only ones who could make the correct choice," said Horikita. "You didn't even take one step forward in the race toward Class A."

"That's enough on that subject for the time being," said Katsuragi, bringing that part of the conversation to a close.

As he did so, there was a soft knock on the door. One of the staff members had arrived, delivering the oolong tea that Katsuragi ordered along with an orange juice. The juice was placed in front of Ryuuen, but it really didn't seem like the kind of thing he'd order.

Horikita and Katsuragi both unintentionally found themselves staring at the bizarre pairing of Ryuuen and an orange juice. Incidentally, I couldn't help but stare too. Ryuuen and orange juice? That just didn't seem to fit.

While everyone was wondering what was going on, Katsuragi spoke up.

"Well, now that we have our drinks, let's get down to business. What is the purpose of this meeting?" asked Katsuragi, urging Horikita to speak.

Horikita nodded, and as she looked between Ryuuen and Katsuragi once again, she started to speak.

"I'm proposing a cooperative partnership for the upcoming Sports Festival in order to defeat Sakayanagi-san's class," she said.

Katsuragi's shoulders twitched slightly, indicating that he was surprised. Immediately afterward, he returned to his usual calm demeanor, and after a pause, he asked her a question in return.

"What do you mean exactly, by cooperative partnership?"

"Cooperation" could imply a wide variety of things, and the exact degree of cooperation required could vary greatly depending on how each person interpreted it. It made sense that Katsuragi would want to hear more details, but at the same time, he wasn't going to dismiss the proposal immediately.

Ryuuuen, on the other hand, looked unsurprised and unimpressed. He simply watched quietly with a smug smirk on his face.

"In the upcoming Sports Festival, there's both competition between the grade levels and competition within each grade level," Horikita said. "I wish to make the most of a system wherein we can win points and share them equally if we win team-based competitions, where multiple students are involved."

"Why *our* class, though?" asked Katsuragi. "Would you mind telling me the reason?"

The leader of that class, Ryuuuen, didn't interject, not even once. He simply listened.

"First of all, it goes without saying that teaming up with Class A is out of the question. Helping that class earn points while we're trying to catch up to them would be completely backward. Therefore, that leaves us with two choices: either Ichinose-san's class, or your class. According to my analysis, while Ichinose-san *is* the most trustworthy of anyone, I'd be hard-pressed to say that she has many gifted athletes in her class."

"So you're saying that you chose us by process of elimination?" replied Katsuragi.

"If I made this decision simply by process of elimination, I wouldn't have chosen to team up with anyone in the first place, Katsuragi-kun," said Horikita. "The only class that I trust even less than Sakayanagi-san's class is the one that Ryuuuen-kun, your leader, is in charge of."

It was certainly true that Ryuuuen wasn't an easy person to team up with. Katsuragi nodded deeply, in a show of sympathy.

"You're right about that," he said. "Even I think so, and I've become one of his classmates. There's no one as dangerous as

Ryuuuen when it comes to having someone watching your back. In that case, I have to ask why you are even proposing a cooperating partnership, and going so far as to shoulder such a big risk for the sake of it?"

"To win, of course. We can't arrive at the top if we don't stop Class A's unchallenged rise in the rankings."

"However, what would be the point if Ryuuuen ends up betraying your expectations in the end?" Katsuragi pushed. "He is a man who will do whatever he feels is necessary. That's just what he is like. Having experienced it first-hand, I understand it all too well myself. I cannot recommend you do this."

Katsuragi's opinion of his class's leader was so scathing that it was hard to imagine that he was the chief strategist on Ryuuuen's side. He was warning Horikita of the danger here: if she entered this partnership carelessly, she could forget about rising to the top. She could instead be swallowed up by Ryuuuen's class.

"I actually had no intention of immediately getting down to business in today's discussion, you know," said Horikita. "I hadn't talked with Ryuuuen-kun in quite some time, and I can't trust someone who would be late without a care in the world. However, *you* apologized for being late, Katsuragi-kun. When that happened, I changed my mind. At the very least, I can trust you."

"That's quite simpleminded. Do you not think my behavior was just another one of Ryuuuen's ploys?" said Katsuragi.

"If I can't figure out whether I can trust someone or not, then I'll simply be swallowed up sooner or later," said Horikita.

Her trust was likely a bet on Horikita's part. If you placed Ryuuuen and Katsuragi side by side, Katsuragi would appear to be a good, sensible person by comparison. However, if Horikita showed that she was prepared for what might come, then even Katsuragi would have no choice but to believe her.

"You're a little different from how you were before, Horikita. You seem to be maturing as well." Katsuragi sensed the change in Horikita and interpreted it as growth. He once again demonstrated a willingness to sit down and engage in a dialogue. "I understand

what you're saying. I will now offer you my own personal perspective, from where I'm sitting."

Katsuragi made a point of saying "personal" there, which meant it was safe to assume that Ryuuen's intentions and thoughts were not being taken into account. At least, I supposed that was what Katsuragi was indicating to us.

"I too envisioned a plan wherein your class and ours joined forces to defeat Class A," he said.

"You did too...?" said Horikita.

"That's right. Your class has talented individuals, such as Sudou and Kouenji, whose abilities go well beyond their grade level. Out of the four classes in our grade, yours rests at the top in terms of physical ability and the available players. We would have no need to worry about being dragged down if we partnered with you. You're not unconditionally trustworthy, but the fact that you're not the sort of class that would casually betray us means that you're not a bad choice."

While Katsuragi was speaking, Ryuuen turned to look at me but remained silent. Up until now, there hadn't been anyone else in Ryuuen's class who could handle negotiations, so Ryuuen had always taken the initiative in these sorts of talks. However, with the addition of Katsuragi to the class, the need for Ryuuen to step in had diminished and he now had the option of being able to wait and see how things went. One could say that this was an extremely significant positive for him.

It was unsettling, not knowing what Ryuuen was thinking—not knowing what he was going to propose, or when he'd do it. And while it was easier to talk with Katsuragi, Horikita was probably starting to become aware of that scary side of it too. Even so, it was something that couldn't be avoided if discussions with that class were going to be happening on a regular basis for the next year and a half.

"In reality, however, I would say that the chances of Ryuuen accepting or rejecting your proposal are about fifty-fifty," said Katsuragi.

It had already been more than a week since we had heard the details for the Sports Festival. That meant that if Katsuragi and Ryuuen's class had really been thinking of cooperating with someone, Horikita might have already heard talk about it. In other words, in Katsuragi's mind, their priority was not joining forces, but rather was something else.

"If we were to enter into a cooperative partnership with someone else, then we would naturally secure first and second places between our classes," he continued. "In that case, it inevitably would be the overall strengths of our respective classes that would determine the winner. If we were to look at simple probabilities, we would have to accept and be content with the possibility that it'd likely be your class that takes first, Horikita, and that ours would take second."

By working together, Horikita and Ryuuen's classes would get a jump on Sakayanagi's class and Ichinose's class, and effectively create a situation where it would just be Horikita's class versus Ryuuen's class for the top spot. That was probably the reason why Katsuragi said there was a fifty-fifty chance of Ryuuen accepting her proposal. Even though Katsuragi was entertaining the conversation here, it wasn't like he was showing that he'd immediately agree to a cooperative partnership. Negotiations with Ryuuen would not begin until the hurdle in front of us was crossed...

What is Horikita going to do in this situation? I couldn't help but wonder.

"In other words, you're saying that you see our class as a threat," said Horikita.

"Of course we do. The situation now is very different than it was a year ago. Unlike before, when you were ridiculed as a collection of defectives, you're now ranked as Class B. And you achieved that after dropping down to zero Class Points, no less. More recently, Kouenji single-handedly achieved victory in the Uninhabited Island Special Exam, and you made the difficult choice of abandoning a classmate in exchange for 100 points in the Unanimous Special Exam. There is no doubt that your class is formidable."

"Even though those accomplishments aren't mine, it certainly doesn't feel bad being praised like that," Horikita admitted. "At any rate, if we don't join forces and instead try to tackle the Sports Festival on our own, we could create a worst-case scenario where Sakayanagi-san's class takes first place. The important thing here is defeating Sakayanagi-san's class. Am I wrong?"

"You're right about that," Katsuragi agreed. "That is also true... Ryuuen, what do you think?"

Katsuragi then turned to Ryuuen, asking for his opinion for the first time in this conversation.

"If you're askin' me to lend you a hand, that means you're gonna give us something equally valuable in return, right?" Ryuuen asked.

"You seem to be misunderstanding something here," Horikita said. "While it's true that I'm the one approaching you with this proposal, that doesn't mean that you're in a position to come to a compromise with us. Instead, I would rather you understand that you're in a position where you can form a cooperative partnership with the class that is going to get first place."

"Don't make me laugh. I'm in a position where I can win *without* your help, but if you're gonna beg me for help, I guess I could lend a hand. And if you don't like it, we can leave. Got it?"

"Do you actually know the way back to your dorm? If you head out that door and turn left, you'll be able to head outside."

At Ryuuen's words, Horikita simply urged Ryuuen and Katsuragi to go ahead and leave, without even considering any kind of compromise. That kind of attitude was the essence of bargaining, but at the same time, Horikita was giving the impression that she wasn't betting everything on this strategy. Basically, she was telling him that negotiations would break down if he left the table now. The proposal to defeat Sakayanagi together would fall through. And if that happened, if Ryuuen later came forward and said he wanted to join forces again, their positions would be reversed.

"You've got some balls, bluffin' like that," said Ryuuen.

"What are you talking about?" Horikita replied. "Just as Katsuragi-kun said himself, we have considerable talent on our side for the Sports Festival. Do you honestly think that you can outscore the likes of Sudou-kun and Kouenji-kun if we go head-to-head?"

"If we were goin' at it head-to-head in a fair fight, then sure, you might be right. But there are a lotta ways we can go about this. You didn't forget what happened last year, did ya?"

Ryuuuen's statement clearly implied exactly what we feared. Him pulling a dirty trick where he made an attack look like an accident.

"This year, we're apparently going to be hosting outside guests," Horikita pointed out. "Also, considering the rules of *this* Sports Festival, it sounds like we're going to be monitored very closely. We'd have to see how far you can get by using such cowardly tricks, won't we?"

"There's always plenty of blind spots," Ryuuuen said. "Don't go thinkin' I'm only talking about what happens during the actual competitions."

By that, Ryuuuen was referring to unsupervised places like locker rooms and restrooms, far away from prying eyes.

"I see you're the same as ever. That's quite a threatening line of thinking you have, but... Well, I've heard enough." Horikita slammed her notebook shut with a *plunk*. She didn't sound particularly disappointed over how the meeting had gone. "Ayanokouji-kun, thank you for coming with me today. Apparently, I didn't even need to ask you for your judgment in this case. It's far too risky, so I think that we should end things here."

"If you're all right with that, there's no problem on my end," I replied.

"Well, all right, then," said Horikita, moving to put her notebook away.

Ryuuuen didn't respond, and simply watched her. Meanwhile, Katsuragi made a move.

"Ryuuken, it seems that Horikita has changed even more than we had imagined." After calmly analyzing the situation, he turned his gaze toward Horikita once more. "If we don't bring our best to the negotiating table, we'll be the ones who get left behind."

"You didn't bring this discussion up with me because you saw the downsides of teaming up, didn't you?" Ryuuken asked Katsuragi.

"I didn't suggest that we propose teaming up, no. However, if the suggestion comes from Horikita, that changes things. Besides, I have a feeling that her class may exceed our expectations."

From what they were saying, their evaluation of Horikita's class had gone up slightly thanks to the updated data they'd received. In other words, they had reevaluated Horikita's class as one that was worthy of cooperation.

"You're just puttin' up a front," scoffed Ryuuken. "From what I can see, this is all for show. It's natural to try and make things work out in your favor when you've got the edge. And yeah, you're talkin' a better game than before, but the only reason it's workin' for you is 'cause you've got Ayanokouji there next to you."

The full glass of orange juice was still sitting in front of him. In a flash, Ryuuken picked it up and tried to toss its contents all over me. I immediately shifted to avoid getting splashed and evaded the wave of juice. A fragrant, yellow-tinted stain appeared in the spot where I had been sitting.

"Come on now. I'm sure you've noticed how freakin' *weird* this dude is, right? Could you have dodged that?"

"I...probably couldn't have, no," said Horikita.

"Exactly," said Ryuuken. "A normal person would've gotten soaked before they could even react. A normal person couldn't avoid it at all. But *this guy* got outta the way with that blank look on his face like it was no big deal."

"It might be true that he has incredible reflexes, sure...but what does that have to do with the current discussion?" Horikita asked.

"Don't you get it? Lemme put it this way. Ayanokouji is your secret lethal weapon, Suzune. Of course you can talk so big with us right now when you're showin' off the heat you're packin'."

"And you deliberately ordered orange juice just to test that theory? ...Give me a break," said Horikita.

I thought it was odd of him to do something like that, but then again, I supposed he always was the sort of person who did outrageous things. I had made the right choice to pay attention to the fact that he ordered something that didn't seem like him. I kept wondering when he'd actually take a drink too.

"Why did you avoid it?" Horikita asked me. "If you let yourself get splashed with the juice, we could have stopped him from making a comeback like that before he even started."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "I obviously didn't want to get splashed with juice. That's just a given."

Orange juice had a strong smell, it would've made me all sticky, and it wouldn't come off easily. Letting myself get splashed with it was too much of a bother for me to deal with unconditionally. Now, if it were oolong tea, then I might've allowed it. Orange juice was one of the best possible drinks to use if you were going to harass someone by splashing them with it.

"If you wanna make this a fair negotiation, get Ayanokouji outta here. Then we can talk," said Ryuuen.

He was offering to continue negotiations on the condition that I was removed.

"That is just like you," said Horikita. "But I refuse. He is my classmate, he has the right to be present, and I have the right to ask him to be here with me. I don't see what's wrong with using the weapons one has at their disposal while negotiating."

Horikita was really acting tough here. More importantly though, she was coming up with ideas that she hadn't before now. Another thought I had was that she was getting additional information about Ryuuen and me without me realizing it. It was unclear exactly how much Horikita knew, but it wouldn't be surprising if she happened to hear about the incident on the

rooftop with Kei. Horikita had told me from the beginning that it wasn't necessary for me to help and that I simply had to be present. While she kept her promise, she was still using me. Even after realizing that, I couldn't complain either.

"I am offering for my class, one that is in a superior position to yours, to enter into a cooperative partnership with yours," she continued. "If that doesn't satisfy you, then you can just pretend this conversation never happened. I won't care."

There was absolutely no way that Ryuuen would cooperate with Sakayanagi. And supposing even if, hypothetically, he asked Ichinose to team up, it was unclear exactly how many useful players he'd acquire. If Ryuuen made the wrong choice here, it would inevitably have an impact on his future. And even though chances of it happening were low, it was also possible that a Horikita-Sakayanagi alliance could be formed instead.

It wouldn't be bad for Horikita if her class took first and Sakayanagi's class took second in a situation like that. However, if that was allowed to happen, then it would make it that more difficult for Ryuuen to catch up with Sakayanagi.

"I am willing to join forces with your class, but it depends on if we can talk it out," Horikita said. "Now, may I ask you what your answer is? Will you accept my offer? Or not?"

Katsuragi couldn't answer that question—it had to be the leader, Ryuuen. After several seconds of silence, he offered his decision.

"All right. I accept this proposal of yours."

However, Ryuuen didn't stop there. He continued, "But I got a condition to add. Since this is gonna be a cooperative partnership, it's gotta be more stable. Fairer. If either my class or yours gets first place while the other places second, then that means there's gonna be a difference of 100 Class Points between us. To make up for that difference, whoever gets first place will pay out Private Points to the other each month until just before graduation, on March 1st. Add that to the agreement."

He wanted to do the same thing he had tried before with Katsuragi. Ryuuen had made an agreement with him in last year's

Uninhabited Island Special Exam where if one side earned more Class Points, then that difference would be made up with Private Points. Ryuuuen himself surely must have been aware that he was in a disadvantageous position, but he was still trying to push for a little something extra on top.

Horikita, however, had anticipated this as well.

"It's certainly true that your condition by itself is fair," she said. "But I refuse. The matter of who will take first and who will take second is a serious contest. We will only settle it through a fair fight."

If things were already fair without adding that condition, then there was no reason for Horikita to go ahead and accept it if she already determined that she had a high chance of winning.

"*Ku ku*. You're not gonna let me line my pockets that easily, huh. But in that case, this deal doesn't look so good for us, does it?"

"It'll be difficult to get Horikita to make any compromises," Katsuragi said. "I believe she's going to remain firm in her offer."

While Ryuuuen demonstrated no indication of formally signing any contracts, Katsuragi showed that he was still willing to be flexible.

"Not good enough," said Ryuuuen. "If you're askin' for my help, then you're gonna have to show me more sincerity."

"Sincerity?" Horikita repeated. "I think I should be the one asking *you* that, no? Say this strategy works well and we make sure that Sakayanagi-san's Class A comes in last place—they'll be penalized 150 points. There is already plenty for you to consider in this strategy where the two of us join forces. But you should know that we are taking a risk as well."

She then continued her rebuttal. "When it comes to whether or not I can trust your class, the clouds of doubt have been swirling around for a long time. If you focus your main players on team competitions, then it's inevitable that you'll neglect the individual competitions."

It was entirely possible that Ryuuen would instruct his people to betray Horikita and have them cut corners in the events, or even have them not show up for competitions that they promised to go to in the first place. Since all of the leaders, Horikita included, would have to attend their own competitions, it was doubtful she'd be able to monitor every single event taking place. And since cell phones and such couldn't be brought to the Sports Festival, it would be impossible to coordinate across distances.

"I'm trusting you, someone who isn't reputable at all," she concluded. "Taking on that risk alone is the maximum allowable concession that I'm offering you in this partnership. I will not budge, not one millimeter more."

I was sure that this hit home for Ryuuen as well, and he must have been aware how painfully true that was. No matter how appealing the players in his class were, the basic premise was that Ryuuen himself could not be trusted. Horikita was essentially telling him to accept that, and then to shut up and cooperate.

"She's made a good argument," Katsuragi put in. "I didn't trust your methods either. You just have to accept it."

"I never expected you to trust me, not from the very beginning." Ryuuen let the comment slide with a laugh, but even so, he must have been convinced by Horikita's argument. He relaxed his shoulders and asked her, "Could you really trust me though?"

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend," she replied. "I put my trust in the useful words of wisdom given by those who came before us."

It'd be difficult to show off what you could do if you were in an alliance filled with doubt. In some cases, people might worry more about being backstabbed by their allies than fighting their enemies.

"I can't approve or agree with everything you're sayin', but there's one thing I *can* say for sure," said Ryuuen. "Letting Sakayanagi's class stay in the lead is no good."

Both Katsuragi and Horikita nodded in agreement without hesitation. They could no longer tolerate Class A winning, no

matter the cost.

"Even though we got a direct showdown with 'em comin' up at the end of the school year, there's no way that's gonna be enough to make up for the gap in Class Points."

He apparently wanted to get within range of Class A before that happened. It seemed fair to assume he believed in that idea.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you've been listening to this discussion quietly, but I think it's about time you tell me your opinion," said Horikita.

I had to weigh Horikita's idea against the risks. She was asking me, objectively, if people would accept this strategy of hers or not.

"Cooperation built on mutual interest isn't a bad thing," I replied. "There will likely be sound objections, but everyone understands that our objective should be to beat Sakayanagi. Yousuke and Kei will back you up on that."

Horikita was once again feeling confident in her proposal, but Ryuuuen slammed on the brakes.

"I want to sign this contract, but not yet," he said.

"Not yet? Do you think you can get anything else from me?" said Horikita.

"Confirm one last thing. Was it *you*, Suzune, who came up with this proposal? Or was it Ayanokouji? You know, that guy over there watching this whole conversation with a blank look on his face. Which one?"

He was aggressively pressing her to say who had come up with the idea of cooperating with his class.

"Are you saying that if this offer isn't coming from Ayanokouji-kun that you won't accept it? There seems to be some kind of secret relationship between you and him that no one else knows about," said Horikita, her comment tinged with implications. "I've witnessed firsthand how enemies can come to recognize each other's abilities, and I feel like I'm out of place here."

"When did I say anythin' like that?" Ryuuen sounded irritated, glaring at Horikita as if to demand she hurry up and answer his question. "I'm just askin' you to tell me which one of you came up with this."

"I did," Horikita replied. "I just asked Ayanokouji-kun to accompany me today, that's all. I didn't even let him know anything about this proposal until just now."

She knew that it was possible Ryuuen might refuse her offer if he knew that she was the one who came up with it. But even so, she was resolved for what might come and answered honestly.

Ryuuen laughed. "I see. Well, I'm relieved to hear it. If that's the case, then sure, I accept your proposal."

Apparently, the fact that it was Horikita's plan was the deciding factor, and Ryuuen officially decided to cooperate.

"...Why?" she asked.

"Why? Who cares? Think about the reason why yourself," said Ryuuen, dodging the question. "Anyway, it'd be mutually beneficial to get a proper written contract done up, just in case. No, scratch that. It'd be even better for you, especially."

"I'll have one written up, of course," Horikita agreed. "I'll include Chabashira-sensei and Sakagami-sensei as well."

A contract that involved faculty. And it would naturally include a breach of contract clause as well. No matter how good Ryuuen might be, he wouldn't be able to try anything if he was bound by rules that couldn't be broken.

"All right, I'll leave the paperwork to you, Horikita," Ryuuen said. "That okay?"

"Yes. Actually, I was wondering if you might be willing to go over it a few times with me, Katsuragi-kun," said Horikita.

When Katsuragi looked to Ryuuen for confirmation, Ryuuen responded with a look that seemed to say, "*Do whatever you want.*"

Ryuuen's class was really lacking in trust, and Katsuragi's presence was very significant. He was smart, trustworthy, and he

was able to express his opinions to Ryuuen without an ounce of fear. The degree to which Ryuuen trusted him to handle things and Katsuragi's peerless ability to judge a situation by watching were both nothing short of brilliant. Bringing him over to the class had truly been worth the large sum Ryuuen had paid.

"All right," said Ryuuen. "Now that we've made this agreement official, let's take this Sports Festival for ourselves."

And so it was decided that Horikita's class and Ryuuen's class would team up for the Sports Festival. The goal was to work together, but naturally, the top priority was still to win as a class.

However, this wasn't the end of the discussion, and Katsuragi changed the subject.

"It's all well and good that we've reached an agreement, but there are other things we should bear in mind," he said. "It is quite possible that Sakayanagi and Ichinose will join forces as well. What do you intend to do about that?"

Two alliances going up against each other. That kind of development was certainly possible.

"It's no problem," said Ryuuen. "Even if Sakayanagi and Ichinose came together for the Sports Festival, we're still better. Besides, Sakayanagi would have to give up on even gettin' third place in that case. Think about it. Katsuragi, just like how you're so scared of ending up in second place by having us team up with Suzune, Ichinose would have the advantage over Sakayanagi if they teamed up too. With Totsuka expelled, and you transferrin' over to our class, Sakayanagi only has thirty-eight people in her class. And since Sakayanagi herself won't be doin' anything, that's thirty-seven people. Ichinose's got forty. A difference of three people is surprisingly huge."

In terms of what their classes offered when it came to physical ability, Ichinose and Sakayanagi's classes were about even. However, in that case, the three-person difference could be the determining winning factor between them.

"However, in Sakayanagi's case, she'll come up with a way to compensate for the lack of people," Katsuragi pointed out.

"Have you even *seen* the rules?" Ryuuен asked. "If someone can't participate in the Sports Festival, they have to wait in the dorms on standby. And since people can't use their phones, that means the brains of Class A'll be completely outta commission."

"Are you sure you understood the rules yourself?" Katsuragi retorted. "It's true that Sakayanagi can't move well, considering her physical condition. However, she can still formally participate in the Sports Festival and get a total of ten points because of the five points given at the start and five points for participation prizes. As long as she satisfies the minimum requirements, she could stay outside and give instructions."

"There's no way someone as prideful as Sakayanagi would ever let anyone see her struggle with anything," Ryuuен fired back.

Sakayanagi would not perform well, no matter what the competition was. There was no avoiding the fact she, and only she, would stand out.

"Don't just assume things will conveniently work out for you," Katsuragi argued. "Abstaining from a competition is a right that everyone has been given. If she officially registers for an event but abstains from the competition, she won't be humiliated."

"Wouldn't there need to be a good reason though?" said Ryuuен. "If she tries to register for an event while the school already knows about her physical condition, then the school would want some justification for abstaining. She'd have to keep runnin' the 100-meter dash with her cane when everyone else's already done. I can't imagine she'd make such a spectacle of herself."

"Yes, it's true that normally, with her personality, she wouldn't want to participate and do such a thing," Katsuragi conceded. "However, if she knew that we were teaming up, Sakayanagi would also consider the risk that she could lose. I'm just saying that we can't assume that this is a sure thing. I'm just going to come straight out and ask—what do you think the chances are that she won't participate? Give me a serious answer."

"I'd say 90 percent," said Ryuuен.

"So, you say 90 percent according to your entirely unfounded and baseless assessment. Well, I would say an even lower figure

would be more accurate. I would put it somewhere between 70 and 80 percent at best."

"Then be happy with those numbers," barked Ryuuen.

"I can't. If you want to claim that this is a certainty, then aim for 95 percent."

Ryuuen and Katsuragi were engaged in a back-and-forth war of words, ignoring Horikita and me.

"This is stupid," scoffed Ryuuen. "But fine, if you're tellin' me to make it even more of a sure thing, then all right, I have some ideas. I'll just harass the hell outta Sakayanagi constantly until the Sports Festival. I'll tell her again and again that if she does participate, I'll make sure my whole class is watchin' her. If I do that, then I'll get that number up to 95 percent."

He was suggesting that she would give in to threats against her personal dignity. However, both Horikita and Katsuragi rejected the idea.

"From an ethical standpoint, that is unacceptable," said Horikita.

"I agree. The school would not stand idly by and watch something like that happen either," commented Katsuragi.

"Then if Sakayanagi *does* participate, we'll just crush her," said Ryuuen.

"Don't forget that we've sunk to the bottom of the rankings, and precisely because doing so isn't that simple," argued Katsuragi.

If Sakayanagi were acting as a sort of commander for her class, it would definitely be impossible to predict what kind of things she'd come up with. Whether she participated or not would greatly affect whether we would find victory or defeat at the Sports Festival. If we could ensure that Sakayanagi would be absent, however, that would bring victory that much more within our grasp.

"Horikita, are you factoring in my contributions to the class's victory?" I asked.

"I generally don't even consider you, no," she said. "You're the only one who remains in a unique position."

"Well, that's convenient for me. Anyway, if the question of whether Sakayanagi will be absent or not is casting a shadow over this cooperative partnership, I might be able to help."

"What do you mean?" asked Katsuragi, showing interest. He had paused his conversation with Ryuuen and was now turned toward me.

"If you leave this to me, I'll make sure that Sakayanagi does not participate in the Sports Festival," I replied.

"Huh...?"

"Oh?"

Horikita was surprised while Ryuuen sounded intrigued. As for Katsuragi, he just kept listening, silently.

"However, in exchange for making sure Sakayanagi doesn't participate," I continued, "I don't want you to count on me earning even a single point at the Sports Festival. And that doesn't go just for you, Horikita. It applies to you as well, Ryuuen."

"I wasn't even countin' you anyway," said Ryuuen. "If you say you're gonna keep Sakayanagi sealed up tight, that just saves me a lot of trouble."

"I can't even imagine what sort of trick you'll be employing to pull this off, Ayanokouji," Katsuragi added, "but if Ryuuen and Horikita say that they trust you enough to leave the matter to you, then I don't have anything further to say on the matter. If Sakayanagi doesn't participate, it won't be difficult to ensure that Class A comes in last place."

"But can you really even pull that off?" asked Horikita.

"Yeah, I can. Honestly, there's a good chance that she'll be absent without me even having to do anything, but you can leave this to me," I assured her. "You know, listening to this conversation, I couldn't help thinking that there haven't been many opportunities for you and Ryuuen to get together and cooperate like this, right, Horikita? Actually, there's something else

I wanted to talk to you about, so would you all mind if I got into that with you now?"

I had been mulling over something a little different from what the three others were focused on during this discussion.

"What is it?" asked Horikita.

As I began to outline my idea, Horikita and Katsuragi exchanged looks, and Ryuuuen listened in silence. And at the exact moment I finished speaking, the ice in Katsuragi's glass partially melted and tumbled down, resulting in a *clink* sound.

"That's an interesting idea, but..." Horikita sounded perplexed, like she wasn't sure whether she could accept it. She looked over at Ryuuuen for his response.

"I mean, sure, it ain't impossible under the rules, but..." he said, trailing off.

"You don't like a proposal that comes from me?" I asked.

Even though we had already reached an agreement about the Sports Festival, since I was the one putting forward this idea, there was a chance he'd turn me down. That's what it sounded like from the way he phrased his answer.

"You're right. I don't. Hard pass," said Ryuuuen.

Ryuuuen might have rejected my offer, but Katsuragi chimed in with his opinion.

"Your personal feelings can wait, Ryuuuen. It's honestly not a bad suggestion. We may need to go over the rules again and confirm... Actually, no, this is Ayanokouji we're talking about. I suppose he's already made sure of everything."

"According to the rules, there's no problem," I confirmed. "We'll have an even better response if students from Ryuuuen's class cooperate too, not just our own. Isn't that right?"

"Yeah, I guess so," said Horikita. "You might be right about that..."

Horikita herself was well aware of the problems our class was facing right now. If we could procure backup from outside of our class, then we could ease her anxiety.

"Take the deal, Ryuu'en," said Katsuragi. "You should now be proceeding to prepare for a direct confrontation with Sakayanagi."

"Listen up, Ayanokouji," Ryuu'en snapped. "Once I crush Sakayanagi, you're next."

"If you're going to rise up in the ranks, I suppose you'll have to," I answered.

Perhaps what I said was the deciding factor as Ryuu'en decided to accept my proposal.

"Katsuragi, you start puttin' that together too," he added.

"I will," answered Katsuragi.

"It's just like we're making a siege net around Class A...isn't it?" said Horikita.

"However, priority number one is making sure that Sakayanagi doesn't participate in the Sports Festival," Katsuragi said. "Neither our cooperative partnership for the Sports Festival nor Ayanokouji's proposal can get moving without first taking care of that preliminary step."

"I understand," I replied. "Leave that to me."

I had an idea for containing Sakayanagi, and it was something that neither Ryuu'en, nor Katsuragi, nor even Horikita could do.

5.1

IT WAS JUST BEFORE seven o'clock at night, and three students from Class 2-A—Sakayanagi, Kamuro, and Hashimoto—were gathered at the café within Keyaki Mall.

"Can't say I'm surprised bein' called out of the blue like this," grumbled Hashimoto, "but what can I do for you today, Princess?"

"I wanted to talk to you about what's going to happen at the upcoming Sports Festival," Sakayanagi replied. "About what we should do."

"I thought you already worked out a plan?" asked Kamuro.

"The situation changes from moment to moment," said Sakayanagi. "And today, there has been yet another new development." She paused before continuing speaking. "Ryuuuen-kun's class has joined forces with Horikita-san's class."

Hashimoto's eyes shone when he heard the news. "Which one approached the other? Was it Ryuuuen?" he asked.

"That is unclear. However, in any case, I believe it's safe to say that the two of them are linked now."

"Hold on a minute," said Hashimoto. "I can't imagine something like that would happen so easily. I don't think Horikita would trust Ryuuuen either. He's not the sort of person you can work with."

"You know what they say: the enemy of my enemy is my friend, right?" Sakayanagi said. "We're firmly in the lead right now. Even if they do not trust each other, as long as they have the same goal, they can work well with one another."

It was easy to guess that both Kamuro and Hashimoto were troubled by the news of these two classes working with one another. Their expressions stiffened, as this development was by no means cause for celebration.

"If things stay as they are, we will be in trouble," said Sakayanagi.

"So, what, we're gonna lose on our own?" asked Hashimoto.

"We will lose," said Sakayanagi plainly, looking at Hashimoto. "If the other three classes were going to fight separately on their own, there would have been a chance for us to take any one of the rankings. But this connection has come from a rather unexpected source."

"I wouldn't work with Ryuuen if it was me," Kamuro said. "You never know when you'd get stabbed in the back."

"If anything, I would welcome that development," Sakayanagi mused. "If Ryuuen did something like that this time, it would be convenient for us. I would gladly welcome Ryuuen-kun's class taking first place and Horikita-san's class taking second place, as an easy-to-understand result of his backstabbing. However, it's a little more troubling for us if the results are the other way around."

Sakayanagi was more wary of Horikita's class than Ryuuen's. Hashimoto's smile faded when he heard what she said.

"They're definitely riding quite a bit of momentum right now," he said. "I thought for sure it would've been impossible for any class other than Ryuuen's to toss aside a nobody and take hold of those 100 points. Has Horikita been growin' up...? Or perhaps Ayanokouji was making moves from behind the scenes?"

Hashimoto emphasized Ayanokouji's name strongly and turned to Sakayanagi, as though he were trying to make sure of something. But there was no way that such an attempt to probe Sakayanagi would work, and she simply responded in an indifferent manner.

"It would seem that his reputation has improved by leaps and bounds lately. Why? Is something wrong?"

"No, not really... It's just, I think he's hiding what he's really capable of. That his abilities are beyond what OAA shows. Though, I guess it's not as if Ayanokouji is the only student like that."

Hashimoto quickly backed off the subject because he knew that if he and Sakayanagi were to try and sound each other out,

he'd stand little chance. He decided it wouldn't be a good idea to carelessly provoke her and draw attention to himself.

"So, what are you gonna do? You're tellin' us that we'll lose if we ignore this, but you're gonna be absent, aren't you?" said Kamuro. She was asking, in other words, if they were abandoning the competition.

Hashimoto was smiling before, but he found that point to be cause for concern and his expression hardened once again. It was only 150 points. Even if Class A came in last, they wouldn't take much damage. However, they weren't going to welcome the idea of losing at all, considering the steady lead that they had built up over all this time and always keeping ahead of the pack.

"There is only one answer," said Sakayanagi. She smiled and then continued, "I will take part in the Sports Festival as well. Even if they have joined forces, they've calculated that they'll win based on me not being there. Let's show them that hope is but an illusion."

"Are you serious?" asked Hashimoto. "Are you really gonna be all right?"

"It's nice that you're motivated and all, but...are you sure?" asked Kamuro.

Both of them were visibly shaken by Sakayanagi's announcement that she would participate.

"Are you worried that I'll be making a spectacle of myself?" she said. "I can deal with that easily, and as many times as I must."

"Well, yeah, I guess knowing you, you'd be able to handle it," conceded Kamuro. "If you say you're participating, then this discussion will be a whole lot shorter."

"Of course, I won't be improving our class's overall athletic performance," said Sakayanagi. "I can only pick up competitions that might otherwise be missed by others. I'm sure it will be a grueling fight for me to take first in those events, even if I do compete in them."

"Well, I think it's enough just being able to say that we're not going to come in dead last, at least," said Hashimoto.

"It won't be that difficult to make a crack in the glass relationship that exists between Horikita-san and Ryuuuen-kun," Sakayanagi told them. "While they're desperately trying to coordinate on the day of the Sports Festival, let's interrupt them and push back a little, shall we?"

Sakayanagi was showing absolute confidence, and Hashimoto and Kamuro trusted her. They had achieved incredible results time and time again, up until now.

"Well, that's a relief, I guess," said Hashimoto, but he looked puzzled. "Still, I've got no idea how you get this info so fast, Princess. You're not, like, walkin' around on your own, are you?"

Sakayanagi used Hashimoto and Kamuro to gather intel most of the time. However, on this occasion, she was giving them information they hadn't heard before.

"I have still been tasked with representing Class A, as I'm sure you're aware," she replied. "I'm becoming acquainted with more and more people, even some first-year students."

Sakayanagi didn't seem to be panicking at all. Instead, she smiled softly, as though she were enjoying the crisis.

5.2

OCTOBER WAS FINALLY HERE, and the Sports Festival was fast approaching. Today, I went to Keyaki Mall after class together with Kei to take her out on a date. I was still getting oppressive stares from the third-year students as usual, but Kei didn't seem bothered despite the fact she, too, was getting wrapped up in the situation. She'd said she was "already used to it," and it didn't seem like she was merely saying that for show either.

Anyway, she apparently wanted to visit several stores today, and we stopped by the electronics store first.

"What are you planning to buy?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, I don't really want anything, actually," said Kei. "Oh, well, I mean, it's not like I don't *want* anything I guess, but I didn't come here today for myself."

If it wasn't for her, I supposed that meant it was for someone else.

"It's your birthday soon, isn't it, Kiyotaka? I was thinking about making it a surprise, but then I thought it might be better to just get you something you wanted."

Huh. Come to think of it, my birthday was coming up soon.

"I thought we could look around together and see if there was anything you wanted, Kiyotaka," she said.

"I see," I replied.

I remembered that recently, she had been repeatedly asking me about things I liked and things I planned to buy. Considering how before she would just ask me random things without thinking about them too deeply, I guessed that meant she decided to come here, find what I wanted directly, and offer it to me as a gift.

"Can you afford to spend the Private Points, though?" I asked. I knew that Kei in particular didn't have a lot of money saved up.

"I know what you're trying to say, but hey, I can least swing *something* for your birthday," she insisted. "Don't be shy, tell me what you want."

Kei seemed to be willing to buy me anything, but that wouldn't do. That said, I'd be lying if I said I didn't need anything in this situation. And I could see in her eyes that she wouldn't be convinced if I told her I wanted something very cheap. Instead, I hoped I could choose something that'd be relatively easy on her wallet.

"I can tell what you're thinking right now, you know?" Kei stared intently at me, aggressively crossing her arms. "I'm going to buy something you want! Okay, Kiyotaka?"

"...All right," I replied.

This meant that at the very least, I couldn't simply let her buy something I didn't need in order to ease her burden. We walked along arm in arm, and Kei proceeded to press her cheek against me.

"Eh heh heh. I'm so happy," she sighed, squeezing my arm more tightly. "You know, I don't have any secrets I'm keeping from you, Kiyotaka. You know absolutely everything there is to know about me. I never thought I'd have someone more important to me than my mom and dad."

She was blushing, and she seemed to be truly happy. Her eyes narrowed in a squint as she smiled with her whole face.

"So, Kiyotaka, you can't keep anything secret from me either, okay?"

"Sure."

Secrets, huh. What was she referring to? My family? The White Room? What I was trying to do at school? Friendships? Romantic feelings? If she was talking about any one of those things, then I hadn't done anything *but* keep secrets. I hadn't told Kei the truth about anything.

"Ah—"

As Kei and I were wandering around the store, looking around this way and that, we happened to bump into Satou. She

seemed to be by herself. As soon as we ran into each other, her eyes focused on where my and Kei's arms were linked together.

"W-wow, you guys sure look lovey-dovey," she blurted out.
"W-well, I'll get outta your way then. See ya!"

"Ah, wai—h-hold on?!" sputtered Kei.

Kei tried to keep her from going, but Satou ran away as fast as her legs could carry her.

"Aw, jeez..." Kei put a hand to her forehead, looking defeated.

"You're still worried about Satou?" I asked.

"It's not like that, it's just... Well, it doesn't feel good, I guess..."

"In that case, we'll just have to refrain from going out arm-in-arm in public from here on out."

"I don't wanna stop," huffed Kei.

Even though she felt bad for her best friend, she apparently wasn't willing to compromise on this. As we walked through the rice cooker and kettle section, we bumped into Ishizaki and Albert.

"Oh? Hey, 'sup, Ayanokouji!" said Ishizaki, beaming.

In that same instant, I felt Kei gripping onto my arm a little more tightly than before.

"Oh, hey, you're on a date with Karuizawa, huh? And whoa, you guys're arm-in-arm, too... It's like you're one o' those guys with a real life..."

Ishizaki looked at me with envy, but my attention was more focused on Albert beside him. He was holding a large brand-name pot in his hands. It was a little strange to me that it didn't look that big, but maybe it was because Albert was so big himself.

"Oh, you're wonderin' about this thing?" said Ishizaki.
"Ryuu-en-san's birthday's on the twentieth, dude. We picked this out for 'im."

"Huh? The twentieth... He's got the same birthday?" asked Kei, surprised.

She looked up at me with alert eyes, seeming a little on edge.

"That's the first I've heard about it," I replied.

"Who's got the same birthday as Ryuuen-san?" asked Ishizaki.

When Ishizaki directed his gaze over in Kei's direction, she glared back at him and hid behind me a little.

"Come on, dude, tell me—"

In that instant, Albert lightly placed his hand on Ishizaki's shoulder, interrupting him. Ishizaki finally seemed to grasp the reason why Kei was so wary of him.

"...Oh! Ohhhh... That's it... Dude..." muttered Ishizaki sadly.

Even though Ishizaki had been acting on Ryuuen's orders, he still had been complicit in what happened, in calling Kei up onto the roof and engaging in what could be called bullying. It was natural that Kei wouldn't take kindly to someone like Ishizaki now. Perhaps Ishizaki was angry at himself for being so slow on the uptake. After clicking his tongue, he lightly smacked his own head with a clenched fist.

"Sorry... I mean, man, I shoulda said that to you before, and... About what happened to you on the roof, I, uh—"

"Don't talk about that here," hissed Kei.

Though Ishizaki tried to apologize, the fact was that he was still quite lacking in sensitivity. We were in the mall right now, and people we knew could show up at any moment. Kei probably wouldn't be too happy if someone tried to bring up what happened on the roof at a time like this. Just letting Ishizaki and Albert walk away would solve the problem for now, but as long as Kei and I were going to continue having a relationship, there'd be more than a few opportunities to run into Ishizaki like this.

"Why don't we change locations?" I asked.

Even in a place like Keyaki Mall where people were often coming and going, there was no shortage of blind spots. Kei looked unhappy but she didn't say anything. She simply walked

along with me, still arm-in-arm. Albert put the item he was holding back on the shelf and followed Ishizaki in similar fashion. They must have been willing to apologize precisely because they felt bad about what they had done.

When we neared the emergency exit, we were far enough away from the shops so students would be able to see us, but they wouldn't be able to hear us. If a familiar face appeared, we could stop the conversation and there wouldn't be a problem.

"I'm real sorry!" said Ishizaki. "I mean, for real, I went all this time without givin' ya an apology! I'm sorry!"

"...Whatever," huffed Kei. "I'm still annoyed even if you're saying you're sorry. If anything, it makes me feel even *more* irritated."

"Uh...?"

"You guys got the crap beaten out of you by Kiyotaka. You're only apologizing to me because you lost."

"W-well, I, uh..."

"If Kiyotaka hadn't saved me back there on the rooftop... Or if he lost against you and Ryuuen, you wouldn't be apologizing to me now. Am I wrong? Ugh, this is so annoying."

Kei certainly had a point that what they had done was terrible and troublesome. I was on speaking terms with Ishizaki and Albert now myself, but that all started because of the rooftop incident. It made sense that Kei was saying there were big "ifs" at play here.

"Look, I know, and like, I can't argue with you blaming me for what I did, but..." stammered Ishizaki.

"I don't really blame you," Kei corrected him. "It's natural that the strong be on top. I don't like being beneath people, so I've been trying to stay on top myself. I've acted all high and mighty to people below me too. I know how it goes."

Despite the differences in the degree of their actions, Kei and Ishizaki were essentially the same in character. Their value systems were basically, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

"Kei, I know what you're trying to say, but I've come to know a little more about Ishizaki now that I've come into contact with him myself," I cut in. "He's definitely had some positive growth since before."

"What do you mean, 'positive growth'?" she replied. "It doesn't look to me like he's changed at all."

"This is just how I feel, but I think that if Ryuuen tried to do to someone else what he did to you that time, I can't imagine Ishizaki would go along with it that easily," I answered.

"Oh really? It doesn't look to me like he can stand against Ryuuen, though."

She was right on the mark. Ishizaki audibly gulped. Unable to say anything back to that, he felt overwhelmed by regret and bitterness and slapped his own knee hard with his palm.

Kei sighed. "Enough already," she said. "You're friends with Kiyotaka now, right? I'm not going to forgive you, but I'm done blaming you for it."

"R-really?" said Ishizaki.

"I literally just said so. It's over and done with. Okay?"

"O-okay!" Ishizaki looked up, a happy expression on his face. He decided to pose his question to Kei again. "Hey, uh...um, yeah. So, uh, about the whole birthday thing earlier, who else has the same birthday?"

Though Kei still didn't trust him, she pointed to me with her index finger.

"Huh? Wait, for real? Ayanokouji, your birthday's October twentieth?!" Ishizaki seemed almost unbelievably shocked. "Whoa, dude! It's like, destiny or somethin', don'tcha think?!"

"Whaddaya mean, destiny?" Kei scoffed. "There are over four hundred people in our school. It's not weird that some people have the same birthday."

"But, I mean, jus' the fact Ayanokouji and Ryuuen-san do is, like, crazy, dude! Ain't it?"

He was overjoyed by a simple coincidence. Just as Kei had said, there was nothing strange about it, but for some reason, even Albert seemed a little happy about it too.

"Can we go back to the store now?" asked Kei, turning back to me.

"Oh! Hey, that reminds me! Hold on a sec!!!" Ishizaki belted those words out in a particularly loud voice, causing Kei to cover her ears, irritated. "I got a little proposition for ya. So, if you want, how about we celebrate both your birthdays together and all on the twentieth? Ryuuen-san and Ayanokouji's Double B-Day party! Dude, wouldn't that be the best thing ever?"

Well, no, it wouldn't. From the second I heard that suggestion pass his lips, I thought it was absolutely *not* the best thing ever... Honestly, even though I tried to imagine what that might be like, I couldn't picture it very well.

"If he apologizes to me, then I'm fine with it," said Kei.

"Huh?" sputtered Ishizaki.

"I mean if *he*, and by that I mean *Ryuuen*, bows down and apologizes to me, I'll agree to it."

Her words were nothing more than a pretense; Kei meant to refuse his offer.

Ishizaki's mouth hung open. Then, when he realized how difficult it would be to convince Ryuuen to do that, he clamped his mouth shut in a frown.

"Ryuuen wouldn't apologize to me though, would he?" said Kei.

"Huh? Uh, well, yeah, that's probably never gonna happen..." mumbled Ishizaki. It'd be impossible for Ishizaki to even *suggest* to Ryuuen that he apologize. Ishizaki froze for a moment, but then it seemed like he found some determination because he forced his mouth to open again. "If you two say that you wanna do it though, then I'll talk to Ryuuen!"

"Maybe you shouldn't bother?" said Kei.

If Ishizaki did try to talk to Ryuuken, he might find a beating waiting for him. Ryuuken was so well-known in our grade level that it was easy to imagine such a scenario.

"I'll try somethin'!" Ishizaki insisted. "If I can get him to promise to say he's sorry, then we'll have a birthday party!"

"Well... If you can really get him to actually do it, then I suppose I'll consider it..." said Kei.

Ishizaki was positively bursting with enthusiasm, but at the same time, he was promising something without due consideration that would likely lead to his own downfall. I thought that I should clearly tell him that I was against the idea. It was true that Ishizaki had been demonstrating his strong willpower lately. It was also true that some changes were beginning to take shape in Ryuuken's way of thinking: he hadn't tried to get anyone expelled in the Unanimous Special Exam, after all. However, that couldn't be interpreted as a shift in his instincts or true feelings.

People didn't change that easily, not even if they wanted to. Ryuuken wasn't trying to change—he was trying to *evolve*. Up until now, he was a man who had fought using evil as his only weapon. Now, he had begun to wield good as well. He was beginning to control both sides of the same coin at will. And if Ishizaki was misreading that fact, then he'd—

"I think it's time you stop," said Kei.

But Ishizaki's resolve remained firm. "If I can get Ryuuken-san to say he's sorry, will you be okay with the birthday idea thingy?"

"But—"

"I've got it! Let me formally 'pologize to you again when we have the party. I'll getcha a little somethin' that's got even *more* thought put into it than my present to Ryuuken-san as my way of sayin' sorry!"

Kei reluctantly admitted defeat in the face of Ishizaki's intense enthusiasm, telling him, "All right, whatever."

"Yeah, dude! It's settled! Anyway, I'm gonna get a move on now and pick out Ryuuken-san's b-day present!"

Albert nodded in response, and then he and Ishizaki went on ahead, back to the store. They seemed to understand that they couldn't walk around together with Kei and me.

"Why did you agree to Ishizaki's request?" I asked Kei. "I thought for sure you'd turn him down."

Even though I expected her to openly listen to what Ishizaki had to say and accept his apology, I had to admit that I honestly hadn't thought that she'd accept Ishizaki's offer about the birthday party.

"Yeah, I mean, it's true I would prefer to spend your birthday with just the two of us, Kiyotaka, but...well..."

"Were you betting on the possibility that Ryuuken would apologize to you?" I asked.

"There's no way he'd do that. Anyway, that's not it, I just..." Kei paused. She turned to look back at Ishizaki, who was chatting away happily with Albert. "I could tell that Ishizaki-kun likes you as a friend. And even *you* need friends, Kiyotaka."

I understood immediately that Kei was referring to the dissolution of the Ayanokouji Group. When she realized I guessed as much, she blushed and averted her eyes.

"And besides, Ishizaki-kun said that he wanted to get me something as his way of saying sorry. I thought it would be okay to accept it is all," she said.

Somehow, that dishonest part of Kei was very much like her too. Anyway, it'd be best to take Ishizaki's proposal with a grain of salt and assume this birthday thing probably wasn't going to happen.

And so, the days leading up to the Sports Festival continued to go by, just like that.

5.3

AFTER SATOU FLEW out of the electronics store at full speed, she stopped to catch her breath in front of the girls' restroom.

"Ugh, why did I run away like that?" she sighed.

Her dear friend was going out with the person she loved. There was nothing wrong with that. Satou knew it too, but when she saw them arm-in-arm, she felt this unspeakable feeling well up within her. She didn't know how she might have acted if she stuck around. Plagued with those thoughts, she ended up quickly running away, and now she was experiencing strong feelings of guilt over it. She crouched down right on the spot, clutching her knees.

"I have to try not to panic next time..."

I'm sure that Kei-chan is holding herself back from doing that kind of thing with Ayanokouji-kun when they're in class and stuff, after all, she thought. And I'm sure that Kei-chan wants to be all alone with Ayanokouji-kun more, with just the two of them.

Just as Satou went to stand back up, a shadow loomed over her.

"Sorry to bother you all of a sudden. You're Satou Maya-senpai, right?"

Satou was momentarily confused at being approached by a student she wasn't familiar with. "I am, but...um, who are you? You're a first-year, I'm guessing?"

"Who I am isn't important right now," the probable first-year said. "Truthfully, there's something I want to tell you as soon as possible. If it's not a problem, could I have a minute of your time?"

"H-huh? What is this all about?"

The stranger was telling Satou that she wanted to tell her something, and Satou felt perplexed—on top of how unsettled she was still feeling about the image of Ayanokouji and Karuizawa clinging together, which she still couldn't get out of her mind.

"Information about Ayanokouji-senpai."

Satou stopped moving.

"...About Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

"Yes. About him and his girlfriend, Karuizawa Kei-senpai."



Hearing the names of the two people who were taking up approximately 99 percent of her headspace right now, Satou couldn't help but look up. As the stranger slowly but surely closed in on her, Satou felt a slight twinge of nervousness.

"I'd like to talk to you about this in detail—but someplace we can be alone, if at all possible. Would you be able to?"

"Well, I..."

The first-year made use of her nimble physicality to close the distance between the two of them, getting close enough that her lips were practically touching Satou's ear.

"If Karuizawa-senpai were expelled...don't you think that would mean even you might have a chance, Satou-senpai?"

Karuizawa was her closest friend right now, and Satou also had feelings for Ayanokouji. This stranger was suggesting that Satou had a chance to change their relationship and to change her own position.

Satou felt overcome with all sorts of emotions.

"Wh-what are you saying?" she asked.

"Whether you listen to what I have to say or not is entirely for you to decide, Satou-senpai," the first-year added. "But if you don't hear me out, you will surely regret it for a long time to come. If you don't want anyone to see us, I don't mind if you come to my dorm room."

The student must have been satisfied by simply telling Satou her room number, because after giving it, she turned and left, leaving Satou alone.

Satou stood there, confused and struggling to process what was happening. However, one thought stuck out in her mind.

Even I can have a chance.

That student had suggested there was a possibility that Satou could date Ayanokouji. Satou felt her chest tighten, and at the same time, feelings that she didn't want to even know she had begun to crawl up from the bottom of her heart, slowly but surely.

"I..."

5.4

THOUGH THERE WERE some tasks still left to be done, the class proceeded with their careful preparations for the Sports Festival. Although some students objected to the idea of fighting alongside Ryuuen, when the time came to get ready and practice, there were no major disputes. People who were working together for team competitions spared no effort in working together so that they could win. They worked hard to train day and night.

And, finally, the night before the Sports Festival arrived. Around 9:30 that evening, I called Horikita.

"It's rather late for you to be calling. I was just about to go to bed," she said.

I could hear a hair dryer running on the other end of the line.

"I'm calling about something important, regarding the Sports Festival," I told her.

"Something important? Well, I guess I should take this a little more seriously then."

The sound of the hair dryer immediately ceased as Horikita must have turned it off.

"Oh, that reminds me, I had something I wanted to tell you first. Apparently, Sakayanagi-san is still going to be participating in the Sports Festival tomorrow. Didn't you say that you could stop her?"

"I'm calling to talk to you about that. I think that I'm going to be absent from the Sports Festival tomorrow myself."

"You're going to be absent...? Hold on a minute, what are you saying?"

I could tell how flustered Horikita was by the sudden news. On the other end of the line, I heard a crashing sound, followed by a brief scream.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Sorry, I just dropped my hair dryer..."

I heard the sound of Horikita setting her phone down on something. It seemed like she quickly picked up her hair dryer as well.

"So, anyway, what's this about you being absent? You aren't sick or anything, are you?"

It made sense that she was puzzled, since it certainly didn't sound like there was anything wrong with me from my voice.

"Nah, I'm in good health," I replied. "Actually, I'd say that I'm feeling even better than usual."

"In that case, why? If you're absent, that means we'll lose ten points, doesn't it? Even if I'm not counting on you earning any, it still hurts to lose those ten points, you know."

Since she only had thirty-eight students in her class, I could understand why she wanted to complain.

"I'm not going to say that losing out on those ten points doesn't matter," I said. "But it's necessary, as part of my strategy."

"Your strategy..."

Of course, I wasn't referring to the fact that assassins sent by my father would be among the guests at the Sports Festival tomorrow. Rather, I decided to tell her something that I had been keeping quiet about until now.

"Let's just say it's related to the attack on Sakayanagi. It's something we can't avoid doing if we're going to make sure Class A comes in last place in the rankings in the Sports Festival."

"An attack on Sakayanagi-san...?"

"I told you before that there was a way to make sure Sakayanagi doesn't take part."

"I don't understand how you being absent has any connection with an attack on Sakayanagi-san..." Horikita was about to ask me the reason why again, but she quickly reconsidered.

"There's no way I can understand what you're thinking of doing right now. Besides, even if I tried to persuade you, you probably

wouldn't change your mind about missing the Sports Festival, would you?"

"You're right, I won't. I'm going to call the school first thing in the morning and tell them that I'm not feeling well."

"In that case, I guess I have no other choice but to trust in you." Though Horikita was exasperated, she was still giving me her consent. *"I had been planning for our class to at least take the top three places, as a personal goal, but I guess now this means that I'll have to make sure we get another ten points too."*

"Good luck," I replied.

I ended the call and plugged my phone in to charge. It was just before bedtime right now, but I was sure that Horikita wouldn't be able to sleep for a while because her mind would be racing, re-calculating scores and so on. It might've been a little harsh, but she'd just have to mark this down as a necessary expense.

With that done, I had one more person left to call. Once I gave that person the necessary information, everything would be set.

Chapter 6: The Second Sports Festival

THE NEXT MORNING. I watched from the faculty side as all of the students gathered on the field. Student Council President Nagumo was standing near a podium that had been set up, giving his opening address. The guests that had been invited from outside campus were watching over the students as well. There weren't that many guests though, just a few dozen or so. Even so, the students seemed uncomfortable at the sight of unfamiliar outsiders.

The students were still in a state of restless excitement; they were about to thrust themselves onto the stage, so to speak, about to dive headfirst into the Sports Festival. The student council had told me in advance about the guests that were going to be invited, but the people present were much more imposing than I had expected. They were from political circles and similar who were involved in creating this school.

There weren't any politicians present that I had seen on TV before, but I was sure that these people weren't very far off from being on television themselves. They were dressed in suits and wore stern expressions on their faces as they watched. It was almost as though they were monitoring prisoners. But even in a situation like this, President Nagumo remained unperturbed, making a dignified speech. He was fulfilling his role in a manner comparable to my older brother, giving the students the kind of wonderful performance my brother had in the past. After President Nagumo's speech was over and the students applauded, the baton was passed to the teachers, and we were once again reminded of things to note during the Sports Festival.

Now, the time had come for the main event to begin. From this point onward, we were free to do as we pleased. As long as they abided by the rules, students could participate in any competition they were currently registered for. Alternatively, they could abstain from an event and choose to enter another

competition instead if they decided as such after seeing what kind of opponents they'd be up against and that they'd be at a disadvantage—although they would need two points in order to do so. And we couldn't forget that students who had completed all of their competitions and were not planning on participating in any more had to go cheer in the designated area. If you were seen aimlessly chatting with people, resting, or slacking off in an unrelated area, you would be disqualified from the event and your points would be forfeited.

My class had formed a cooperative partnership with Ryuuuen-kun's class. We had made adjustments to spread students out as much as possible in individual competitions in order to avoid clashing with his students. As for team competitions, we had hand-picked students from both of our classes who could win easily. We made sure there were equal numbers of students from each class, and we also made sure that the same number of points would be distributed to our two classes regardless of whether those teams won or lost. However, no matter how exceptional a student was, the maximum number of people you could enter in a team competition was fixed. There was a measure to prevent either side from using outstanding talents like Sudou-kun and Yamada Albert-kun for extended periods of time.

Additionally, we had a contract in place that allowed for each person to enter into a maximum of three events so they could lend a hand in group competitions if needed. This arrangement was limited to events that could be registered for in advance, however, and we had made sure to include that in the contract. It would've been nonsensical for us to have disputes on the day of the Sports Festival and have students yelling and screaming at each other to help them out with this or that.

Furthermore, we didn't have any firm restrictions against working together with students from Ichinose-san's or Sakayanagi-san's classes. If there were any competitions where we could make use of their students, then for the sake of convenience, we were willing to allow some cooperation. I wasn't worried about there being any problems because Katsuragi-kun and I had bounced ideas off of each other back and forth quite a few times.

There was less to worry about at the start, since at this point, most students would just be participating in competitions that they had registered for in advance. Having said that, I needed to remember to check in with my classmates every hour and make adjustments as necessary if any problems arose.

The first event I was going to participate in myself was the 100-meter dash. The start time was fifteen minutes after the event began, so there wasn't any need to rush. It was still a good idea to arrive early though and check out the competition that was already

"All right, Horikita! You and me are gonna have a showdown!!" shouted Ibuki. She came running at me at full speed immediately after the crowd disbanded and the students were free to go about the grounds. She glared at me while stopping to catch her breath.

"Are you an idiot?" I asked.

"Wha-?! What the hell was that for? What, you scared you're gonna lose to me? Is that it?"

"No." I rejected her in a split second. "What competition are you about to go to? Take a deep breath and then answer me that."

"Huh? The 100-meter dash, obviously. That was the deal we made, and I wouldn't forget that," said Ibuki.

"Yes, exactly. The 100-meter dash. And our agreement was that we registered for the first race. That means that we're going to start running right away. And if that's the case, why were you recklessly running here at top speed a moment ago? You know that we're going to have our competition soon, so you should be waiting patiently in the designated place. There shouldn't be a need to explain any of this to you."

She must have realized it now that I had explained.

"Damn it," she mumbled under her breath. "A-anyway, you still better race me!"

"Relax. I was planning on it, without you even having to tell me."

Ibuki-san wasn't an easy opponent to go up against. I won the 100-meter dash last year, but only by a slim margin. I would've normally wanted to avoid challenging her, but I was also greatly indebted to her. If Ibuki-san hadn't helped me recently, then it was possible Kushida-san still might not have come back to school. Even so, I couldn't lose to her.

I knew she wouldn't want me to just let her win either, so I was going to give her a real race and we'd compete fair and square. Ibuki-san didn't seem to like walking next to me, so she put some distance between us as we headed over toward registration for the first event. I could feel a pleasant kind of tension building, and this would be a battle just between second-year girls.

Not much had changed from when the advanced reservations were made, and my only potential rival was Ibuki-san, but it would've been foolish of me to interpret that as a stroke of good luck. If I had an easy battle ahead of me, that just meant that there would be stronger rivals to face in other competitions.

6.1

THE 100-METER DASH was held immediately after the opening ceremonies, and in that first race, I had my showdown with Ibuki-san. It ended in a narrow victory for me. Oddly enough, I won by about the same slim margin that I did last year. After we crossed the finish line, Ibuki-san kicked the dirt in apparent frustration and made excuses for losing, saying it was because she stupidly ran over to me as fast as she could before the race even began.

My next battle with her would be in my fourth event of the day, the running long jump. The two contests before that were our own individual pursuits. My second event was a steeplechase, in which I placed first. The third was a team-based tug-of-war contest, and my team won third place in that. So far, I personally had accumulated a total of twenty-one points: I had gained five points at the start of the Sports Festival, ten points for placing first place twice in individual competitions, three points for placing third in the team tug-of-war competition, and another three points for general participation. I could confidently say that I was off to a great start.

Then, at around ten o'clock, it was time for my second showdown with Ibuki-san: the running long jump. I finished my turn with an impressive leap, and my jump was recorded as 5.79 meters. *Not bad.* Setting aside the fact that this was a situation where there was no room for failure, I thought I might have just set a personal best.

Ibuki-san was three spots behind me and was breathing heavily as she looked at my record. In all, there were three jumpers left. I felt that now that I was, at least tentatively, in first place for the event, I was one step closer to scoring points.

As I watched the next contestant, I heard someone call for me from behind.

"Suzune! Found ya!"

When I turned around, I saw Sudou-kun running up to me with Onodera-san behind him. I had high expectations that the

pair of them would be top scorers in this Sports Festival.

"From the looks of it, you're doin' pretty good!" said Sudou-kun.

"You've won three competitions in a row since the day began, Sudou-kun," I replied. "And on top of that, you're looking totally relaxed. I'm impressed."

"Well, y'know, I'm tryin'. Anyhow, Onodera competed in two events and got first place in both of 'em too. Right, Onodera?"

"Well, I just happened to get lucky in a few ways," she said.

Onodera had no equal when it came to swimming, but she had made a good show of her talents in track-and-field events as well.

"You know, when we first started school, I didn't have the impression that you were that fast. When did that happen?" I asked. I was particularly curious about that because I had seen her in gym class.

"Well, to be honest, I don't like running all that much," she said. "I've never really been interested in anything besides swimming. I guess it's just like, before, I just kinda *did* it without really putting in an effort."

"She said she'd never do long distances," said Sudou-kun.

"Well, it's super exhausting. I can't run that far, and it's not really good for you."

Apparently, the two of them had been practicing together day after day ever since they decided to team up. It seemed they made an even more natural pair than I had imagined they would.

"Still, to tell ya the truth, I'd love to go up against Kouenji if I got the chance," said Sudou-kun. "He's won three events in a row and got first place in all of 'em too. It looks like he's gonna keep the wins comin'."

"Absolutely not," I told him. "It's not a good idea for our classmates to try and destroy each other. You understand that, right?"

Sudou-kun and Kouenji-kun both had the potential to get first place. I understood that Sudou-kun wanted to compete against him, but we had to prioritize the overall class.

"I-I know, I'm just jokin'," he said.

"Don't worry," said Onodera-san. "I'll keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn't get out of line, so you can relax."

"Thank you," I said. "The more I can leave to you, Onodera-san, the less I'll have to worry about."

"It's like you don't got any trust in me at all. Man..."

Sudou looked disgruntled, but when I turned to look him in the eye, he averted his gaze awkwardly. That was a sign he was reflecting on how he had behaved in the past.

"Well, I'm sure that you two are planning on competing in more competitions still, Sudou-kun, Onodera-san. Good luck to you both."

"Yeah. I'm gonna keep up this winnin' streak," said Sudou-kun.

That was encouraging to hear. Just then, I noticed that the final competitor in my event had taken the starting line. I stopped the conversation there and turned my attention toward Ibuki-san.

"Let's not bother her anymore," Sudou-kun said to Onodera-san. "How about we go check out the next event?"

"Yeah, let's. See you later, Horikita-san," said Onodera-san.

"Yeah," I replied.

I casually watched them go from the corner of my eye, but my gaze was mostly focused on Ibuki-san since she had started her run. I understood very well that her abilities were close to my own. In other words, it was conceivable that she could surpass my own record. I was feeling two emotions at that moment: I wanted her to fail, but I also wanted her to give it her best and make this a good fight.

I was sure that she must've been feeling intensely pressured, but her movements were nimble and graceful. She leaped forward and landed on her feet, but she ended up pitching forward and

falling. Even though she had a face full of dirt, she quickly looked up and turned her eyes to the scorekeeper.

5.81 meters. It was just two centimeters different, but even so, those two centimeters made her jump better than mine. I had lost.

"Yeah!!!"

Ibuki-san pumped her fist in the air, looking as gleeful as a child. If she had lost this competition, she would've lost our little best two-out-of-three showdown already. Instead, she had made a brilliant leap and won.

"You see that?!" she yelled. "I won! You lost!"

I could tell that she was happy, almost to the point of being obnoxious. It was actually making me feel a little irritated.

"I have to wonder if you had an advantage over me because you have slightly less air resistance than I do..." I mused. If our abilities were about the same, then that would be the only difference...

"Huh?" she blinked. "Air resistance?"

"Never mind."

"Don't make weird excuses. Just admit you lost."

"Don't get carried away," I told her. "This just means we each have one win and one loss. We're back to being even. That's all."

Even though I warned Ibuki-san not to get overly excited, she still had a huge grin on her face that wasn't going away any time soon. I suppose I should have regretted the fact that I missed out on getting first, but seeing her look so happy, I suppose I just couldn't help but...

"I won! I won! I won!" she exclaimed.

...Yeah, no. I *did* regret not getting first. If anything, the amount of mental and emotional stress I was feeling suddenly increased. I now had one win and one loss. I would have loved to get to our third match right away, but there were several team competitions worth a lot of points coming up after this. I had to

wait until the balance beam event later that afternoon to settle the score with her.

6.2

THE SPORTS FESTIVAL had started without Ayanokouji-kun. An electronic scoreboard was set up on the field so that we could see how each class was scoring and confirm their respective results at any time. Although Ryuuuen-san's class started off at the top of the rankings, we, now Class B, overtook them in short order and took first place for ourselves. We had been holding onto it ever since. Our ideal final ranking would be Class D in second, Class C in third, and Class A in fourth.

I was hoping that things would continue on like this all the way until the end without any trouble. Since I had some time until my next competition, I headed over to the cheering section to kill some time. There, I was approached by Yagami-kun from Class 1-B.

"Great work out there, Horikita-senpai," said Yagami-kun.

"It seems like your class is putting up quite a good fight too, Yagami-kun. You're in a very close second in your grade right now."

"But you're in first place in your grade, aren't you, senpai? I can't believe that you started in Class D last year."

"Was that a compliment?" I asked. "Or was there some sarcasm mixed in?"

"Heavens, no. I genuinely respect you. Not as much as Student Council President Nagumo, but still." Out of the corner of his eye, Yagami-kun saw the instant that Student Council President Nagumo cleared the finish line. "I heard some third-year students talking earlier. Apparently, that's his fifth first-place finish in a row."

Some girls cheered for him, and several of the guests turned their attention to President Nagumo as well. However, Nagumo walked away with a blank expression on his face without so much as a word to any of the cheering girls. He put some distance between himself and others, making it clear that he wanted to be alone.

"Knowing President Nagumo, I expected him to say something, but he doesn't look even the least bit happy," I remarked.

"Well, win or lose, he's already guaranteed to graduate from Class A, I suppose," said Yagami-kun. "Perhaps he's just not feeling too enthusiastic?"

It was certainly true that the Student Council President had a solid position. From his perspective, the Sports Festival rankings really must've meant nothing. I wondered if he was aiming for first place in this event simply because he couldn't afford to be lax in front of the current students and the guests.

"I think I'll have a little chat with the President," I said.

"I see," said Yagami-kun. "Well, my next event is coming up, so if you'll please excuse me."

With that exchange behind me, I decided to approach the Student Council President. Another third-year girl was standing next to him and seemed to be talking to him. It was Kiryuuin-senpai from Class 3-B. I heard rumors about her from time to time from my interactions with other third-year students. I also knew that she had incredible scores in OAA. Not wanting to interrupt their conversation, I decided to just give them a slight bow and wait.

"Congrats on your fifth win in a row, Nagumo," said Kiryuuin-senpai.

"What'd you come here for?" he asked.

"No need to be so unkind, is there? I was just concerned for you. You don't seem to be very happy, even though you won. And it looks like more than a couple people are cheering you on too..."

"Don't make me laugh," he scoffed. "How could I call winning a contest like this an accomplishment?"

"Well, it would have been easy for you to just gather up weak opponents to face so you could steal first place by force. But looking at the people you were racing against just now, it didn't seem to me like that's what you did." She was pointing out that he didn't appear to be cutting any corners in the event.

"I heard through the grapevine that Ayanokouji is absent today," she added. "Is that perhaps the reason for the long face?"

Ayanokouji. His name was popping up again, even in a place like this.

The Student Council President sighed quietly, without so much as looking at Kiryuuin-senpai. "I thought he'd satisfy me, but I guess I was wrong."

"Aw, poor you," said Kiryuuin-senpai. "In that case, how about I be your opponent?"

Student Council President Nagumo directed a sideways glance at Kiryuuin-senpai in response to her provocation, looking at her for the first time. But when he saw the smirk on her face, he turned away from her once more.



"A cheap lie," he said. "Even if I wanted to go up against you, I can't imagine that you'd actually compete with me. I'm right, aren't I?"

"*Fu fu fu.* Guess I've been found out," she admitted. She shrugged her shoulders and drew closer to Student Council President Nagumo. "After just one more event, I'll have fulfilled the minimum required of me. Once that's done, I plan to just relax and watch."

"Yeah, I expected as much," he said.

"You shouldn't care about your juniors anymore," Kiryuuin-senpai advised him. "At the very least, you have total control over your grade and your position in Class A is secure. And on top of that, you have your track record as student council president. That's enough, isn't it? I suggest you just quietly graduate."

"Wow, you're really giving *me* advice, huh?" said President Nagumo. "What brought about this change of heart? You've talked more in the past six months than the two years before Ayanokouji came into the picture."

"You may be right about that," she said.

"Relax, Kiryuuin," he told her. "I know that I'm done playing with Ayanokouji, you don't have to tell me that. He chose not to fight me. There'd be no point now, even if I pushed it."

"If Ayanokouji lost in a direct confrontation with you, he wouldn't be able to remain as composed and low-key as he has been all this time," Kiryuuin-senpai said. "You have to consider his desire to run away from that. He has a cute side to him too, I think."

Fighting against Student Council President Nagumo? Ayanokouji-kun? I did wonder why he was called to the student council office the other day. I guessed it was to challenge him? That also lined up with the message that he had given to me.

Kiryuuin-senpai casually glanced over at me, but then she walked away without really saying anything in particular.

"Sorry to have made you wait, Suzune," President Nagumo said. "You need something from me?"

"Well, no. It's just that I was going to ask you the same thing that Kiryuuin-senpai did," I replied. "I saw that you took first place, but you didn't look happy at all. And also... You apparently had Ayanokouji-kun agree to compete with you in the Sports Festival?".

"In the end, it didn't happen," he said. "He's absent, so it's over."

Ayanokouji-kun said that his absence wasn't due to illness, but part of his strategy to make sure that Sakayanagi-san was absent too. It seemed like Student Council President Nagumo was unaware of this fact, so I reasoned it would be best not to let him find out.

"When it's time for break at noon, come see me for a bit. I'll be waiting for you at—"

Even though he was asking me to do something without giving me many details, I couldn't refuse, and I accepted his offer.

A short time later, it was time for lunch, and I looked over the lunch boxes provided to us on the field. I could choose whatever I wanted from the array of food. There was a varied lineup of options, ranging from light meals like sandwiches to more substantial meals like katsudon, meant for restoring your strength and stamina.

I was both impressed and astonished by how incredibly scrupulous and thorough this school was. Students were required to completely finish eating whatever they chose, and they were allowed to select multiple items too. Most of the students just chose one thing, but I observed that there were some boys here and there who took multiple things. I also saw a larger student among them happily holding three or four items against his chest. He was a first-year student, and someone I had seen before... If he was going to eat all of that and still take on competitions in the afternoon, he was either underestimating the competition or was just that much of a big shot.

Just as I reached for one of the lighter meal options, I was approached by Student Council President Nagumo again.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," he said.

"What did you want to see me for?" I asked. "I do want to let you know that I have a meeting soon, so I would sincerely appreciate it if we could keep this brief."

"Sure. I just wanted to know about Ayanokouji. I heard he was out sick, but did he just suddenly fall ill or something?"

Although Student Council President Nagumo didn't mention anything earlier, he was apparently suspicious of Ayanokouji-kun.

I decided to lie. "Yes, he did. He informed me of his absence this morning and said he was quite sorry. After all, one person being absent means that our class is losing ten points. But even so, if he's not feeling well, I can't force him to participate."

Of course, that was the only sort of answer I could give. I was the only person who knew that he was absent for another reason.

"Well, if he really is sick, then I suppose that's good," said President Nagumo.

"What do you mean by that?" I couldn't imagine that President Nagumo suspected anything from what I had said. I wondered if he had any reason that led him to think something was up.

"You heard what Kiryuuin and I were talking about earlier, didn't you? That maybe he shut himself away in his room because he didn't want to be humiliated."

"I did hear that." I decided to give President Nagumo a safe answer, so as not to provoke him.

"I don't think I can say for sure that Ayanokouji-kun didn't do something like that, certainly."

"Maybe I'll cause trouble for your grade then," said President Nagumo.

"What do you mean?" I asked again.

"Well, I'll just have to make someone else pay the price for him running away. Yeah..." President Nagumo was muttering to himself instead of answering my question.

Then, he gave me a casual wave of his hand, signaling to me that he was leaving. He walked away without taking a lunch.

"Pay the price...? Make trouble for our grade? What was that all about...? Even so..."

It seems like Ayanokouji-kun's reputation preceded him—he really *was* highly regarded by many. I was once again impressed by him today, at the festival. I was nervous about what was going to happen when he told me that was going to be absent, but as it turned out, Sakayanagi-san was indeed absent as well. Without a doubt, Ayanokouji-kun really had been able to do something to contain Sakayanagi-san.

The results of that were evident in Class A's current ranking and score. I supposed it wasn't surprising that they couldn't coordinate well if their commander was suddenly unable to be down on the battlefield. I felt a little sorry for them, but this was serious business. I was going to make sure that we accumulated wins while we had the opportunity to.

6.3

AFTER THE MIDDAY BREAK was over, the Sports Festival continued, going into the second half. More than half of the students had already completed the requisite five minimum events, and those who demonstrated confidence in their athletic prowess were continuing on in their sixth and seventh events. Matoba and Shimizu from Class A continued to struggle desperately without their leader as they fought against Horikita and Ichinose, both of whom were assessing the status of the competitions and their players from minute to minute.

"Next is ping-pong doubles in the gymnasium," said Shimizu. "Satonaka reported earlier that there don't appear to be any strong contenders. There are only two spots open, so there's a good chance we can make it."

"We need to rack up some wins," said Matoba. "Or, at the very least, make sure that we don't come in last place."

Sakayanagi's absence had cast a dark shadow over Class 2-A and many students were feeling discouraged. On the other hand, however, there were more than a few students who felt even more motivated by the situation. After Shimizu and Matoba heard that there were openings in the ping-pong doubles match coming up and that the deadline to enter was just ten minutes away, they decided to give up on the penalty kick event that they had planned on doing and hurriedly made their way to the gymnasium.

Ishizaki was walking toward the two of them with his gaze directed downward, not paying attention to what was in front of him. As he approached, Shimizu moved to his right to try and avoid bumping into him, since he was blocking the path forward. But at almost the exact same time, Ishizaki moved to his left.

Shimizu tried to avoid a collision as quickly as he could, but he wasn't able to get out of the way in time and their shoulders collided. The force of the impact was twice as strong as Shimizu had expected it to be, and there was no way it could've been an accidental collision. Having determined that Ishizaki rammed into

his shoulder forcefully, Shimizu tried to speak up and say something, but then...

"Ow! Watch where yer goin', dumbass!" Ishizaki shouted angrily, flaring up at Shimizu before he could even say anything. "Why don't ya look in front of ya when you're walkin', huh? You slammed into me!"

Shimizu from Class A and Ishizaki from Class D glared at each other.

"*You* were the one who wasn't looking where he was going!" said Shimizu.

"Huh? The hell are you playin' at, tryin' to play the victim here...? You obviously slammed into me on purpose, didn't ya?"

"Wait, what? No, anyone with eyes could see that *you* were the one who slammed into me on purpose. Right?" Shimizu turned to Matoba for back up, hoping that he'd help him out.

"He's right," said Matoba. "You weren't looking ahead at all, dude."

"Hey man, I wasn't lookin' the other way or nothin'. You two are just makin' stuff up. That's playin' dirty."

"Whaddya mean playing dirty? Anyone would agree you're the one in the wrong here," argued Shimizu.

"The hell?" barked Ishizaki. "Me? You guys were just too caught up in your little conversation so you didn't see me, that's all."

Both sides continued to foist blame onto the other, and the clock ticked on with no sign of Ishizaki making any attempt to apologize.

Matoba, even though he was convinced that Shimizu was in the right, was also in a rush to get to the next competition. He urged Shimizu to calm down.

"Come on, man, just let it go. He's not worth it."

"I can't let this slide, though," replied Shimizu.

"Dude, I know, but we got other priorities right now," said Matoba.

"...Yeah, you're right."

Matoba sympathized with Shimizu, but he also reminded him that they need to sign up for the competition and win. Shimizu reluctantly nodded in agreement. He glared at Ishizaki as he walked away.

"Watch where you're goin' next time," he spat.

"Ow!" Ishizaki suddenly cried out.

"Huh?"

Just as Shimizu and Matoba tried to move past him, Ishizaki suddenly clutched his left shoulder.

"I got all riled up so I didn't really notice it, but damn... I think you might've broken somethin'," he muttered.

It took a moment for Shimizu and Matoba to realize what Ishizaki was saying, but then they suddenly understood what was happening. Ishizaki had sprung a cheap trap on them. They exchanged looks and let out scornful laughs. However, the situation then took a sudden turn.

"Damn, sounds like quite the commotion over here," said Ryuuен, who just so happened to be present as this dispute was breaking out. "What's the matter, Ishizaki?"

"Ryuuен-san! Listen! These guys just slammed into me for no reason!" wailed Ishizaki.

"Ryuuен... Pfft, now a pain in the ass like you is involved, huh..." Shimizu grumbled. "I didn't expect that you'd use such an obvious trap."

"Huh? What're you talkin' 'bout? I just so happened to hear this tussle goin' on and came to check it out and all."

"Quit messing around. You've got a history of doing this kinda thing," protested Shimizu.

"A history?" said Ryuuен. "Hm, a history, huh... Well, I guess it's true we might have a history of doing things like this, sure."

"So, you do get it," said Shimizu.

"But! Even if I *do* have a history as you say, that's got absolutely nothin' to do with what happened this time. I mean, it'd be a *big* problem if my precious wittle follower Ishizaki here got hit and maybe even, heaven forbid, injured by an underhanded move by one of you Class A folks."

"Precious wittle follower,' what?" Shimizu repeated in disbelief. "I bet you're the one who told him to do it. Isn't that right? Just cut the crap already or I'll call a teacher and...!"

"*Ku ku*," Ryuuuen laughed. "Yeah, I guess you're right, when you're in trouble, you just gotta call the teachers. Hell, I welcome it. After all, we're the victims here, yeah? Don't you worry, I'll make sure we get the teachers *thoroughly* involved. Ain't that right, Ishizaki?"

"Yeah. I'm the victim here."

"Seriously, how's he the victim? These guys aren't even taking the Sports Festival seriously... Hey, can you go ahead and call the teachers?" Matoba whispered into Shimizu's ear, having decided that there was no avoiding the inevitable.

With that, Matoba sent Shimizu off running somewhere. Shortly afterward, Shimizu returned from his attempt to call the teachers, looking clearly depressed.

"What's wrong? What'd the teachers say?" asked Matoba.

"Well, it's—"

Shimizu hadn't brought a teacher back with him, but rather, a student from his same class—Hashimoto Masayoshi.

"I saw Shimizu runnin' and I could tell from the look on his face he was pretty pissed," said Hashimoto. "I asked him what was up. If you guys talk to the teachers, it could make this into an even bigger mess. If you have the teachers make a judgment call here, you might not be able to compete."

"But!" protested Shimizu.

"Look, man, I know. But Ryuuuen's trying to make this into a big mess. Don't play into his hands." Hashimoto placed his hand on Shimizu's shoulder, urging him to relax. "I'll try talking to them for the time being."

"...Got it," said Matoba. "We're counting on you to wrap this up quick."

Matoba had no other choice but to leave the task of resolving the situation to Hashimoto. He decided to watch from a short distance away. After hearing the whole story, Hashimoto walked forward and approached Ryuuken and Ishizaki calmly and slowly, despite the commotion.

"Let's wrap this whole thing up peacefully, eh, Ryuuken?" said Hashimoto.

"What?" Ryuuken scoffed. "You were the ones who hit us. We're just respondin' in kind, since they were apparently fixin' for a fight."

"I know, I know. But you know, if you don't pull back, we're really gonna be in a bind here. These guys are our breadwinners in the Sports Festival. You're keeping our main guys tied down. I hate to say this, but Ishizaki can't exactly offer that much in terms of getting your class points, y'know?"

No matter who you asked, it was obvious that Ryuuken's side engineered this situation. Hashimoto was pointing that out, trying to make it clear to Ryuuken that he had him figured out, so Ryuuken couldn't push the matter too aggressively.

"Hey, don't look down on my guy," Ryuuken said. "Ishizaki's been pourin' his blood, sweat, and tears into this day. He's been showin' that he's got the potential to compete on equal footin' with your so-called breadwinners. Ain't that right?"

"Yeah!" said Ishizaki.

Hashimoto had seen Ishizaki messing around many times before and on a regular basis. He was completely exasperated by what he was seeing.

"Oh, for the love of... Man, you guys are always pushing the envelope." Hashimoto knew that he wouldn't be able to have an actual, proper discussion with Ryuuken and Ishizaki about this, much less win, and so couldn't help but scratch his head in frustration.

"Gotta say, it's pretty clear to me now though," he added. "You guys are seriously going to crush us in this Sports Festival. And I'm sure you're the ones who instigated this whole thing with the best first-years sticking to us like glue to throw us off, huh?"

Hashimoto noticed early on that the more physically gifted first-year students had been following Class 2-A's more talented students around, joining competitions that they were taking part in. However, it wasn't like Hashimoto had any way of stopping those junior students from entering events after he noticed what they were doing. The end result was that his class was now getting even worse results than he had originally expected.

"Look, we're trying desperately hard to keep out of last place since Princess is absent today," Hashimoto said. "If we make you guys our enemies, we're not gonna stand a chance. How about we just settle this peacefully and call it a draw?"

"A draw?" repeated Ryuuен. While he had been acting relatively friendly up until that point, his demeanor changed completely. Ryuuен's smile disappeared. "I don't *care* what's goin' on in Class A. We're Class D. I'm doin' everything I can to crawl up from the bottom of the rankings here. If you're gettin' in the way of that and think for one second that we can just shake hands and be pals, then we're gonna have a *big* problem."

Hashimoto had been wearing a faint smile during this entire conversation, but now he froze, feeling like he was about to be attacked.

"Okay..." he said slowly. "In that case, what do you want us to do? What if we offer something to show that we're sorry?"

"I don't know and don't care. I don't want your money. I just want a *sincere* apology for him, is all. Ain't that right, Ishizaki?" said Ryuuен, turning to his classmate.

"Yeah, man. I guess the pain in my arm's gone away a little bit, so a 'pology would be good enough for me," said Ishizaki.

Losing more time was the thing that would hurt them more than anything else. So, once Hashimoto had confirmed that Ryuuен wasn't making any special demands for money or anything like that, he decided to accept their request for an apology.

"Give me a second to talk it over with my guys," said Hashimoto.

"Better hurry," Ryuuuen warned him. "We've got our next competition comin' up too."

More than five minutes had already passed since this scuffle had started. If they apologized immediately, they might still have enough time to make it before the deadline if they ran to the gymnasium. But even so, the clock was ticking.

"Listen up. I know it doesn't seem fair, but the best thing you can do is sincerely say that you're sorry," Hashimoto told Shimizu.

"That's a load of crap," Shimizu snapped. "You said you'd take care of it so I stayed quiet and listened, but now you're telling me to apologize to him when he's the one who started this? No way!"

"Then are you okay with not winning?" said Hashimoto. "If you're stubborn and hold your ground here, all you're gonna accomplish is protecting your pride. But if we end up losing the Sports Festival by five or ten points, are you gonna be happy with the decision you made?"

"W-well, I..."

"What's important right now is that our class wins, right? Just think of this situation like stepping in dog crap by accident: it sucks. That's all it is."

With just one brief apology, he could jump back into the competition. That's what Hashimoto was urging him to do.

"Damn it! Why do I..."

Shimizu was intensely irritated, but after he regained his composure, he reluctantly agreed. He started walking over to apologize to Ishizaki.

"Hold up, Shimizu," Ishizaki said. "Matoba over there is just as guilty as you. He assumed I wasn't lookin' either."

"...Matoba," said Shimizu, turning to his classmate.

"All right..."

The two students had no other choice but to stand side by side and apologize. They both gave Ishizaki a slight bow.

"We're sorry, we were in the wrong... So, are we good now?" asked Shimizu.

"Hey, Ryuuen-san... Y'know, I don't really feel like these guys really mean it," said Ishizaki.

"Well, of course not," Ryuuen agreed. "They ain't actually willin' to bow and apologize for real, they're only bowin' a little bit. They clearly don't wanna. Deep down, they're practically spittin' on you, Ishizaki. It doesn't seem like a clear apology at all, does it? It's nowhere near sincere enough."

"Have you lost your mind, Ryuuen?" said Hashimoto. "We're not gonna give you anything more than this."

Hashimoto had been keeping Matoba and Shimizu in check before, but now enough was enough. Concluding that there was no other option but to get a teacher to meditate, he quickly ran over to where the faculty were. About a minute later, he returned with a teacher in tow.

"Now, what in the world is going on here?" asked the teacher.

"The truth is—" Hashimoto started to speak, but just as he was about to tell the teacher what was going on, Ishizaki made a declaration.

"Apology accepted," he said. "I'm sorry, Ryuuen-san. I deeply appreciate all the advice you gave me, but I think it's pretty childish to make a big fuss over this, about just a little bump on the shoulder... I mean, I think we should just pretend this whole thing never happened now that these two guys have apologized to me. That okay?"

"Hey, it's all right, ain't it?" Ryuuen said. "If you're satisfied, then there's nothin' else for me to say when it's not my business."

Ryuuen and Ishizaki moved to bring the argument to a close just as the teacher arrived, and the teacher was now trying to make sense of the situation. Since Hashimoto brought help back

with him because he felt that it was a necessary step in solving the problem, he was puzzled about what was going on.

The teacher drew a conclusion after only having seen this part of the incident. "You two bumped into Ishizaki and apologized. And he accepted your apology. Do I have that right?" asked the teacher, making it sound as though the situation had been resolved already.

"Hold on, that's—"

Just as Shimizu was about to protest that version of events, Hashimoto stepped in.

"Yes, that's what it seems like, from the sounds of it. It's been resolved."

"Well then, that's good. Anyway, try and avoid causing any more trouble during the Sports Festival, okay?"

Shimizu and Matoba were about to explode in anger, but Hashimoto urged them to leave so that they'd get away from Ryuuuen and Ishizaki.

"Get going while the teacher is still watching. Okay?" said Hashimoto.

Shimizu and Matoba looked back several times to glare at Ishizaki and Ryuuuen, but they eventually made their way toward the gymnasium and blended into the crowd. Ryuuuen and Ishizaki dispersed at the same time.

When Hashimoto saw that no one was left nearby, he let out a deep, sad sigh.

"Jeez, doing somethin' like that in front of this huge crowd of people... Seriously? He is not somebody I wanna make an enemy of."

Hashimoto was terrified, but at the same time, he was smiling happily to himself as he said that.

6.4

IT WAS 3 P.M., and the Sports Festival was nearing its end with less than one hour left to go. We had entered the final phase of the event and essentially had to defend our position in first place. We were only seventeen points ahead of Class 2-D, who was closing in behind us in second. Ryuu-en-kun was even more persistent than I had imagined, and I reasoned it would be best to assume that he had some kind of unseen strategy in play. Even so, there hadn't really been any particular issues between the second years, and we had functioned well as an alliance so far.

Still, if we didn't rack up more points in the next hour, there was a strong possibility that there could be an upset in the rankings...

I was standing in a corner of the gymnasium, staring intently at the list of remaining competitions along with their rules and schedules. Then, a visibly irritated Ibuki-san came over to me.

"Showdown, showdown!" she shouted.

"That's an odd thing to say," I replied. "I already won our contest with two wins and one loss, didn't I?"

"But I wasn't even there for that one!" she protested.

"I don't care. It's not my fault that you didn't show up at the designated time."

"Ugh! I... I just got the time wrong..."

That's right. Our third competition, the one that would've been the deciding factor, was the balance beam event. Registration for that event closed at 1:20 p.m. and Ibuki-san had been unable to participate in the event as she hadn't made it in time to sign up. Of course, *I* didn't miss registration. Although I failed to take first place, I did end up getting second, and I earned three points for my efforts.

"I know you're not happy about it, but in the real world, that's called a loss by default," I told her.

"It's still just one win and one loss! You didn't settle things with me yet!" Ibuki-san continued screaming in my ear. It looked like she wasn't going to be backing down any time soon.

"I've participated in a total of nine events," I said. "I can sign up for one more event, but I haven't decided yet..."

"That one, then!" exclaimed Ibuki-san. "Tell me what you're gonna do!"

"If you're going to beg me to compete with you, you need to fix that attitude and ask me more nicely."

"Grr...!"

"You want to compete with me, right? Or don't you?"

"P-please...h-have...a showdown...w-with...me!!!" Ibuki-san was shaking with anger as she pleaded with me through gritted teeth. She was so upset that it seemed like she was going to start spewing fire from her mouth. "There! Happy now?!"

"I suppose so. That did make me feel a little better."

The situation was changing every minute and spaces for competitions were filling up. *Should I do as I originally planned? Or should I aim for even more points, to get a higher score?*

"Out with it!" yelled Ibuki-san. "Tell me what event you're gonna do!"

"Can you be quiet for a second?" I asked.

"No, I can't!" she replied immediately.

She was repeatedly making a gesture with her hand in an attempt to provoke me, holding her palm out flat and bending her fingers back. I didn't want to deal with her, but if I ignored her here, she'd only get even more annoying.

"I was originally planning on entering the shuttle run," I informed her. "I'm considering that one."

"Shuttle run? That's the one where you run back and forth endlessly 'til you drop out, right?"

"Yes, the very one. It's also called the round-trip marathon run."

"I think I remember doing somethin' like that in junior high. All right. That'll be perfect for our final battle. Bring it." She nodded in satisfaction, turning to run over toward registration.

Then she looked back at me, noticing that I wasn't moving. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"If you want to do it, go ahead," I said.

"Wait, hold on, you're doing it too, aren't you? It doesn't make any sense unless you're doing it with me."

"I just said I was considering it. I haven't made my decision yet."

"What?" she balked.

"To be honest, I think that I want to do volleyball as the final event I compete in."

"Volleyball?" Ibuki-san repeated. "But volleyball needs six people, right? I mean, it sounds like you just came up with that on a whim, not like you actually planned for it in advance or anything. Trying to get people together for a team now is probably impossible."

Volleyball was one of the events that was announced today at the Sports Festival itself. It was an event where men and women competed separately, but it was open to all grade levels. My class had originally planned on skipping the event because it required you to have six competent players, but other classes may have been thinking the same thing. I got the impression that the people currently registered were rather lacking.

"There are only ten minutes left to register, but there's still space for three teams," I said. "And from the looks of it, there aren't many strong players on the currently registered teams. If we can win this competition, then it would be worth abandoning the shuttle run in favor of it. Since we're not going to have any other choice but to quickly throw a team together though, our chances will largely come down to how capable the students we can get are. If we can get one or two students who are sure of themselves, then we'll have a better chance of winning."

"Wait, hold on, what about what I was asking you for earlier?"

"Unfortunately, you're going to have to give up on that."

Ibuki-san was visibly aghast. I expected her to get angry again, but she instead appeared discouraged and resigned. This was all because she had gotten the registration time wrong, as she had stated earlier.

"Well, guess that means our showdown isn't happening," she sighed. "It's all over..."

"You're not going to play volleyball?" I asked.

"I'd need five people to play against your team. There's no way I could get that many people. Pass."

"Because you don't have any friends," I reminded her.

"Hey, you're not any different," she retorted.

"I would think that you at least have classmates that would help you if you asked them."

"Yeah, I don't know about that. I wanted to settle things with you, but I guess it'll have to wait for another time," said Ibuki-san.

For the record, our contest technically had been settled. I won, but...oh well.

"Aren't you going to register for the shuttle run?" I asked.

"The only thing I'm interested in doing is settling our contest," she replied. "I am not planning to go out of my way to help Ryuuken."

"Well, that's convenient for me," I said. "The fewer points you score for your class, the closer my class will be to winning."

I thought it would've been better to just let this be without carelessly provoking her. Or that's what I thought, but for some reason, Ibuki-san didn't seem to be leaving.

"What are you still doing here?" I asked.

"If you don't get enough people for volleyball, you're going to do the shuttle run, right?"

The deadline for volleyball registration was 2:20. The shuttle run registration deadline was 2:25. I had deliberately refrained from mentioning that, but Ibuki-san had apparently noticed it regardless.

"Apparently I said too much. I didn't realize you could actually use your head."

"Ugh, shut up. Anyway, this means I'm gonna hang around you for a bit."

I supposed this meant that in the worst-case scenario, if I couldn't get enough people for volleyball, I'd be facing Ibuki-san in the shuttle run event. *Well, that might not be so bad.* I figured I'd take a look at the girls from my class who were over in the cheering section right now to see if there was anyone I could recruit. Unfortunately, it turned out that I wasn't able to conveniently find a group of good potential teammates and time continued to pass. Before I realized it, Ibuki-san was sitting beside me, yawning. She was giving me a look that seemed to say, "*Just give up already and settle things with me in the shuttle run.*"

"Oh my, what's this? Is that Horikita-senpai and Ibuki-senpai I see? Why hello there, you two."

While I was waiting around to find potential teammates, the first-year student Amasawa-san approached me. In that instant, Ibuki-san suddenly shot straight up and glared at her.

"Oh no! What an angry face you're making... Could it perhaps be your time of the month?" said Amasawa-san mockingly.

She was teasing Ibuki-san, but it seemed like Ibuki-san didn't hear half of what she said.

"If you can still compete in any competitions, I'll throw down against you, if you want," said Ibuki-san.

"Come to think of it, I don't think we ever competed against each other today," said Amasawa-san. "Well, I suppose that's to be expected, since we don't have many chances to go up against each other, being in different grades and all. But don't you think

it'd be a better idea to just drop the idea of competing with me? You're going to lose, you know."

"Don't underestimate me," Ibuki-san replied. "You better be grateful that you haven't run into me yet."

"My my, you're as confident as ever. By the way, what are you two doing here? If you're not competing in anything, you're supposed to be cheering. Otherwise, you'll get in trouble."

"You participate in the shuttle run too, Amasawa. Then we can have ourselves a showdown," said Ibuki-san.

"Oh, you're planning on competing in that event? Well then, I ___"

"I finally found you."

Just as Amasawa-san was about to finish her sentence, Kushida-san suddenly appeared. I thought that perhaps she had some business with me, but instead of looking at me, Kushida-san was staring at Amasawa-san.

"I felt like someone was chasing after me," Amasawa-san said. "Turns out it was you, Kushida-senpai. What is it? Oh, you don't mind that Horikita-senpai is here too though, do you? To overhear our conversation?"

"Horikita-san...? Oh, you're here too," said Kushida-san.

Kushida-san seemed so entirely focused on Amasawa-san that she completely failed to notice I was even there.

"Oh, sorry, Kushida-senpai, it seems like my friends are all here. I guess I'd better be going," said Amasawa-san.

As she said that, she pointed over toward another nearby first-year student, Nanase-san, along with four other girls I didn't recognize.

"I came to the gym to sign up for the volleyball tournament," she said. "It's my first time ever playing volleyball, you know."

She apparently was planning on entering the tournament. I supposed this meant that the first-years were making a move on this event as well after seeing that the competition was light.

"Anywho, see ya later. Break a leg in the shuttle run, okay?" said Amasawa-san.

After having come over and saying everything she wanted to say to us, Amasawa-san went to join up with her group.

"She's gonna play volleyball?" said Ibuki-san, while glaring at Amasawa-san's back.

"Sounds like it," I replied.

"Then I'm gonna play too. There's no way you're gonna find five people to join your team on your own anyway."

"Huh?" I blinked.

"I said I'm gonna play. As much as the thought of teaming up with you annoys me, this is my chance to beat that stupid, arrogant little first-year."

If Ibuki-san was willing to work with me, then I certainly had no complaints. She was a capable player. However...

"Don't just go deciding that on your own," I replied.
"I haven't said whether I'm going to accept you as part of my team."

"What? Even though you haven't even found one single person yet?"

"In team competitions, points are distributed equally to each class represented," I told her. "So I'd obviously want to fill my team with people from my own class rather than people from other classes, wouldn't I?"

Even if I managed to score points from this competition by having Ibuki-san on my team, her class was currently in second place. In other words, it wouldn't change the rankings at all.

"Who the hell cares? I'm fine with playing just as long as I can see Amasawa looking all sad and upset."

"That all depends on what other teammates I can find. My condition for participating would be that there's a higher ratio of players from my class. That's nonnegotiable," I answered.

"Then in that case, will you let me be on your team?" asked Kushida-san. She was still staring at Amasawa-san's back.

"What are you planning, Kushida-san?" I wondered aloud. "It doesn't look to me like you've had a change of heart and you want to work together with me."

I honestly told her what I thought, and Kushida-san didn't deny it. However, what I really found curious was that Kushida-san's intense gaze was focused not on me, but on Amasawa-san.

"I owe that first year. Amasawa-san," she said.

"Wait, you and her...?" I asked.

"You too?" said Ibuki-san.

"I'm not going to tell you the reason why, but I'd be more than happy to help you out if it means I can give her some payback," said Kushida-san.

"In that case, welcome aboard," I told her. "I'm not going to complain about having a classmate join the team. That's perfect."

As they say, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.
Unexpected allies were falling into my lap.

"But she is most definitely a formidable opponent," I added.

"You got that right," agreed Ibuki-san.

Ibuki-san immediately started warming up with some stretches, psyching herself up. Amasawa-san looked back at us from afar and smiled, apparently finding something about this funny. Amasawa-san's abilities were incredible—Ibuki-san and I had experienced them firsthand—but the other people on her team were an unknown quantity. Going just by the OAA values that I could remember, I recalled that Nanase-san had a relatively high score in physical ability, but I didn't have any impressions of the other students.

I was sure that I remembered all the names of students with scores around A, so I reasoned that they could have Bs going by the highest estimate, or perhaps somewhere below that, but... At any rate, the problem was that I was still three people short. Analyzing my opponents when I didn't meet the requirements to even sign up would be counting my chickens before they hatched.

"What are your conditions for the remaining three players? Just that they're not from Ryuu-en-kun's class?" said Kushida-san, asking me about my requirements for the team.

"Yes, exactly," I answered. "I'd like to have as many people from our class on the team as possible. But our priority is winning and making sure we have good players."

"Got it. Wait here a minute."

And with that, Kushida-san walked off.

"She said, 'Got it,' but what is she gonna do?" said Ibuki-san, puzzled. "There's no way people are gonna help us that easily."

I traced Ibuki-san's curious gaze as she watched what Kushida-san was doing. Kushida-san had gone to talk with Rokkaku-san, a student in Sakayanagi-san's class. After chatting for a while, the two of them went on over to see Fukuyama-san, also from Class A. After that, they went over to talk to a student from another class who was cheering for her classmates in the gymnasium.

"That's Himeno-san from Ichinose-san's class, isn't it?" I muttered to myself.

Kushida-san, the two students from Class A, and the one student from Class C talked for less than a minute. Then, Kushida-san came back over with those three students in tow.

"These girls said that they'd play with us," she said. "Volleyball isn't really Himeno-san's thing, but she agreed to play as long as the five of us back her up. I told her that if she left the hard part to us, it'd be okay."

Kushida-san had apparently spoken to Himeno-san using her usual "Kushida-san Mode" that she didn't ever use with me. I especially couldn't hide my surprise over the fact that she had convinced two students from Class A to lend us a helping hand with no questions asked.

"We're in panic mode right now ourselves since we're probably about to lose the Sports Festival," said one of the girls from class A. "But even so, we want to at least contribute

something to our class, even if the worst is happening, right?" She turned to her classmate, who nodded in response.

These two girls wanted to achieve something precisely because they were in Class A, which was currently dead last in the Sports Festival. Kushida-san recognized that mindset, and at the same time, instantly picked out which students were talented players. Even if she didn't exactly remember what their scores were in OAA, being Fukuyama-san's and Rokkaku-san's friend, Kushida-san had a solid understanding of how physically capable they were.

"She pulled off a feat you could never achieve in your entire life, Ibuki-san," I teased.

"Shut up," she snapped. "You weren't able to find anyone either."

"Well, there are still about five or six people in the gym that we could probably talk to about joining the team, but...this is probably the best possible team we could make right now," I said.

At any rate, while it was doubtful whether we'd actually be able to register still, I had managed to get a full team together for volleyball. Sure, one person on the team was from Ryuuuen-kun's class, but that was okay. Winning the volleyball competition and earning ten points from it was overwhelmingly more valuable than competing in the shuttle run, which would only net me two or three points. And even if we lost this competition, the gap between my class and Ryuuuen-kun's class wouldn't change either, which was another benefit.

Ibuki-san and I were positioned at the front as the top players on the team, and we had Kushida-san, Rokkaku-san, and Fukuyama-san as capable players backing us up. Himeno-san rounded out the team, and although she might drag us down a little bit, we had more than enough skill to make up for it.

6.5

WE TOOK ON OUR FIRST MATCH without any difficulty. Right now, we were watching Amasawa-san's team play. Nanase-san was the one who really took control of the match. She was head and shoulders above than the other players both offensively and defensively.

"This Nanase girl pretty much flew right under my radar, but don't you think that *she* isn't really that big a deal as we thought she'd be?" Ibuki-san was, of course, referring to Amasawa-san.

"You're right, I don't get the feeling Amasawa-san is so good that we need to be wary of her," I agreed. "I assumed she was joking about her lack of volleyball experience, but now I'm not so sure..."

It was possible she had been deliberately holding back so far, but I didn't get that impression from what I saw. The students that they were playing against weren't all that good, and Amasawa-san was still better than them both on offense and defense. I didn't see Amasawa-san as that much of a threat.

However, after the midpoint of their match, the situation gradually started to change.

Ibuki-san had been watching the game somewhat listlessly up until that point, but she started to pay attention more closely as well. In less than ten minutes since the match had begun, Amasawa-san was visibly showing signs of improvement. She had incredible adaptability and intuition, the likes of which could not be explained away as mere innate physical ability. But just as Amasawa-san was beginning to show us a glimpse of her talents, Nanase-san spiked the ball, ending the game.

"They'll be playing us after our next game," I remarked. "She might be even better by then."

"Just a couple matches worth of experience is nothing," said Ibuki-san. "We can totally beat her."

It was dangerous to be overly optimistic, but it was true that their team had really won the game without Amasawa-san even touching the ball that much thanks to Nanase-san taking the lead. When our turn came, we won our game too, seizing a decisive victory at around 3:40.

In this Sports Festival, there were many differences in the rules compared to a normal competition, and this volleyball tournament was no exception to that. There was no rotation in who served, and you could have any player of your choosing serve the ball. The winning team was either the first to score ten points overall or the team who scored the most points by the ten minute mark. If the score was tied when time ran out, the game would go into overtime. If that happened, the side that scored last and tied things up had the serve, and the first to score a point won.

"Looks like it's time to see what kinda face you make when you lose, huh?" said Ibuki-san, staring Amasawa-san down.

"Will settling things with me on the volleyball court really make you happy, Ibuki-senpai?" replied Amasawa-san.

"First, I'll beat you in volleyball," Ibuki-san replied. "Then, I'll beat you in a fight."

"Aha ha ha! You know, I don't hate your way of thinking," chuckled Amasawa-san.

They weren't wishing each other good luck in their upcoming match, saying that they hoped it'd be a good game or anything like that. Instead, the sparks were flying between them as they waited for the signal for the match to begin. Amasawa-san's presence was unsettling for sure, but Nanase-san was the one that we really needed to be wary of.

"I'm gonna be the attacker, just like in our last game," Ibuki-san declared confidently. She sounded more fired up than before. "I'm gonna slam the ball into their side of the court with everything I've got."

Though she had some difficulty controlling the ball, I certainly couldn't complain about Ibuki-san' spikes. Their destructive power was second-to-none. When the match began, Ibuki-san served the ball, and we quickly scored a point. I thought

we'd carry that momentum forward, but Nanase-san quickly spiked the ball back, and her team scored a point on us. After that, I was expecting it to be an even closer game at the start, but we held a slight advantage and established a small lead in the first part of the game with a score of 4 to 2.

As I anticipated from watching her play, Nanase-san was an even match for Ibuki-san and me, but apart from that, my team had a slight advantage. The situation changed in the middle of the game though, when there were five minutes remaining.

Ibuki-san took three steps in her run-up, leaping up into the air, and spiked the ball.

Up until this point, Ibuki-san's spikes had sailed past the net and earned us sure points. But this time, Amasawa-san appeared and blocked the shot. Actually, no, that wasn't quite right. Amasawa-san slammed the ball back down on our side of the court, with the same amount of momentum. The ball hit our side and the first-years' team earned one point.

"Too bad, huh, Ibuki-senpai?" gloated Amasawa-san. "Hey, Nanase-san. What do you call that kind of play again?"

"I believe that's called a 'roof,'" Nanase-san replied. "I'm not too familiar with the terminology though."

"Well, senpai, since I can see what your attack pattern is like, I'm afraid you're not going to be scoring anymore," Amasawa-san taunted.

"Like hell!" Ibuki-san yelled. "Next time I'm gonna score against you for sure!"

"Calm down," I told her. "She only happened to block you this one time."

"Shut it. Pass the ball to me again."

Now, the score was 5 to 3 and it was our serve. This whole thing would've been much easier on us if we could finish the game now, but... The rules stated that if a player went out of bounds, one point was immediately awarded to the opposing team, so players couldn't go about the court recklessly. If you served the ball from a standard position, it was only natural that the other

team would return it. At any rate, we had defended well until now. I gave the ball over to Ibuki-san.

"This time for sure!" she shouted. "You're goin' down!!!"

Ibuki-san changed up her rhythm, leaping high into the air after two steps for her run up. She then made the best spike of the day. The two first-years who jumped into the air to block weren't able to get a hand on the ball, and it headed straight for the ground on their side of the court. However, Amasawa-san stopped it from landing. It was almost as though she knew exactly where the ball would land; she received it beautifully and completely stopped it, pushing the ball back up into the air on their side of the court, in enemy territory.

Nanase-san jumped high into the air with her golden hair flowing behind her. She spiked the ball, sending it straight towards Himeno-san. Unable to move, Himeno-san froze, and Kushida-san quickly raced over to try and receive the ball. Unfortunately, she was unable to control its momentum.

The first-year team were starting to catch up with us, slowly but surely, and when we reached the final stage of the match, we were neck and neck.

The score was 6 to 6. With the way things were going and with only about two minutes left on the clock, it was entirely possible that the game would end in overtime.

"Get it to me again!" Ibuki-san shouted furiously.

Ibuki-san had been blocked by Amasawa-san twice now, but she was determined to score next time. I instructed our teammates to get the ball to Ibuki-san, and the game resumed. After both sides exchanged the ball back and forth, Amasawa-san was poised to spike for the first time.

"No way am I gonna let *you* of all people score," hollered Ibuki-san, jumping to block.

But, immediately afterward, I saw Nanase-san behind Amasawa-san.

"Too bad for you!" teased Amasawa-san, smiling.

She had faked us out with a decoy. They had been planning to have Nanase-san spike from the very beginning.

Ibuki-san was caught completely off guard. She tried to reach for the ball, but she couldn't get a handle on it. The ball was heading straight for the ground on our side of the court, traveling at a sharp angle...but Kushida-san slid over in the nick of time, making a risky move to receive the ball.

"Ibuki-san!" she shouted, setting the ball up for her.

Everyone's attention turned to Ibuki-san, and the first-years rushed to take the necessary positions. Amasawa-san readied herself to receive an attack from Ibuki-san with a completely relaxed look on her face.

Ibuki-san took aim, looking to risk taking a spike despite the tough situation, but she couldn't find a good opening. Even so, Ibuki-san had the ball and had to do something with it, so she gritted her teeth and instead set the ball. I took in Ibuki-san's determination and unleashed all the power that I had been conserving all this time into spiking the ball. It slipped right past Amasawa-san as she attempted to block and went straight for Nanase-san, who was ready and waiting.

However, Nanase-san was too exhausted to scoop the ball back up, and she ended up causing it to sail out of bounds. If Nanase-san had been at full strength, she might have stopped it beautifully. At any rate, the score was now 7 to 6. We secured a one-point lead when time was nearly out. And whether their team liked it or not, there was only a minute or so until time ran out, and we had the next serve.

"Okay, now I think it's time I take this seriously," said Amasawa-san.

It was almost as if she was suggesting she was just playing around until that point.

Nanase-san deftly blocked Ibuki-san's next serve. The ball was robbed of its forward momentum and was sent sailing high up in the air, and we all stared at a single point where it was likely to go.

"I'm going for it!" I shouted.

The ball was rocketing toward me with intense speed. Despite my efforts to focus my reflexes, my reaction was delayed, and the moment I tried to reach for the ball, it was already too far away for me to reach. The sound of the ball hitting the floor echoed violently through the gym.

"Out!" shouted the referee.

I supposed that my delayed reaction was a blessing in disguise, so to speak. The ball had partially landed on the white line that indicated what was in bounds on the court.

"Aw," said Amasawa-san. "Sorry, Nanase-san, it went out. It sure is hard to control the ball perfectly, isn't it?"

"Whew, that was a close call," I muttered. "Still though, we definitely shouldn't underestimate her potential after all..."

Even though I had to tip my hat to Amasawa-san's unfathomable ability and intuition, we had essentially narrowly escaped from certain death just then. The one-point gap between us widened to a two-point gap. Shortly afterward, their team scored another point on us, but just then, the whistle blew. Nanase-san was just tossing the ball into the air when she heard it and looked suddenly startled. Amasawa-san had just been about to knock the ball over toward our side of the court again, but she simply landed back down on the ground without taking a swing at the ball after all.

"Aw, time ran out," she said. "And things were just starting to get interesting too."

There wasn't the slightest hint of regret or frustration in her voice. She was simply saying that she had fun playing volleyball, and that it had been a good game. After having a quick chat with Nanase-san, she left the court.

Even though their team lost our match, they still earned points for taking second place in the volleyball tournament. Of course, since we had taken first, we successfully managed to claim a large number of points.

"Y'know, I'm not really happy with what just happened... It's like, it doesn't feel like we *won*," said Ibuki-san.

"They were pushing back on us pretty hard at the end," I replied. "I shudder to think what might have happened if we didn't run out of time."

We should have been feeling good about ourselves after our win, but we were left uncertain and gloomy, like things were still unresolved. Even so, this was a big win for us, and it was the sort of hard-fought battle that felt like a fitting end for the Sports Festival.

It was only then that I noticed that there were quite a few people who had been watching the game, and though it was sparse, we were getting some applause.

6.6

AT LAST, the Sports Festival had entered its final stage. The gymnasium was filled with an odd kind of excitement as students entered into the final, decisive rounds of various team competitions.

"We're just about to start playing, Sudou-kun," said Onodera. "Are you ready?"

Sudou and Onodera had teamed up to take part in many competitions together as a pair during the day's event. They were now about to begin the finals for their tenth competition, mixed boys-girls tennis doubles.

"...Yeah," replied Sudou.

Onodera felt like there was something slightly off about the way he responded. Sudou sounded distracted. Even so, she continued on, making conversation.

"I have to say though, don't you think we make an amazing team? So far, we've been in four competitions as a pair, and we've won four times. I'm sure everybody in class is going to be surprised," said Onodera.

In the two tennis matches before the one they were about to begin, one was against students from their own grade level and another against third-year students. But Team Sudou-Onodera won both without any trouble whatsoever. They were now poised to win five straight team competitions if they took the finals here. If one included individual competitions Sudou had taken part in, he had won nine in a row, which meant he was on the verge of his tenth consecutive win. Onodera hadn't placed first in all nine of her competitions, but she had still maintained her position.

Even though Sudou indicated to Onodera that he had heard what she said, his gaze was directed elsewhere.

"Is something up with that first-year?" she asked. "You've been staring at him for a while."

"Huh?" said Sudou.

"That's...Housen, right? He's so huge it's hard to imagine he's a first-year, and he's got that kind of crazy vibe about him. But for some reason, I kind of get the feeling there's some other reason you're paying attention to him, Sudou-kun. Is something going on?"

"Nah, it's nothin'. Don't worry."

Housen and his partner had just been playing as well, and they won in a landslide victory. That win meant that Housen would be Sudou and Onodera's opponent in the finals. Sudou continued staring at him as he replied absent-mindedly to Onodera, but Onodera was staring at Sudou from the side. Sudou had been taking all of the competitions thus far seriously without getting too lost in thought in any of them, but this time, he was clearly shaken.

It wasn't just today that Sudou and Onodera had spent together. They had been working alongside one another for most of the time they'd spent in preparation for the Sports Festival. They had been meeting up and doing all sorts of training at all times of the day—during normal practice time, during lunch, and during their morning commutes to school. As a result, Onodera had learned to pick up subtle changes in Sudou's expressions.

Though Sudou was an unparalleled athlete, he did have a number of flaws. He had a crude personality and got carried away quickly. He was also prone to losing his temper. Those things had occasionally been a hindrance to Onodera and Sudou as they worked together.

A staff member approached Sudou and Onodera as they were sitting down, resting their bodies.

"We'll now begin the final match," the staff member told them. "Players, please take your positions."

"All right! Let's settle this fast and get ourselves a victory," said Sudou, pretending to be calm.

Both he and Onodera tried to empty their minds as they headed into the match. Onodera figured that even if there was something going on with Housen, it would be fine as long as it didn't interfere with the event.

"Okay," said Onodera as she proceeded to pick up her racket. She was replying to Sudou, but she also spoke as though she were reassuring herself as well.

Sudou and Onodera's classmates started showing up at the gym one after another, hurrying over so they could cheer them on. Even the adults must have been very interested in seeing the finals because they stopped to watch as they passed by.

"It kind of feels like an actual tournament," observed Onodera.

"Yeah," Sudou agreed. "It's like, a good kind of nervousness. Makes you feel all fired up."

No one needed to worry about the likes of Sudou or Onodera getting stage fright at a time like this as they were capable players when it came down to it, including during their club tournaments. However...

"Heh. Never thought I'd be goin' up against *you* of all people in the finals, Sudou-paisen," remarked Housen.

"Housen," replied Sudou.

The mood in the air changed when Housen spoke to Sudou from the other side of the net.

"You really think you can beat me in tennis?" Housen sneered. "I'm gonna destroy you, so I hope you're lookin' forward to what's coming."

The doubles tennis match then began. There was a time limit and there were four points to a game. The match had a total of three games, and the first to secure two wins was the overall victor. The right to serve didn't change on a per-match rotation. Rather, because of the short length of the game, there was a special rule in place so that the side that scored earned the right to serve. Also, players on a given team didn't need to alternate, and any player could repeatedly serve at their own discretion.

The match started with a furious assault from Housen. With his huge frame, he delivered vicious serve after serve, shooting the ball straight to the other side of the court with ease. Sudou's serves, on the other hand, were lacking in comparison, and they

were returned one after another with Housen's team scoring. In less than a minute, the score was three (40) to zero (love), with Sudou and Onodera's team on the losing end.

"No way," said Onodera. "This is happening way too fast... He's gotta be an experienced player, right?"

It was no wonder she was flustered. When Housen hit the ball, it slammed into the court with such speed that it was legitimately terrifying.

"What's the matter, Sudou?" crowed Housen. "Looks like you ain't a match for me, are ya?!"

"Damn it!!!" Sudou tightened his grip on his racket and raised it up in the air, intending to smash it on the ground.

"Sudou-kun, *no*," said Onodera.

"Wh—"

"Don't you know that whenever you lose your temper like that, you start making mistakes?"

"B-but!"

Sudou was rapidly getting more and more stressed out because he didn't have a way to vent his frustration. Housen, watching the situation from the other side, snickered at the sight.

"I mean, I can't exactly talk a big game myself as I haven't been able to return his serves either," Onodera said. "But you're clearly playing worse than you did in our previous matches. Don't you think so?"

She rightly pointed out that Sudou was moving with less precision because he was so fixated on the first-year.

"I can't let you serve as you are right now, Sudou-kun," she added, ball in hand. She wanted Sudou to be on defense as she served.

Onodera launched the ball with the kind of power and sharpness that one might not expect from a girl, much less one with no tennis experience. Housen quickly managed to close the distance between himself and the ball and responded with beautiful technique, as if the racket were a part of him. Sudou

reached out to return the ball, but despite his valiant efforts, he managed to just nick the ball with the edge of his racket, and it landed on his side of the court.

The first-year team won the game without Sudou and Onodera scoring a single time.

"Guess you ain't too hot after all, eh, Sudou?" Housen sneered. "You're like a whiny little yappy dog. A loser."

Housen was deeply enjoying this game, but the girl he was partnered up with couldn't hide how frightened she was. Still, during the game, Housen handled almost everything himself and it was practically a two-on-one battle.

However, while everyone expected that Housen would keep up this furious, one-sided onslaught in the second game, there was an unexpected turn of events. When he hit the ball, it didn't have the kind of momentum behind it that it did before. Onodera managed to react to it and send it back.

At that moment, she wondered if perhaps Housen was getting tired. But as those thoughts were running through her head, Housen swung wide and smashed the ball hard, sending it flying as fast as a speeding bullet. It shot straight for Onodera, who was protecting the front of the court. After the ball grazed her cheek, she winced in agonizing pain. Out of surprise and fear, she unintentionally dropped her racket, letting it fall to the floor.

"The hell?!" Sudou snarled at Housen. "You did that on purpose, didn't you?!"

"What? Hey man, it's only natural to aim for your opponent's body in tennis," Housen scoffed, proudly asserting the legitimacy of his move. "You aim too far from the body and the person's gonna send it back. Come on, you're just whining over one little shot, anyway."

"Damn it!!!" huffed Sudou.

Onodera hurriedly picked her racket up off the floor. "Don't worry. It just grazed me a bit... Besides, he's right. In tennis, you're supposed to aim near your opponent, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's what people who play tennis say. But this is the Sports Festival, ain't it?" Sudou complained irritably, as if to say he couldn't care less about how people normally played the game.

It was once again Sudou's turn to serve, but it was a fault and landed outside of the court. On his second serve attempt, the serve was in bounds, but Housen returned it easily. The ball didn't have much force behind it, and Onodera caught it beautifully with her racket and sent it back. After knocking the ball back and forth two or three times, Onodera came to the front again, returning it back. But after closing the distance between himself and the net, Housen swung down hard and spiked the ball directly back at her.

"Kyah?!"

Onodera stiffened, unable to swing her racket in time at the blazing fast ball, which was just as speedy as the one that had terrified her before. The ball grazed her side this time, but Sudou gritted his teeth and went for it, managing to hit it back. All the same, Housen continued his relentless volley and focused only on the area around Onodera. It was as if he were toying with her.

Eventually, the score came to Team Sudou with 3 points (40) and Team Housen with 2 points (30). Onodera still kept trying her absolute hardest, but after being shaken by another ball sent near her face, she twisted her left ankle and collapsed on the spot.

"Onodera!!!" shouted Sudou.

Onodera wasn't able to stand up. Sudou raced to cover her and returned the ball back to Housen. Sudou only barely managed to get the ball to land in bounds, but it still counted, and so Sudou's team had taken the second game.

But Sudou wasn't thrilled at his victory. He exploded in anger.

"What the hell is your problem?!" he yelled. "Can't you play fair?!"

"Dude, how many times do I gotta tell you this?" scoffed Housen. "It's just that your chick there sucks at this. She plays like crap. What a useless partner."

Onodera was unable to get back on her feet, but she spoke up quickly from where she was sitting on the floor to try and calm Sudou down. "Don't, Sudou-kun. It'll just be a repeat of before."

"I know, I know! But how the hell can I let him keep doin' this?!"

"It's true that even the judges are suspicious of him," she said. "But Sudou-kun, you understand that your mindset is getting in the way of your skills, right?"

It was clear that Housen had changed the way he was playing, focusing on tormenting Sudou instead of trying to win. The first-year figured he already had this tennis competition in the bag. Housen's goal had simply been to instill fear in Onodera, trying to get her to injure herself with just a single misstep.

"You gotta calm down, Sudou-kun," Onodera said in a kind but firm tone, despite the pain she was in.

Sudou, still angry, shot Housen a glare, but when he saw Onodera wincing in pain, he remembered what his priorities ought to be. He quickly rushed to get Onodera patched up since she had twisted her ankle.

"Aww, too bad. You lose. Oh, but wait, we have one more game to play, don't we. Guess that means you're gonna see hell, huh?" Housen casually mocked Onodera and Sudou with a yawn before turning to his partner.

"That son of a... He's going that far just to harass us; he totally did that on purpose... But are you okay?" Sudou asked, worried, as he looked at Onodera's left ankle.

"Yeah, more or less, I think," she replied. "But wow, I really am pathetic, huh... I got scared of the ball and tried to dodge, but I ended up slipping and twisting my ankle."

She gave a self-deprecating smile as she lightly tapped her leg, which was wrapped in tape.

"Hey, don't beat yourself up over it," Sudou told her. "That guy pisses me off so bad I could die, but he is an incredible athlete."

Even Sudou was terrified of the high-powered volleys that Housen could unleash with his superior physical strength. Unless you were an experienced tennis player or an active part of the tennis club, there was no way you'd be able to get over that fear so easily.

"You know, I... I've always really admired you, Sudou-kun. Ever since I started school here," said Onodera.

"Huh? Wait, what's this all about, all of a sudden? Just sit tight and let me keep patching you up."

"This might be a good thing, actually. Me getting hurt, I mean. It means that you've been given a little time to cool off," Onodera noted.

"You've got a lot of guts, Onodera... Wait, hold on, you admired me? Even the old me?"

"Yeah," she admitted. "But back then, you were the number one person I didn't want to associate with. You used to be *so* prickly."

"Ugh..." muttered Sudou, embarrassed.

"But still, even though other people around you criticized you for your behavior and your inability to study, I do respect people who really try their best at club stuff. Sudou-kun, you've got a lot of talent. And you try really, really hard," said Onodera.

"How do you know?" asked Sudou.

"I know," she insisted. "Sometimes when I headed back to my dorm late after club, I passed by the gym. And every time I took a peek inside, wondering if anybody was still there, I always saw that you were the last one practicing. You'd always clean up afterward too. You took it very seriously."

"Wh-what, you saw all that?" Sudou said. "I'm...kinda embarrassed..."

"But...you're never going to be appreciated by others, Sudou-kun, not with the way you are right now."

"...Huh?" he said, blinking.

"You got mad for my sake. I'm not saying that I'm upset about that, I don't hate it. But it still doesn't change the fact that you tend to lose your temper. If you don't change that, then someday it might land you in more trouble than ever before."

"...Well, I..."

"It'd be better for you if you fix that bad habit of yours."

"Y-yeah, I know, but..." said Sudou.

"You make even more mistakes when you're frustrated, right?" Onodera said. "Even in sports."

"Well... Yeah, I do," Sudou conceded. "Like, my success rates for shooting go way down and stuff..."

"It's the same for me," she told him. "When I get frustrated, I try harder and harder to get better, but then it just seems like I end up slower than normal. Not much good comes out of it."

"Wait, Onodera, you're like me too?"

"One time after I lost this big, important competition, I got so frustrated. 'What do I do now?!' And when I got to the locker, I was so mad I forgot to change, and just kind of went berserk... I ended up hurting my hand. It was pretty rough."

Onodera looked back on those days with some degree of fondness, but she also seemed embarrassed about it. She stuck her tongue out playfully.

"I realized back then that nothing good came out of being angry," she said. "Anger just comes back to bite you."

"How were you able to get your anger under control?" asked Sudou.

"Well, actually, from a magic spell that my senpai taught me."

"M-magic spell?" sputtered Sudou.

"Yeah. And I'll teach it to you, Sudou-kun. A magic spell to get your anger under control."

"H-how does it work?"

"Well, you know, anger flare-ups are actually kind of surprisingly short. They're generally a few seconds at most. So,

whenever I feel like yelling angrily, I just let it out inside, in my mind. Then, I'll take a deep breath and count to ten."

"So, like...you just count to ten whenever you get mad?"
Sudou blinked. "That's it?"

"That's it," Onodera nodded. "I think that'll really make all the difference. You should give it a try."

"...Okay." Though Sudou was skeptical, he committed what Onodera told him to memory.

"I wanted to team up with you *because* I admire you, Sudou-kun," she added. "Don't betray the faith I have in you."

"Onodera..."

After they finished wrapping Onodera's ankle, she tested how it felt and then stood up.

"It's all right," she said. "Anyway, this tournament all comes down to this one last game whether we like it or not. If we lose this game, we lose the tennis tournament. But if we win it, the tournament's ours."

"...Yeah," said Sudou.

The third game would be the deciding factor.

Housen continued targeting Onodera relentlessly now that the injury to her left leg had dulled her movements. Even in cases when Housen actually ended up getting scored on because he took it too far, he still showed no sign of letting up his assault on her.

Despite that, Team Sudou was leading now, with the score 3 (40) to 1 (15). Housen knew that if Team Sudou scored on him just one more time, the game would be over. Even so, he targeted Onodera once again, sending the ball hurling her way at high speed. This time, Onodera was unable to avoid it, and it smacked her directly in her right upper arm. Onodera crouched down, in pain.

"That's *not* how you're s'posed to play," Sudou snarled.
"Enough of this—!"

Sudou was so angry that he felt like his blood was coming to boil. But then he remembered the magic spell that Onodera had

taught him moments earlier. While glaring at Housen, the source of his repeated frustrations, Sudou let out silent shouts of anger in his mind. *Ten seconds of anger.* He just had to hold it for ten seconds. He began counting, 1, 2, 3, and so on, and then took a deep breath to help get his emotions in check.

8... 9... 10...

Sudou took those insults that he wanted to hurl at Housen and kept them inside, swallowing his worlds back down. Although his irritation hadn't completely disappeared, he succeeded in taking a step back, calming down, and looking objectively at the situation. He took stock of everything: the judges' suspicious eyes, Onodera's gaze, the fact that this was a game that needed to be won, and their remaining time. Sudou knew that if he got into it with Housen again, he'd naturally be put in check himself.

"Onodera, do you believe in my strength?" he asked.

"Of course I do," she replied after a moment. "I'm playing together with you because I believe."

Sudou took a deep breath and centered himself again. Then, he tossed the ball up into the air and made the best serve of the entire day. Without missing a beat, Housen returned Sudou's ball, and from that point on, Sudou and Housen began knocking it back and forth, back and forth, like something out of a sports manga. Both players kept hitting the ball with incredible intensity, not letting up one bit. But one time, Housen was a little lacking in his return, and Sudou didn't miss his chance. He smashed the ball back into Housen's side of the court.

"Yaaaaaaahhhh!!!" Sudou, still holding onto his racket, let out a victorious war cry that carried all throughout the gymnasium.

"We did it!" shouted Onodera.

Having been dominating for so long only to slip up and lose in the endgame because of his carelessness, Housen was immensely frustrated. He slammed his racket onto the court hard, snapping it in two.

"We won, Onodera! It's all thanks to you!" Sudou, still in a total adrenaline rush, excitedly ran over to Onodera and hugged

her intensely, sharing his enthusiasm.



"Wh-wh-wh-whah?!" Onodera didn't understand what had happened and was flustered. "Wai—ouch! That hurts, Sudou-kun!!!"

When Sudou heard Onodera shout out in pain after he hugged her tightly with his thick, burly arms, he quickly regained his composure.

"S-sorry! My bad!"

Perhaps Sudou was just so happy that he had been able to control his anger in addition to achieving victory, but he had the biggest smile of the day on his face at that moment.

"Congratulations on the victory, Sudou-kun," said Onodera.

"Thanks, Onodera. We definitely would have lost if it weren't for you, though."

"That's not true. If anything, I probably held you back..." she replied.

"I don't wanna say it was a good thing that you got hurt and all, but when it happened and I lost my temper, I really thought we were gonna lose then," Sudou admitted. "But you brought me back from that."

"I see," said Onodera. "In that case, I guess...that means we're good partners, huh?"

"Yeah. You're super easy to play with, and you're dependable. You're, like, the best partner, Onodera, for real! Oh, I sure hope that Suzune's around here somewhere and she saw our win just now..."

There were quite a few guests and students around, though, and Sudou wasn't able to find Horikita right away.

"Suzune, huh..." murmured Onodera.

"Huh? Where?" exclaimed Sudou. "Do you see where she's at?!"

"Oh, um, um, sorry. Wrong person, I guess."

"Damn. Welp, maybe she's out on the field or somethin'..."

"Hey, um... How about we get dinner together sometime? Like after we're done with club stuff and heading back to the dorms?" asked Onodera.

"Huh?" said Sudou. "Oh, sure, that's fine with me. Anyway, though, help me find Suzune. Where the heck are ya? Suzune!"

"Aha ha ha, sorry, but I'll pass on that," said Onodera.

Despite the fact the game was over, Housen must not have been satisfied, because he strolled up to Sudou. "'Sup Sudou. Don't get carried away after winnin' a game like this, got it? You do realize that if I had actually taken this seriously, I would've beaten you into the ground, right?" he said. "I think I wanna settle this with you outside, so follow me."

"Hey, hold on just a—"

Onodera was about to step in and say something to Housen now that he was here trying to pick a fight, but Sudou quietly held her back.

"Truth is, I got some beef with this guy from a little while back," Sudou said. "I ain't surprised he's trying to get in my face."

"B-but!" protested Onodera.

Onodera wanted to protect Sudou and keep him from getting into trouble, but Sudou just smiled back at her. He then turned to Housen.

"Sorry, but I don't feel like goin' along with whatever this is," he told him.

"Huh? Who said anything about you goin' along with it or not?" Housen scoffed. "Startin' now, you're gonna be my punching bag."

"Sorry, not interested, dude."

After Sudou rejected his demands for a fight, Housen shoulder-checked Sudou and drove his clenched fist right into Sudou's abdomen. Struck by Housen's powerful punch, even though Housen hadn't even wound up his arm for it, Sudou fell to his knees.

"Sudou-kun!" exclaimed Onodera, worried.

However, Sudou gestured to her to stay back with a wave of his hand and slowly got back onto his feet. A teacher rushed over to see what the matter was, but Sudou simply said that nothing had happened, and the teacher left.

"Ow. Ah... Dude, I already know you're good in a fight," Sudou said. "I can't complain too much because I was in the wrong back then too. But y'know, if you go any further with this, I'm really gonna have to let the teachers step in."

"God, you're pathetic," sneered Housen. "So what? You were way more fun when you came at me before, y'know?"

"Maybe, I dunno," replied Sudou. "Let's go, Onodera."

"Y-yeah," said Onodera.

"Ugh, you're such a boring little brat. Don't you ever get in my face again," snapped Housen.

If anything, Housen telling him that actually came as a relief to Sudou. It meant that if he didn't do anything to bother Housen himself, there wasn't going to be any more trouble. Sudou learned that by not giving in to his anger, he had been able to turn the situation around into something much more positive.

"Y'know, I guess I ought to be grateful to Housen too," he said. "When I see him like that, tryin' to pulverize anyone and everyone around him, I realize how seriously lame I must've looked. It makes me cringe so hard, it hurts. I can't really put this into words too well, but... When I tried that trick you taught me, it's like somethin' inside me just suddenly...stopped. It's like, why was I so angry all the time? It's almost like there was some evil spirit that was in me and now it's gone."

While Sudou was grateful for winning all ten competitions he had been in consecutively, he was just as appreciative of the Sports Festival overall. And, of course, of Onodera too.

Chapter 7: The Guest

IT WAS AROUND eleven o'clock in the morning, and I could just faintly hear the cheers from the other side of my closed windows. It sounded like the Sports Festival was in full swing. I didn't want to assume everything was going smoothly, of course, but even so, the class was certainly putting in the effort to win it. Horikita's class could hold their own well against the other classes and other grade levels too. It was that conclusion that had allowed me to choose, without hesitation, not to attend the Sports Festival myself.

I had taken care of all of the necessary arrangements on my end, so I just had to leave the rest to Chairman Sakayanagi. Although the fact that he was the chairman didn't necessarily mean that I could fully trust him, it was easy to decide whether I could or couldn't trust him at all—because of course, it would be virtually impossible for me to remain at this school if he were to betray me. All that was left now was to wonder what kinds of battles the second-year students would face at the Sports Festival and what the results would be...and how greatly Sakayanagi's presence or absence would affect the outcome.

I looked at the door. I had come up with a strategy to contain Sakayanagi, but...it was a little too late to see what the effects would be. I was concerned about a number of things, but I supposed that I'd just have to wait and see. And that included matters with the Sports Festival too.

I think it's about time I started getting lunch ready, I thought to myself. Just as that thought crossed my mind though, my doorbell finally rang. Now then, was this visitor going to be a welcome presence or not? I wouldn't know for sure until I tried dealing with the situation.

As I kept my distance from the door and watched to see what would happen, a voice came from the other side of the door, as if whoever was standing there had anticipated my cautiousness.

"Hello, Ayanokouji-kun."

I lowered my guard somewhat and reached out. I placed my hand on the door. I tried to imagine various scenarios, but from the moment she entered the dormitory it was as though I had lost. The person standing on the other side of my door was none other than Sakayanagi, dressed in her casual clothes.

She looked up at me with a broad smile on her face. "I'm terribly sorry, but would you mind letting me in for a moment?" she said. "Though I am only forbidden from leaving the dormitory building proper, I'm afraid that visiting a male student's rooms during the Sports Festival could also be somewhat problematic."

"Coming inside my room might be even *more* problematic," I pointed out.

Still, I decided not to turn Sakayanagi away and welcomed her inside.

"Please pardon the intrusion," she said. Sakayanagi took off her shoes and came into my room, her physical limitations making her movements slow.

"Come to think of it, this is the first time you've come to my room, Sakayanagi."

"That's because I don't often visit anyone's room," she replied. "Have you already had lunch?"

"I was just thinking of making something," I replied.

"I see. That's good then. I brought this with me to say thank you for the invitation," said Sakayanagi as she handed me a small plastic bag. "I bought these at the convenience store early this morning. It's apparently a new product, and since I had the opportunity, I thought I'd like to eat it with you."

When I took a peek inside the plastic bag, I saw two small Mont Blanc cakes inside. I figured it'd be a good idea to brew some coffee if we were going to have sweets like those.

"It'd be better to sit on the bed rather than the floor," I said. "Sit down anywhere you like."

"Thank you very much for your thoughtfulness," replied Sakayanagi.

After directing Sakayanagi to sit on the bed, I went over to the kitchen, turned on the faucet, and started filling the teapot with water.

"It doesn't seem like you came here to visit me on a simple whim," I remarked.

I said it with a straight face, but Sakayanagi chuckled softly like she found something amusing about it. "People don't normally know who's in the dormitory. People would not expect that I, the leader of Class A, would be visiting your room all alone, Ayanokouji-kun."

Anyone, no matter who you asked, would be surprised if they saw Sakayanagi come to my room. They'd suspect that something was up, and that was exactly why Sakayanagi never made contact with me in the dormitory. Until today, that is.

"You really are a bad person, aren't you, Ayanokouji-kun? This was your strategy, wasn't it?"

"Strategy? What do you mean?"

"*Fu fu*. No need to put on an act. You were almost certain that I'd be coming here today, Ayanokouji-kun," she said. "Actually, no, let me amend that statement. You were absolutely certain of it. Weren't you?"

It seemed as though Sakayanagi had completely seen through my trap without needing to think very much.

"We, Class A, have fewer students," she said. "We have an immediate disadvantage in this Sports Festival right from the starting line. Moreover, although we do have capable students like Kitou-kun and Hashimoto-kun, on average, Class A falls short of Horikita-san's class. As such, if we were to win, we would need to determine what person should be participating in what competition and manage our schedules down to the second while simultaneously keeping an eye on which of our rivals are participating in what events."

I turned the teapot on, and it started to quietly bring the water to a boil. I then took a can of coffee out from the cupboard along with cups and a coffee filter.

"You did this because you didn't know how the situation might turn out if I participated," she added.

"You have a high opinion of yourself, I see, same as always," I replied.

"The best way to ensure that the other classes beat Class A in the Sports Festival was to make sure I didn't take part."

The Sports Festival went along according to a very precise schedule. Knowing Sakayanagi, she could direct her classmates and organize her players well and get them into the appropriate placements. Moreover, she could have coordinated event participation using students from other grade levels too.

"Last night, my father told me that he wished for you to be absent from the Sports Festival," she went on. "He said it was to possibly prevent someone from the White Room attending as a guest from coming into contact with you. He said that he was going to assign someone to watch the dormitory too."

"It's true that Chairman Sakayanagi asked me not to participate, but I never thought that he'd tell his daughter about it," I replied.

"Surely you must be joking," she said. "You're the one who instructed my father to tell me, Ayanokouji-kun, aren't you?"

She had seen right through me, as though what I had done had been simply a matter of course. Even though she was his daughter, Chairman Sakayanagi would never mix his personal and professional lives. That was why I had asked him to tell his daughter what was going on himself, rather than having me explain to her. I had requested that he explain the situation to his daughter beforehand, as she was someone who could have likely missed the Sports Festival anyway due to health concerns anyway, telling her that it was possible she could get wrapped up in whatever trouble came as a result of me and the White Room.

As the leader of Class A, Sakayanagi had been surprisingly willing to participate in the Sports Festival, but I couldn't imagine that the chairman knew about that. And even if he had known, he would also decide it would be safer to just have her take the day off from the Sports Festival regardless. Since she was his own daughter, he would have known that if something happened, there was a risk that she might stick her neck out to help me.

However, there were some things that not even the chairman could predict. He didn't realize that his daughter's instincts and her curiosity were not easily suppressed. If I was going to be absent, it was natural that she would think of it as a good opportunity for the two of us to have a nice, long, undisturbed conversation. She had even showed up outside the door to my room, which was considered to be the most dangerous place of all, without any fear.

"Did you choose to come here before noon just to make me nervous?" I asked.

"I wanted to tease you a little bit, Ayanokouji-kun," she admitted. "And I wanted to make you wonder if I had perhaps ignored your strategy and decided to participate in the Sports Festival anyway."

"I see."

"Incidentally, you and I are the only two students who are absent from the event, Ayanokouji-kun. Everyone else is attending."

From the sound of it, Sakayanagi's information network had kept her abreast of who was participating from each class. She must have gotten reports via phone before the Sports Festival began. There had apparently been no oversights on that point either.

"Anyway, even though I did end up being mean to you by arriving just now, I honestly did plan on visiting you a little earlier in the day," Sakayanagi said.

The water just started coming to a boil in the pot, shaking about inside.

"I went down to the lobby a few moments ago, to check on the situation outside," she added.

I was, at least ostensibly, on sick leave, so I was strictly forbidden from leaving my room. Sakayanagi, on the other hand, wasn't able to leave the dormitory building, but she wasn't out on actual sick leave. Even though she'd get a warning in the unlikely event that she stepped outside the building, it wasn't like she'd be violating the reason for her absence if she did.

"So, how were things down on the first floor?" I asked.

"There were three people there who I assumed to be security guards. It appears that they aren't only stationed to stand watch here in this dormitory, but rather they're meant to patrol the entire school so that their presence doesn't appear unnatural."

That was likely because while they were here to protect me, they were mostly security professionals meant to protect government officials.

"The MVP in today's Sports Festival and the one who made victory a certainty is neither Horikita-san, who proposed a partnership with Ryuuen-kun, nor Ryuuen-kun, who accepted her offer," she then said. "Ayanokouji-kun, you're the one who had the final word to guarantee my absence from the event. That alone was what it took to decide the winner. Bravo. I expected as much from you."

"But we still don't necessarily know how it'll turn out in the end," I replied.

"It's true that the tables could be turned unexpectedly, but it's unlikely. I would think that by now, Class A is completely at the mercy of Horikita-san's class, who is fighting this battle head-on, and Ryuuen-kun's class, who is employing every trick imaginable. Even if a body has excellent arms and legs, it can't do anything without a head. That's the sort of class I've been building, after all."

Similar things could be said for Ryuuen's class, but generally, the issue in Sakayanagi's class was that it was too strong at the top. The fact that the leader solved all problems meant that, on the flip side, nothing could be solved if the leader wasn't around.

"Well, it's all right," she said. "In exchange for losing 150 points in this event, I will be enjoying my time together with you, Ayanokouji-kun."

She didn't seem to care even the slightest bit about any damage being done to Class A.

"You're not afraid of a drop in Class Points," I remarked.

"This school's systems are a game to me," she replied. "As long as I maintain Class A's position to some extent, there's no problem."

At any rate, since she had gone through the trouble of bringing Mont Blanc cakes to enjoy, I took them out of their packaging and brought them to the table on two plates. Then, I poured hot water from the pot into the filter with coffee grounds in it.

"It seems like you're used to doing this," observed Sakayanagi as she watched my movements.

"This isn't really that big a deal for me."

"I suppose that these kinds of things, like preparing coffee and so on, are new and fun for you. Isn't that right, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Sakayanagi knew as well as I that these were the sort of things we never did in the White Room.

"The same goes for everything at this school, really," I said. "I just wanted to do normal things is all."

At any rate, I was curious about what Sakayanagi had said moments earlier.

"It seems like you have a sense of purpose in maintaining Class A. Is that pride on your part, Sakayanagi?" I asked, as I placed milk and sugar packets on the table.

"At first, I didn't have any real commitment to Class A," she said. "But when I learned that you were here in this school, Ayanokouji-kun, my objective changed. I thought when you eventually led your class and moved up to Class B, we might be able to have a serious fight. Don't you agree?"

To put it in simpler terms, she was basically saying that she was waiting for me from atop her throne.

"Class D lost all of its Class Points in the first semester of our first year," she went on. "However, at some point, you began to increase your number of Class Points. Now, you've finally managed to reach Class B as well. The reason for this, of course, was you, Ayanokouji-kun, working from the shadows."

Sakayanagi spoke happily and eloquently, as though she were bragging about her own accomplishments. She picked up a plate off the table and placed it in her lap.

"Let's eat, Ayanokouji-kun."

She urged me to sit down next to her on the bed. I didn't refuse and I simply went over and sat down next to her. I had to wonder what she was thinking, because she stabbed the Mont Blanc with a fork, scooped up a piece of it, and held it out toward me.

"Here," she said.

"...Here, what?" I asked.

"Can you not tell just by looking? Please take a bite."

"No, I can tell, it's just..."

"Surely there isn't any problem, is there? It's just you and I here right now, Ayanokouji-kun. No one will bother us."

I had wondered if there was some underlying motive at play, but that didn't seem to be the case here. I took the forkful in my mouth and the sweetness filled my senses. This was, in fact, the very first time I had ever eaten a Mont Blanc.

"Is it good?" she asked.

To be honest, I didn't care for the taste. I personally thought that a simple shortcake had a more pleasing flavor. However, I didn't want to complain about a gift.

"Yeah," I answered.

Receiving that simple, one-word answer, Sakayanagi smiled warmly.

"Well then, I'll have some too," she said.

She scooped up a bite for herself and brought it to her own mouth, not caring at all that it was the same fork she used to feed me.

"It's not quite as good as what they have in the café, but it's still satisfying as sweets you can get from a convenience store." She nodded in satisfaction with that, and then offered a forkful to me once more. Since we were both eating the same piece of cake, we quickly polished off the first Mont Blanc.

"I'll bring a different cake next time," said Sakayanagi.

"Huh?" I blinked at her.

"I could tell from your reaction that it wasn't quite to your taste, Ayanokouji-kun."

"...I thought I said it tasted good though, when you asked me."

"I am quite proud to say that I possess excellent insight, and particularly so when it comes to you, Ayanokouji-kun."

I never imagined that she'd be able to see through me like that and figure out what I was feeling.

"You never show any openings when you're in a serious contest of thought," she added, "but, surprisingly enough, you can't really hide what you're thinking in personal matters like this."

"Maybe that's because I'm not used to it, I guess," I answered.

"*Fu fu.* Well, I like that part of you too." I couldn't tell whether she was being serious or if she was joking when she said that. In any case, she carried on, "Please allow me to try again. I'll find another delicious cake and bring it to you."

"If we find another time like this where people won't see us, then sure," I agreed.

Whether it was on regular weekdays or on holidays didn't matter—it would be next to impossible for us to meet unless it was during a time when people were out of the dorms. Well, I

supposed we could consider meeting in the early morning or late at night, but that would naturally lead to other problems.

"Anyway, I have to say, this change of heart you've gone through is quite curious, Ayanokouji-kun," said Sakayanagi. "Why is it that you have started pursuing Class A in earnest instead of just occasionally helping out here and there in school? Wasn't your original intention simply to quietly observe?"

"I guess there are things that not even you understand," I answered.

"I'm not a god. Moreover, I understand your situation, Ayanokouji-kun, but there are parts of your thinking that I haven't caught up with yet and that I don't fully understand. Could you please enlighten me?"

A genius, driven by the unknown, was looking for answers. The main reason why Sakayanagi wasn't interested in the whole Class A through Class D ranking issue was probably because it wouldn't matter either way for her after graduation. As the daughter of the school's chancellor and someone who was already quite academically gifted herself, Sakayanagi would be able to achieve most everything on her own already. She didn't need to use the privileges that came with graduating from Class A for anything, so she wasn't fixated on it.

I could say that the same applied to me as well since I would be going back to the White Room after graduation. Though we were headed in different directions, I understood very well that the privileges of Class A didn't mean anything for either of us.

"I guess it might seem strange, yeah," I conceded.

"I can't imagine you're doing it so you can live it up extravagantly with a surplus of Private Points like Kouenji-kun."

"He's probably in a similar position to us, anyway," I said.

He was the type of person who could get by on his parents' influence and his own talents. Kouenji contributed to the class occasionally to help get Class Points on his own whims.

"I suppose you at least have the right to ask the reason why I'm contributing to the class," I said. "After all, you did walk right

into my obvious trap and practically threw away a win at the Sports Festival."

If you risked losing 150 Class Points and gained nothing in return, there would be no way forward for you. But if Sakayanagi could leave a trail of breadcrumbs, she could leave her opponents wondering if the same strategy would work again.

"To respond to what you're thinking about, yes, I'll come here once again if the same thing happens," said Sakayanagi.

"Don't just say my thoughts out loud."

"*Fu fu fu.*"

"Basically, what I'm doing is the same thing you're trying to do, Sakayanagi," I told her. "You're trying to find the answer to what *genius* means, by defeating me. I guess what I'm trying to prove, in my own way, is that the education of the White Room is by no means perfect."

I didn't get the impression that Sakayanagi was surprised by this. That was evidence to me that she already assumed I had this line of thinking, even if she didn't have any hard proof.

"So you're trying to create the strongest class with your own two hands, Ayanokouji-kun," she said. "Is that right?"

I nodded in affirmation.

Sakayanagi placed the pad of her pointer finger on her lips. "I can't say that I haven't considered that before, but...it does leave me with some questions," she said.

"I'm sure."

"The Sports Festival... Despite the circumstances, you could have forged ahead and participated anyway, Ayanokouji-kun. I'm sure that, had you been providing instructions directly on the battlefield, you would have increased your class's chances of winning even more and turned it into a sure victory, no? I'm sure you were not afraid of me participating either."

"I approached this Sports Festival with one idea in mind."

"That is a rather interesting statement. And what idea is that?"

"‘Careful observation.’ I decided that this would be a good opportunity to see how well the other students could fight on their own without my direct intervention. Your absence was a byproduct of that, I guess.”

“So, I’ve come to see you only because you decided to observe, Ayanokouji-kun. Not because of anything you did directly regarding the events of the Sports Festival... I see.”

As she spoke, Sakayanagi quickly arrived at the conclusion, ahead of everyone else. “Meaning—”

Just as she was about to give the answer, I gently shoved her from the front. Well, actually, it was probably an exaggeration to call what I did a shove. I had gently grabbed both of her shoulders and gave her a light push. Sakayanagi was completely powerless and unable to resist, so she fell backward. There was a light *pomf* sound as she hit the mattress, followed by the slight creak of metal. Even Sakayanagi, who prided herself on being a genius, must not have even considered that I’d do something like this.

Before she could wrap her mind around what was going on, I looked down at her from above as though I was hanging over her.

“A-Ayanokouji-kun?”

The normally confident and relaxed Sakayanagi was unable to keep up with the shift in this situation.



"I'm living my life here at this school according to my plan," I told her. "The fact that you came to my room today, and that you showed interest in my plan, along with the possibility you'd arrive at the answer, and that there would be a route to arrive at that conclusion—that was all part of that plan too."

Sakayanagi had probably never had a man looming over her like this before. She cleared her throat, perhaps out of worry or nervousness.

"If you tell anyone else about what we discussed today, it will hinder my objective," I added.

"Do you...think that I would tell anyone?" she asked.

"Well, we can't say that there's zero possibility of that, can we? If you were to threaten me and tell me I had to have a showdown with you or you'd expose me, then I would have no choice but to accept."

"I see, that's certainly... Yes. But, if I were willing to coerce you into a competition by doing something like that, then...couldn't I have just told others about the White Room?" she suggested.

"No, that wouldn't have worked," I replied. "Even if you made knowledge of a facility like that public, it's just not something other people would understand. It also wouldn't be a risk to me personally."

"Ayanokouji was raised in an educational institution called the White Room." Most people would probably just give you a confused look if you said something like that. There wasn't any way to find more information on the internet either. If Sakayanagi made claims about the White Room, it might cause some small degree of confusion, but I obviously wouldn't do anything about it.

"But what I'm trying to do isn't yet at the stage where I can let people know about," I added. "So, you could use it as a means to extort me."

When I drew slightly closer to Sakayanagi, a deep shadow fell over her as I blocked the light from the ceiling.

"So I suppose this means that I found out about your plan by chance... What will you do?" she asked me.

"A secret for a secret," I replied. "A threat for a threat. You and I are the only people in this dorm right now. Which means that no one would come to your rescue if something were to happen. Even if you scream, it wouldn't carry beyond the hallway."

"Surely you're not considering going so far as committing a crime to protect your plan, are you?" said Sakayanagi.

"A crime? No. You and I are going to come to an agreement, to share secrets," I told her.

I took out my phone and turned on the camera.

"The only way for you to refuse this agreement would be for you to run off on your own," I added.

Considering the condition of her legs... Well, no, even if there weren't any problem with her legs, there was no way for Sakayanagi to get out. How would she respond in this hopeless situation?

"...Do you think you can beat me?" she asked.

"Beat you?" I repeated.

"Even if things are going the way that you expect them to, Ayanokouji-kun...can you *really* say that you have the upper hand? That's what I mean."

"Sorry, but you don't stand a chance of winning against me."

"You can catch up and overtake people by learning more, such as with a slight difference in experience. But in fact, you might learn that *you've* been learning things the wrong way, you know?" she asked.

Even when she had been driven into a tight corner, Sakayanagi continued to think as calmly and rationally as possible. She must have been feeling flustered, but it was impressive that she had been able to deal with the situation thus far. I tossed my phone down toward the bottom of my bed and then slowly moved my hand toward Sakayanagi. I grabbed her shoulder, and then I brought my hand to the nape of her neck. Even still, all Sakayanagi did was avert her eyes.

"Let's begin a special lesson, shall we?" I asked.

Sakayanagi had a broad grin on her face. She quietly closed her eyes and offered no resistance.

7.1

“YOU REALLY ARE a mean person,” said Sakayanagi.

“Maybe so,” I replied.

About an hour had passed since Sakayanagi had come to my room.

“And now there’s a secret between you and I that we cannot tell anyone about, Ayanokouji-kun,” she said.

“That’s a misleading way of putting it.”

“You were the one who caused this misunderstanding in the first place, though. No?”

“Yeah, you’re right about that.”

“Nevertheless, this was the first time I had ever been in a man’s bed, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“It was for less than ten seconds, so it probably doesn’t count.”

“You’re making light of a girl’s commemorative event.”

I showed Sakayanagi my phone, letting her see the screen as I proceeded to select and delete the necessary items. Perhaps I slid through pictures too fast as I was doing that as a picture of Kei and I came up. It showed the two of us at Keyaki Mall.

“Your relationship with Karuizawa Kei-san seems to be going well,” Sakayanagi remarked.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said.

While looking at the picture of Kei smiling happily, Sakayanagi spoke once more.

“So...maybe you were attracted to her looks, her voice, or her personality, Ayanokouji-kun,” she mused. “Well, one would normally think so, but there are some things there that don’t quite add up.”

Sakayanagi looked up at me with a sharp look in her eyes. The expression on her face was like she was fighting with me.

"I looked into your girlfriend as much as I was able. I looked into everything, from what she does after class to what she does on her days off. With how things are right now, it's quite easy to follow you, Ayanokouji-kun."

As long as the entire third-year student body was monitoring me, I couldn't pay attention to every little thing. It would be difficult for me to pick up on Sakayanagi's spies if they were added into the mix. I wouldn't have noticed Hashimoto, someone who I knew had tailed me before, or someone else for that matter, if they were following me.

"I was unable to ascertain the real reason you chose to go out with her, Ayanokouji-kun, but certain things did become apparent," Sakayanagi went on. "Her behavior, namely her strong trust in you and affection for you, could almost be described as blind faith. Are you going to be using her for some kind of experiment in the future? Or are you trying to help her? I have deduced that the reason is something along those lines."

I didn't recall giving Sakayanagi any extra information on my part. I didn't think that she had as much information on Kei as Ryuuен did, but she was still able to make an estimation that was incredibly close to the truth.

"Was that what your special lesson for me was about?" she asked.

"I have to say, I'm getting tired of using the word *brilliant*, but honestly, you are," I replied.

Unlike with Kei, Sakayanagi and I were able to communicate and understand each other without using words.

Ding-dong.

My doorbell suddenly rang. It was a completely innocuous, ordinary sound. It was just around 12:30 p.m. now, around the time that students would be finishing their meals. A visitor had suddenly shown up outside my door when there wasn't supposed

to be anyone in the dormitory. After Sakayanagi and I exchanged glances, we simultaneously turned to stare at my front door.

There were supposed to be three bodyguards in the lobby on watch. Did someone force their way in? If someone had the incredible skill to subdue those armed guards, that would mean more problems. If that were the case though, whoever it was, they would have likely barged into my room without ringing my bell and waiting around like this.

My doorbell rang once more.

It would probably raise suspicion if I ignored it any longer since this person was operating on the assumption that I was resting in my room. It was also possible, though unlikely, that this person was a school official.

"Who's there?" I asked, without moving from my position on the bed.

"Stay where you are and listen," responded the visitor.

Whoever it was, he must have been able to tell from the sound of my voice that I was sitting far away from the door. It was the voice of a young man. Not an adult, but someone my own age.

"You sound familiar," I said.

However, the visitor's identity wasn't coming to my mind. Judging from the voice, he sounded like he was a student. And while I couldn't place exactly who it was, he was definitely familiar. Of course, if you were living on campus, you would inevitably hear a large number of different voices all the time. Even so, I immediately recognized that I had definitely heard this voice somewhere.

"You called me once," I added.

When I made that remark, the person standing on the other side of the door remained silent for a short while.

"Impressive," he said. "You remembered my voice after only hearing it once."

The fact that this was coming after my father paid a visit to this school also made an impression on me.

"You didn't say anything that sounded like you wanted something from me back then," I pointed out.

"It was good that I didn't," said the visitor. "Something unfortunate happened afterward. I haven't made contact with you since then, but... Anyway, I'm sure you're probably curious who I am, but it doesn't matter. I am neither friend nor foe to you."

"In that case, why'd you come?" I asked.

"I'm sure you're thinking that once you've eliminated Tsukishiro and any students from the White Room, peace will return. I came here to advise you that such thinking is a mistake."

"*Fu fu*," Sakayanagi chuckled. "This sounds like quite an interesting conversation. Would you mind if I joined in?"

"Sakayanagi Arisu, huh..."

The young man on the other side of the door showed no sign whatsoever that he was perturbed by Sakayanagi's unexpected comment. In fact, he was able to identify her immediately just after hearing her. Had he figured that out by narrowing down the list of everyone absent today? Or did he recognize her voice?

"At any rate, if you want to stay at this school until graduation, do be on alert," said the visitor.

"You say you're neutral, but you're giving me support," I said.

"Your presence is causing a negative impact. I just want to prevent anything further." His voice then trailed off. Apparently, this person must not have intended to stay for very long as it sounded as if he had walked away already.

"That voice..." Sakayanagi mused. "Where have I...?"

"Do you have any idea who that was?" I asked.

"Like you, I'm afraid I don't have a clear answer to that question, Ayanokouji-kun. However, I just had a feeling that I've heard that voice from the other side of the door somewhere."

So, in other words, I could take what Sakayanagi said to mean that she remembered hearing that voice someplace else, but someplace different from where I heard it.

"It wasn't recent," she added. "Five, maybe ten years... It's a fairly old memory."

"If that's the case, then the chances of that person being a White Room student are slim to none," I said.

"Yes. If I met whoever that person was when I was small, that's true," she agreed.

It was understandable, then, how he reacted when he learned that Sakayanagi was here in my room. Not only was he not surprised, but he reacted as though she were someone he was acquainted with. But whether I was dealing with Amasawa or that man, this occurrence wasn't something I cared about. As long as there wasn't any harm being done to me at the moment, then I wasn't inclined to bother.

7.2

THE SPORTS FESTIVAL, which I wasn't present for, ended in almost an ideal manner. The class too was in total excitement over the final results, the likes of which would've been unthinkable at any other time in the past year and a half. The gap between Horikita's class and Class A had narrowed, and Horikita's class now had undeniably significant assets thanks to a growth in Class Points through the Uninhabited Island Exam, the Unanimous Special Exam, and the Sports Festival. Several days had passed since then, and it was now just after the middle of October.

The Sports Festival rankings were as follows: Horikita's class came in first place, Ryuuuen's class came in second place, Ichinose's class ended in third place, and Sakayanagi's class was in fourth place. Of course, it wasn't as though any one person was responsible for these rankings; it was the will and the strength of the class as a whole. Furthermore, Sudou and Onodera each took first place respectively for individual scores. Kouenji also placed first in all ten competitions he took part in, but since all of his were individual competitions, he took second overall.

Kouenji seemed satisfied with that though, and no problems had arisen. Sudou and Onodera were each presented with the option of transferring classes, but they chose the Private Points rewards instead without hesitation. While there were still some points of concern with Horikita's class, they were most certainly heading toward Class A.

Kei apparently had plans to meet up with a friend today, so I decided to stop by Keyaki Mall and head back to my dorm room after that. As I walked back alone though, Horikita came up to me.

"I'd like to speak to you for a moment, if you don't mind," she said.

"As long as we can walk and talk, then sure," I replied. "I'm heading back to the dorms."

"That's fine."

Since she had gone out of her way to come talk to me when I was on my way back to the dormitory, it must not've been something she wanted too many people to overhear.

"I learned a great deal from the Unanimous Special Exam," said Horikita.

"And what would that be?" I asked.

The Sports Festival was over, but her problems hadn't all been solved. While there were some instabilities remaining, the class was starting to move forward again. In the midst of all of that, Horikita was troubled but was apparently learning from it.

"I wasn't wrong," she said. "In making the choice to keep Kushida-san, I mean. I can see once again that I made the correct decision."

Horikita demanded results from her, and Kushida responded by contributing to the class, even earning points in the Sports Festival. She was once again being a diligent honors student in her daily school life, and although her Societal Contribution score in OAA had fallen slightly from the top in the beginning of October, it was probably only a matter of time before she regained her position. If I were to make an unforgiving comparison, Kushida was contributing far, far more to the class than Airi could. Of course, it wasn't though the decision was one that only came with benefits.

"I know, you know," Horikita continued. "And I know that there are still some matters of concern, especially the issue of Hasebe-san. I honestly don't know what to do about her. But, if there is another special exam like that one, I think that I'll be able to handle it better when the time comes."

"And your basis for saying that is?" I asked.

"I made an ill-advised promise to the class during that test in order to reach a unanimous decision," she said. "I said that the traitor would be expelled, and then I went back on my word. Making that promise was an easy shortcut to getting a unanimous decision, but I didn't understand the magnitude of that risk. I already knew deep down that Kushida-san was the traitor. Also, I made the decision to make that promise even though I hadn't

made up my mind about letting Kushida-san be expelled. That was a mistake."

"If there was a possibility that you were going to keep Kushida from the start, then it's definitely true that making a careless promise like that would only end up coming back to bite you," I agreed.

Horikita's decision back then was a last resort and made as time was about to run out. But even so, it was true that if the class had come to a unanimous decision at that time, with Horikita leaving the possibility that Airi or other dead weight students similar to her in terms of ability could be the ones expelled, the aftereffects wouldn't be as significant as they were now. What had been thrown away, and what had been gained?

"We gained Class Points," Horikita said. "But we also lost more than a few things. That special exam taught me a lot. It showed me both success and failure."

"I imagine that you'd rather not fail, though," I replied.

Horikita closed her eyes, suddenly took a deep breath, and then opened her eyes once more. "I'm still only in my second year of high school. I'm a child. Failing is a good thing."

"You've reconsidered things," I said.

"It's not like me to agonize over things, to be stuck on the fence. I...I'm going to be like myself. I may not be able to do things as well as the other leaders. But Hirata-kun is here, and Karuizawa-san is here, and so are Sudou-kun and Onodera-san, and Kushida-san and Kouenji-kun too. With their support, I'll move forward. I've decided to think of it like Class A is there, waiting ahead."

"I see."

"And I count you among those with me, of course. I don't know what you're thinking, and you're totally uncooperative in many ways, but...you are indispensable to the class, and to me."

My presence was somewhat like training wheels on a bicycle. Even if it was indispensable at first, you'd take them off, fall down

a bit, and then be a bit wobbly as you tried to ride forward. Then, eventually, you'd be able to ride without difficulty.

You're not supported by only one person as you're pedaling that bicycle, Horikita. You're supported by your classmates. And after I make sure you mature a little more—

I'll leave your class.

I wasn't going to say anything right now, but eventually, Horikita would learn the reason why.

And...

She'd definitely understand.

The time would come when she'd have a class that she was absolutely convinced will win, and she'd be faced with the reality that she couldn't.

I would teach her that, for her own sake, and no one else's.

As long as I was winning, that's all that would matter.

If I decided to become her enemy and defeat Horikita, then it was a done deal.

However, I planned on leaving *precisely* because I want to be defeated. I *wanted* there to be uncertainties in the future.

There was a contradiction there: I had an answer, but I wanted to be wrong.

Chapter 8: **The Arrival Of Autumn**

MIYAKE HAD BEEN WAITING for her near the school entrance. Hasebe approached him and lightly tapped him on the shoulder.

"Sorry to keep ya waiting," said Hasebe.

"Nah, no big deal, I didn't wait long," Miyake said.
"If anything, I was just kinda bored."

Hasebe had been absent from school for a week, but since she came back, she had been showing up to class every day.

"You're sure you're okay quitting the archery club?" she asked.

"It's more like I was sticking with it out of force of habit anyway, or just inertia."

"So, you quit because of me?" asked Hasebe.

"It's not like that. I quit because I wanted to. That's all there is to it. Anyway, I don't really care about that, I'm glad you came back to school."

Hasebe only participated in five competitions—the minimum number required. Although she didn't see much in terms of results, she had at least contributed the bare minimum to the class. Still, she rarely spoke to anyone other than Miyake, and she was even somewhat estranged with Yukimura as well, who had agreed with Sakura's expulsion. Miyake continued to stay by her side without a word, as though he had no other choice in the matter now.

"At first, I thought I wanted to destroy everything," she said. "I thought it'd be fine if I could just get back not just at Kiyopon, but at all the rest of our classmates who abandoned Airi too. They're bad people. And I'm one of those bad people."

"Well, I... I understand how you feel," said Miyake.

"Someone had to be expelled in that situation. But it should have been Kushida-san. That was what they originally promised."

That was the correct decision. Right?"

"...Yeah," replied Miyake.

"I won't forgive Kiyopon. I won't forgive our classmates. But I thought it'd be wrong to drag our feet forever to hold them back, to make them suffer for it." Miyake responded with complete silence as Hasebe continued to confess everything that she was thinking. "Hey, Miyacchi. Just this once, would you...be with me and help me get revenge?"

Judging from the look in her eyes, Hasebe wasn't joking. But Miyake didn't have the courage to ask her if she was being serious.

"Haruka..." said Miyake.

"What? Come on, I was just kidding." She brushed it off with a laugh and then started walking. "I'll get revenge on my own."

"I..."

Hasebe had reached out her hand to Miyake as she spoke but pulled it back. Now, she turned her back and left. Miyake, although hesitant, started walking after her without a word.



Postscript

HELLO THERE. It's been a while. Or rather, nice to see you. I'm Syougo Kinugasa. This postscript is a serious one. I'm sure there's something that you've all noticed by now, right? After five years, a continuation of the *Classroom of the Elite* TV anime is in production to be broadcast. Although that news is so brief that it's almost disappointing to see it put into words, a lot of hard work and toil has gone into everything leading up to this announcement. I even almost stopped writing once or twice!

I was overwhelmed with anxieties, like "It might not be possible for more of the anime to be made." But the reason why I've been able to continue writing without too many publication delays until today was because of my many readers who have been supporting me even after the original anime finished airing in 2017. Without this long and significant achievement of mine, the continuation of the anime would have never come to fruition. As an author, I couldn't be happier and more grateful for the decision to create more of the anime. So, all of you: thank you, thank you, thank you!

Also, please allow me to state one thing very strongly: I, more than anyone else, have been eagerly awaiting a continuation of the *Classroom* anime for a long, long time.

About two years ago, talk about whether it would be turned into an anime again, and whether it even *could* be turned into an anime again, started to come up. There was a brief moment in time where I was filled with excitement, like I could feel this exclamation point swelling in my chest...but it ended up taking quite a long time because of the effects of the worldwide pandemic.

Anyway, I'm overjoyed that we were able to finally make this announcement. And please know that we aren't going to rest on our laurels, not one bit. Everyone is going to do their best to make sure that the story connects with the original. Anyway, there's still more to say, but that's all on that for this postscript.

It's been a long, long time coming, but I'm really looking forward to seeing Ayanokouji and the others grow up once again. I wonder if they'll continue the anime all the way to the end of the story? Maybe? Maybe?!

Well, anywho... HECK YEAAAAHHH!!! HOORAYYYYYY!!!

Thank you, everyone! Thank you all for your continued support!!!



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