

NOVEL

8

STORY: SYOUGO
KINUGASA
ART: TOMOSE SHUNSAKU

CLASSROOM
OF THE ELITE²
YEAR



Table of Contents

[Character Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 1: Kanzaki Ryuji's Soliloquy](#)

[Chapter 2: Know Your Enemy, Know Yourself, and You
Need Not Fear a Hundred Battles](#)

[Chapter 3: Self-Explanatory School Trip](#)

[Chapter 4: School Trip Day Two](#)

[Chapter 5: School Trip Day Three](#)

[Chapter 6: School Trip Day Four](#)

[Chapter 7: A Light Shining at the End of the Darkness](#)

[Postscript](#)

[Newsletter](#)



CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE^{YEAR 2}

NOVEL 8

A group of three young women are in a hot spring at night. The woman on the left has dark blue hair and is looking down. The woman in the center has pink hair tied up in a bun and is smiling. The woman on the right has blonde hair tied back and is looking towards the center. Snow is falling around them.

"So, Ichinose-san,
are you going out
with anybody?"

"Hm? W-wait, what?!"

Ichinose panicked
over the entirely
unexpected question.

"It's just that, lately,
a lot of guys in class
have been asking me
if you're available."

"N-n-n-no, there's no
one! I'm not seeing
anyone!"

"I see. Okay, so, is
there anybody
you like?"



KUSHIDA KIKYOU

AYANOKOUJI KIYOTAKA

RYUUN KAKERU



"That's—"

Suddenly, she thrust out both arms in front of her, hands open wide, pushing the wall as hard as she could with both palms.

"I'm okay, I'm okay..."

She mumbled to herself, her movements coming to a complete stop.

8



WELCOME TO THE CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

NOVEL 8

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku



Seven Seas Entertainment

YOUKOSO JITSURYOKUSHIJOUSHUGI NO KYOUSHITSU E 2NENSEIHEN
VOL.8

©Syougo Kinugasa 2022

First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Timothy MacKenzie

COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Rebecca Schneidereit

PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen

EDITOR: Harry Catlin

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar

VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold

PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-88843-430-7

Printed in Canada

First Printing: April 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2 8

CONTENTS

1. KANZAKI RYUUJI'S SOLILOQUY
2. KNOW YOUR ENEMY, KNOW YOURSELF,
AND YOU NEED NOT FEAR A HUNDRED BATTLES
3. SELF-EXPLANATORY SCHOOL TRIP
4. SCHOOL TRIP DAY TWO
5. SCHOOL TRIP DAY THREE
6. SCHOOL TRIP DAY FOUR
7. A LIGHT SHINING AT THE END OF THE DARKNESS
- POSTSCRIPT



Chapter 1:

Kanzaki Ryuji's Soliloquy

A WISE MAN keeps away from danger.

I've always kept my distance from other people, ever since I was a kid. Why did I make that choice, you ask? Because it was easier, and, more importantly, it kept me from getting mixed up in any kind of trouble. I didn't make any close friends, but I didn't make any enemies, either. When you keep people at arm's length, neither too close nor too distant, relationships are easy.

But one day I got wrapped up in a silly fight between children, simply because I happened to be close by. Apart from me, there were four of them. Three of the kids were relentlessly laying into the fourth. Those three were being arrogant, but it wasn't as though it was for no reason. It all started with a lie. The one child who was being verbally accosted was clearly upset. That child had been lying to the others.

Honestly, it was something entirely trivial. If I remember correctly, it was about whether or not the child had actually gotten an autograph from a famous celebrity. The three others had wanted the fourth to admit to the lie and apologize. But the fourth refused, continuing to insist that it wasn't a lie. I happened to be there by chance, and after analyzing the situation objectively, I urged the child who lied to admit to it. But ultimately, the child stubbornly clung to the lie until the end.

A flimsy lie. Pointless stubbornness. I thought the situation might escalate to the point of physical harm, but I didn't do anything. Besides, in the first place, the issue was that someone told a meaningless lie. I didn't know why that child did it, if it was to look good in front of their friends or what, but it was honestly so stupid. There was no need for me to step in and help.

It had nothing to do with me. That's how I truly felt, from the bottom of my heart.

I mean, if anything, I thought that kid should've gotten punched at least once, so they'd learn something from the situation.

But...in the end, the kid who told the lie got away with it.

Just as the situation was turning dire, a third party suddenly swooped in and, employing some quick thinking, saved the child. That person protected the child without accusing them of lying, simply because they were friends. I couldn't accept that. That wasn't justice.

The right thing would have been for the child to have never lied to the other three in the first place. My uncertain feelings over the situation hadn't gone away. Who was in the right? Was it the three who had told the truth, but were acting high-handed and violent? Or was it the one who had clearly been lying? Or was it the third party, who knew it was a lie, but still stepped in to save their friend?

There was one adult there, who had watched the entire ordeal from start to finish. That person placed their hand on my head and told me something.

"If you don't have the power to help, you might as well just give up and run away. But if you do have the power and don't use it, then you're a fool."

I didn't understand, at the time. I wondered if that person meant, ultimately, that I was supposed to help the liar. But as I grew into an adult, I came to understand. When that person talked about helping, they didn't necessarily just mean helping the child who'd lied. I think that adult meant that, if I had the power to control the situation, I could resolve things, no matter what point of view I was coming from. That was when something stirred within me. Something hot and smoldering, something I didn't think I had inside me. Even now, I still can't forget those words I heard from an adult I had never met before.

When I started attending the Advanced Nurturing High School, I reluctantly chose to socialize with people, which wasn't my forte. I learned how to help those in need, even if only a little.

I had hoped to support Ichinose, who I recognized as the leader of our class.

However, ultimately, things didn't go so well, and my heart was broken.

Then...Ayanokouji Kiyotaka's words saved me.

Ayanokouji... Fate truly is a strange thing.

Chapter 2: Know Your Enemy, Know Yourself, and You Need Not Fear a Hundred Battles

IT WAS LATE NOVEMBER, and the day we were due to set out on our long-awaited school trip was finally drawing near. I was on my way to school on a bright but chilly morning when I happened to spot a group of three people walking along ahead of me, with Haruka in the middle. They weren't laughing out loud or smiling broadly or anything, but they did seem to be enthusiastically engaged in some topic of conversation, as though they were making up for lost time, filling the void of the recent past.

"You sure you don't need to go talk to them?" asked Kei, as she walked beside me.

"Nah, it's fine," I replied. "This is just how things have ended up, ever since Airi got expelled."

I was no longer needed in that group—or rather, that was the way it had to be.

"In that case, I won't bring it up again. I understand that if you say it's okay, then that's the right answer." Kei didn't seem to care too deeply about this; she probably figured that this whole issue with the former Ayanokouji Group was none of her business anyway. "Besides, you know what? This just means that I get to keep you all to myself, Kiyotaka. Right?"

She flashed me a sincere, earnest smile, with no hesitation. There was no doubt in my mind that I had become an emotional pillar for Kei over all the time we'd spent together.

"I'm super excited about our upcoming school trip," she added. "Where do you think we'll go?"

"I'm not giving up on my dream of Kyoto," I said.

"Yeah, you did talk about wanting to go there, huh? Well, for me personally, Kyoto's the only place I *don't* want to go."

For some reason, Kyoto, the place that I was passionately longing for, was the only one that she was dismissing. And right out of hand, too.

"You hate Kyoto that much?" I asked.

"I mean, it just seems like it's all, like, cultural stuff, like temples and junk. It doesn't sound fun at all, does it?"

But that was one of the best things about it, if you asked me... Well, it sounded like visiting temples and shrines might not be enjoyable to Kei.

"That's exactly what's on my mind right now, for sure," she said. "Yep."

"Okay, sure, our trip destination is important too, but aren't you concerned about the results of the finals?" I asked.

"Well, it's not like worrying about them now is going to raise my test scores, is it? Besides, I feel like I did pretty well, actually. Thanks to you, Kiyotaka."

Though that overconfident part of her was a little problematic, what she said was true. Although it was unlikely that we could expect to see her get a high score, it was also safe to say that the bottom range of her scores had been rising. Realistically, I could only make an iffy declaration at this point, but I could sense some growth in her after seeing her scores.

"I wonder if I should spend even more time studying with you, Kiyotaka, like Sudou-kun with Horikita-san," murmured Kei, the tip of her index finger pressed against her lips.

She probably didn't understand that just studying for the same length of time as Sudou wouldn't improve her academic performance like his. Personal motivation was very important, but the skill of the tutor was just as important. The reason Sudou had developed so remarkably well was, without a doubt, Horikita's talent as a tutor. That was probably an advantage that Horikita held over even someone like Keisei, who had the same level of academic ability as her.

In my case, though, my education wasn't built on that kind of foundation. It would be simple enough for me to raise Kei's

academic ability forcefully, by educating her thoroughly, but that wasn't my role. I had to entrust that matter to another student in the class. All I should do was the bare minimum necessary. I also needed to instill in her the kind of attitude that would enable her to study. That way, when another student who was right for the job eventually came along, they'd be able to take things over smoothly.

2.1

TWO HOURS were going to be set aside later this morning to talk about the school trip. I supposed that at a normal school, we might have gotten those details at a slightly earlier stage, but for the students at this school, the end-of-term exam we just had beforehand was more important. So, first, we needed to find out what our results were. Learning about the plans for the school trip and then immediately finding out you were being expelled for your test scores would've been like a bad joke.

"Now then, I'll be giving you your results from your second-semester finals," said Chabashira-sensei.

There was a feeling of tension in the air, like everyone was standing on pins and needles. But despite the nervousness and anxiety, none of the students in the class were in despair. Around this time last year, the school had conducted a unique final exam called the Paper Shuffle. Kushida had schemed, and Ryuuuen's shadow loomed. Horikita's characteristic strategies had been formidable back then, too, but this year, things were different.

The rules had been standard: students took the test that the school had produced, and if they scored below the clear pass/fail line, then they'd be expelled. It was also a competition between classes, with the class coming in first place earning fifty Class Points, and second place earning twenty-five Class Points. Third place, however, lost twenty-five Class Points, and fourth place lost fifty Class Points. It was, simply put, a scramble for Class Points.

A failing grade was an average score of thirty-nine or less in all subjects. Having carefully examined the exam contents, though, I concluded that a failing grade in any given subject could be avoided without much difficulty as long as a student took their classes seriously.

"First, for this exam's results, I'll start with the students at the bottom," said Chabashira-sensei. Her expression was stiff; she didn't show any sign of relaxation. I got the sense she was doing

it to wind the students up, but I supposed that a modicum of tension was necessary. "First, the student with the lowest score—"

The lowest grade was thought to be even more important than the highest.

"It's you, Hondou, with an average score of fifty-three," Chabashira-sensei announced.

"Agh! Me? Oh, but wait, fifty-three isn't so bad, is it?! Wait, should I be happy about this?!" he cried out strangely. There was joy in his voice at hearing he'd avoided a failing grade, but he must have been conflicted over having gotten the lowest score in class. Hondou had always placed near the bottom, though; this probably wasn't the first time that his score had been the lowest.

Chabashira-sensei continued announcing the results in ascending order, and eventually, she started calling the names of the higher-ranking students.

The bottom range for the lower-scoring group was definitely getting higher. Even my girlfriend, Kei, didn't have as bad a score as I had expected, with an average of fifty-six points. It was undoubtedly Airi's expulsion during the Unanimous Special Exam that had led to this development. Ever since that exam, the students who ranked lowest in OAA had developed a constant sense of urgency, knowing that they could be next on the chopping block, so they couldn't slack off. No matter what kind of exam they faced, they had to tackle it to the best of their ability. Even Kei was steadily improving her grades, although she didn't want to study unless it was with me.

However, I supposed I'd need to solve that problem as soon as possible. Since I was only teaching her the bare minimum, there was a risk that she'd be separated from the other students due to a gap in growth potential. I needed to ask someone else to take over tutoring her who could come up with a solid teaching plan, like Horikita, or Keisei, or even Yousuke.

As our names were called, each student's score per subject, total score, and average score were displayed on the monitor at the front of the class. I came in twelfth place. I was slowly but steadily rising in the rankings.

Finally, Chabashira-sensei got to announcing the top ten scores. In tenth place was Sudou. Although I'd been a little concerned about him, his results were similar to what he'd gotten in the last exam. He had earned a solid score and cracked the top bracket, going up by one place in the rankings and setting a new personal best.

And first place was, unusually enough, a tie. Horikita and Keisei were tied for first with an average score of 93.5 points.

"As for your overall placement in your grade level," Chabashira-sensei added, "you surpassed Ichinose's class's average score and took second place. Excellent work."

Sakayanagi's Class A took first place, Horikita's Class B took second, Ichinose's Class D took third, and Ryuuuen's Class C took fourth—so our class was getting an additional twenty-five Class Points. However, even the lower-ranked students in Sakayanagi's Class A generally scored well, so we couldn't take first place this time. As a result, the gap between our classes had widened, just a little.

"Now then," Chabashira-sensei said, "I understand quite well that you've been looking forward to this school trip, as evidenced by how much effort you put into the end-of-semester exam. But first, before we get into talking about the trip, there's one thing I'd like for you to do."

At that, a chart with the names of our classmates, which we all knew quite well, was displayed on each of our tablets. It was also displayed on the monitor in front of us. There were three fields: name, gender, and number. Two of those fields, name and gender, were already filled in. Just as Chabashira-sensei had suggested, information was given for everyone in class. Only the field for numbers was blank, so it was clear that some kind of number was going to be entered in that field.

The table was generally understandable at first glance, but it was unclear what criteria the number field was supposed to be based on. Although I was limited to what I could see from my seat, it appeared as though no other students understood, either.

"This chart shows a list of students in Class 2-B, i.e., this class," said Chabashira-sensei. "You can see that there's a field header labeled 'Numbers' next to 'Name' and 'Gender,' written in a small font size, and that the field is blank, yes? The numbers start from one and go up to thirty-seven, which is the number of students in this class—thirty-eight, minus you yourself. You cannot use the same number twice. First, please enter 'Self' in the number field next to your own name, so that it's easy for us to understand that it's you."

Without Yamauchi and Airi, who had been expelled, there were thirty-eight students in Class 2-B. So, from the sounds of things, we were supposed to assign a number to each student excluding ourselves, going up to thirty-seven. The problem was what these numbers were supposed to mean. I couldn't possibly imagine that we'd just be assigning numbers randomly, with no meaning behind them. We all did as instructed, typing on our tablets and entering "Self" by our respective names. After confirming that we had all done that, Chabashira-sensei began to explain what the numbers meant.

"Now then, regarding the numbers that I'm about to have you assign. You can basically see them as your evaluation of your peers, from your own personal perspective. You could rank someone as number one simply because you respect their skills the most, or because you are best friends, or because they're the funniest one in class. What's important is that whoever it is you rank as first, you're making a positive evaluation according to your own set criteria."

So, we were basically ranking our classmates, then. Actually, wait... It seemed that if you slid the table over, it wasn't just our own classmates in there. There were fields for students in the other three classes, too.

"I'm sure that some of you might have already noticed this," added Chabashira-sensei, "but I'm going to ask you to do this ranking for the entire grade level, class by class. When it comes to students from other classes, there may be some people who you've never even spoken to before, but you're going to have to

rank them based on your own criteria as well. I'd like for you to assign them a number based on what you know of them."

Students evaluating students. We did something somewhat similar last year, but I suppose you could also say that this was very different. But what in the world was the point of having students do something like this, anyway? Making some kind of superficial hierarchy?

"We will absolutely not be divulging what numbers you've assigned to other students, of course," Chabashira-sensei assured us. "Not even we, your homeroom instructors, will know what kind of evaluations you've given, so please rest easy."

In other words, this chart was going to be managed by the school administrators.

"You are forbidden from talking privately amongst yourselves whilst filling out the chart, and you are also forbidden from looking at OAA. Putting aside whatever you happen to remember, it would be defeating the purpose of this exercise if you were to simply use the school's evaluation as your hierarchy without giving it any thought or reasoning of your own."

So, there were also restrictions against just assigning numbers mechanically based on an existing metric.

"There are tons of girls I've never even talked to or anything, though, and I have no idea what people's OAA scores are, so all my scores are gonna be pretty random," muttered Hondou, uncertain. "Is that gonna be okay...?"

Some students had a wide circle of friendships, but Hondou, who lacked self-confidence, wasn't one of them.

"Yes, that's fine," Chabashira-sensei replied. "There'd be no problem even if you assigned numbers at random to people you have little connection with. However, the school will be using these lists for a certain purpose, and you will be responsible for whatever consequences there are."

So, essentially, we were supposed to be ordering students based on some kind of general criteria, but in the end, what to actually put was up to the discretion of the person filling out the

form. Accordingly, Chabashira-sensei was saying, we shouldn't complain about whatever effects might come about in the future as a result of our rankings. We should be able to grade each student appropriately as a result of the cumulative interactions we had with each other thus far, I supposed. If we did it without thinking, we could regret it later, so we needed to take this challenge seriously. That's what Chabashira-sensei was telling us.

"You have one hour to finish, starting now," she said. "In the unlikely event that you do not finish within the time limit, we'll be reducing the time spent on explaining the school trip to you and continuing the time spent on this, so please focus on the task at hand."

Surely no one had thought that we would be forced to do something like this before the school trip. Though the students were puzzled, Chabashira-sensei instructed them to go ahead and begin immediately. No one had fully wrapped their mind around the task yet, but even so, they got started.

Still... *Criteria, hm?* I decided to hold off ranking my own class, since that would take the longest amount of time, and started with organizing Class A. If I were simply going on ability alone, I would have placed Sakayanagi as number one, but what I was looking for right now was a comprehensive evaluation. I could simply judge everyone based on like or dislike and wrap up everything that way. It was up to the individual's own discretion if they wanted to rank the person they most wanted to date or the person they liked as their number one, after all. Regardless, the numbers should be assigned based on clear criteria.

I intended to start filling out the form right away, but I found it was surprisingly difficult. The safest option would have been to use an overall evaluation of the students' abilities at this point in time as seen from my perspective. It wasn't likely to be an issue for me to make calculations based on what I remembered from OAA for the students I'd never interacted with. Once I settled on a course of action, I was going to start with number one and work my way down.

I figured many other students would make the same decision, but it was safe to say that Sakayanagi would be taking number one for Class A.

Once I got started, it took me about twenty minutes to finish entering evaluations for everyone from the other three classes. All that was left was the class I was currently enrolled in: Class B. I wasn't going to be assigning numbers so simply with this class, because for these students, I'd obtained much more information than OAA accounted for.

I was going to factor in hidden potential, communication skills, and growth. I figured there might be some overlapping similarities with OAA, but at this point, I decided that Yousuke would take number one. If I took into account not only his simple overall value, but also the number of ways that he'd contributed thus far, he was the best choice. Without Yousuke, there would be no cooperation in this class.

Then, I chose Kouenji as number two. His hidden potential and the tangible benefits that he had brought to the class, such as his contribution in the second-year Uninhabited Island Special Exam, and even his unintentional contributions, like in the Sports Festival and so on, were extremely significant. Even if I were to count his personality quirks and his lack of cooperativeness against him, second place would still be a fair assessment. It was an undeniable fact that Kouenji's achievements had paved the way for our current position as Class B.

Horikita, Keisei, and Mii-chan, along with other students who always performed well academically, also rated quite highly. Then there was Sudou, who possessed outstanding physical ability, and whose academic prowess was not to be underestimated either. I put him down as number nine. If I'd only been taking into account what had happened since the start of our second year, then I definitely would've rated Sudou as third or fourth, after Kouenji.

After I'd finished entering my evaluations for all of the students, I looked up.

I took close to forty minutes in total to fill everything in, but none of the students aside from me have finished y—

Just as that thought was going through my head, though, my eyes met with Chabashira-sensei's as she observed the students, and I realized that Kouenji, sitting to my side, had finished before I did. I couldn't be certain, but I expected he had simply filled in numbers randomly without giving it any thought. He was gently blowing on his nails without even giving his tablet a second glance.

If we considered the possibility that these numbers could be used for some special exam, for some purpose other than group building, then what kinds of arrangements could we envision? Was it possible that, when the school took a comprehensive view, they could, for example, hold an exam where only the students selected as number one and number two overall in each class would participate? On the other hand, the school could do the opposite instead. They could gather only the students with low overall ability together, and in the end, they'd have a balanced group to face the challenge.

However, if either of those possibilities were true, then they should have told us beforehand to consider the merits of students' respective abilities more carefully before we assigned numbers. It wouldn't even have been necessary to have students do these evaluations in the first place. The risk of distorting the competition by assigning numbers based on like or dislike would have been significantly higher if that were the goal.

2.2

WHEN THERE WERE ONLY a few minutes remaining, Chabashira-sensei addressed the class.

"Okay. It seems like everyone is finished, so we'll bring the list-making process to an end right here," she said. Apparently, everyone had managed to finish their evaluations within the time limit without incident. "This is a little sooner than I expected, but let's start talking about the school trip."

"I've been waiting for this!" Thrilled to have been released from the tedium of list-making, Ike clapped loudly. Some of the other students joined him.

Unlike in the past, Chabashira-sensei didn't issue Ike a warning this time, and instead started pushing buttons on her tablet.

We'd heard that there was going to be a school trip, but we still didn't know what our destination would be. There were three options in the Unanimous Special Exam: Hokkaido, Kyoto, and Okinawa. Each class had cast its vote for one of those three choices, and whichever one got the most votes would be chosen as the destination for the school trip.

Incidentally, I was part of the minority faction that wanted to go to Kyoto, along with Horikita and Keisei. This class had ended up casting a vote for Hokkaido in the end, but that didn't mean hope was gone. If two of the remaining three classes voted for Kyoto, then my wish would be granted. And the results were...

"First, I'll tell you the results of the vote from the Unanimous Special Exam," announced Chabashira-sensei. She paused for a few seconds, with a pompous air, for dramatic effect. "After tallying up the results from each class, the winner, with a total of three votes, has been decided. Our school trip will be to Hokkaido."

There were mixed reactions as soon as we heard the results, with people expressing both joy and disappointment.

Horikita's class had allocated its vote to Hokkaido, but that didn't necessarily mean the majority were happy about this. Anyway, we were going to Hokkaido, huh? Horikita didn't appear to be disappointed, from what I could tell by looking at her back. Even Keisei didn't seem especially unhappy with the announcement.

Meanwhile, Sudou and the other people who were in the pro-Okinawa group had shown absolutely no sign of even really reacting to the news from the start. Classes weren't allowed to share what they had voted for, but it was possible that some rumors had been going around anyway. I felt like it was a little disappointing, but hey—Kyoto was Kyoto, Hokkaido was Hokkaido. Each was its own thing. From my perspective, it was still an unknown world out there, and the vote didn't change the fact that I was looking forward to the trip.

"I'm sure that you're already aware of this, but don't forget that a school trip, just as its name implies, is an excursion meant for learning and acquiring knowledge. Unlike in a regular high school, there are many rules you'll need to follow," Chabashira-sensei warned lightly, so that the exuberant students wouldn't confuse this trip with a vacation.

"You're not telling us that there's going to be a special exam or something...are you?" asked Hondou fearfully.

There was no way we could be sure, and it was understandable that someone would want to speak up to rule it out. In response, Chabashira-sensei chuckled softly as she looked at the students. "Relax. There will not be a special exam where you'll be competing over Class Points."

Hearing her clear, definitive answer, the class collectively let out a sigh of relief.

"Anyway, before we go into the details of the trip, let's first touch on the schedule for the four nights and five days," said Chabashira-sensei.

SCHOOL TRIP SCHEDULE

DAY 1

Depart from school -> Haneda Airport -> New Chitose Airport -> Arrival at ski resort, lesson -> Skiing -> To ryokan

DAY 2

Free day

DAY 3

Visiting tourist spots around Sapporo -> Back to ryokan

DAY 4

Free day (with some conditions)

DAY 5

Return

Apparently, we were going to be free to do whatever we wanted all day on the second day, and again on the fourth day, albeit with some conditions.

"Wait, I was all worried, but that looks totally normal!" exclaimed Hondou. "Actually, hold on, it's even better than normal! Yeah, free days!"

Apparently, almost all of the students in class had a positive impression of a normal school trip schedule. It sounded like this one was somewhat comparable to what you would find at most schools, and people appeared to be unusually excited about that fact. It was true that it wouldn't have been unexpected for this school to come up with a more complicated or involved schedule.

"It's fine to get excited, but have you already forgotten what I said earlier?" Chabashira-sensei said. "Yes, you are promised free days, but there will be no shortage of activities that you'll need to be doing as students at the Advanced Nurturing High School."

There wasn't going to be a special exam, though. *So, what in the world is going to be expected of us?* I wondered.

"Know your enemy, know yourself, and you need not fear a hundred battles.' That is the theme of this school trip," said Chabashira-sensei.

"Huh? Wait, what? What does that mean?" Hondou cocked his head to the side in apparent confusion. He must not have understood the quote Chabashira-sensei had referenced, from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*.

It was Sudou who spoke up first to explain the proverb in an easy-to-understand manner. "It means to actually understand the enemies that you're fighting, and their situation, and to understand yer own situation properly, too," he said. "Basically, if you make sure you know that stuff, then you'll never lose."

"O-oh, wow, dude... So, like, you even get that kinda stuff?" asked Hondou.

"Nah, it ain't really anything amazing. Besides, you can figure out what it means literally from what the quote says in the first place."

I was starting to like how he wasn't being arrogant about having one piece of knowledge. That left a good impression.

"Normally, several groups are formed on school trips, as people are out and about," Chabashira-sensei said. "Things will be no different for you in that regard, but there is one aspect that is clearly different from how other schools do it. Namely, groups will be formed not just from students within your own class, but with students from your entire grade."

"Huh? Wait, what? What?!" one student wailed. "So, like, doesn't that mean there's a super-high chance that we could get paired up with people we're not even friends with?!"

The students, who were all excited over the still-as-yet-unseen Hokkaido, were suddenly snapped back to reality. As if to demonstrate this, Chabashira-sensei began giving us the details. "That's exactly right. Depending on your social circle and what combinations there are, it's possible that almost everyone could be with people they've never spoken to before."

Even if I was being charitable, I couldn't say that I had a wide circle of friends in other classes. Depending on the size of the groups, it was entirely possible that things could turn out just as Chabashira-sensei had said.

"If this were a normal school, with the same maximum of just 160 students in your grade level, there would be a good chance that you'd be able to widen your circle of friends beyond your own class," Chabashira-sensei continued. "However, the way this school is structured is a detriment, and hinders you in that regard."

It was true that you'd expect your number of friends to increase if you were studying together in the same environment for more than a year and a half. At this point, it wasn't difficult to imagine how the way this school was structured got in the way of that.

"The most important thing for you is whether you can graduate from Class A," she went on. "Which means that it's a battle between classes. That structure is going to remain the same from this point onward. Naturally, as a result of that, you'll perceive other students as rivals more often than you have opportunities to engage with each other as friends." That kind of environment wasn't conducive to making a wide circle of friendships, was basically what she was saying. "Thus, opportunities for you to learn about other students' situations, and how they spend their time, are limited too, of course."

It was certainly true that we'd learned more about our own classmates over the past year and a half or so, while when it came to other classes, many people naturally only knew what was going on at the surface level. If you carelessly showed any weakness, there was a chance that others could take advantage of that.

And, considering this issue from a completely different angle, friendships might also make you feel hesitant to defeat the other classes. Someone might even end up thinking, "I want my best friend from another class to graduate from Class A." If something like that were to develop, there could be substantial hesitation when the time came to fight. There were probably more than a few students who intentionally wanted to keep themselves from knowing too much about people from other classes.

"The purpose of this school trip is to deliberately remove that obstacle," Chabashira-sensei told us. "It will be a great opportunity for you to get to know each other as fellow students at this school, and simply as human beings, person to person, rather than as students from other classes as you have until now."

Four nights and five days might seem short, but it was a lengthy period of time. The more time people spent on group activities during that period, the more likely it was that the distance between them would be shortened. On the other hand, though, there could be cases where the distance wouldn't shorten at all. Even if the school removed some obstacles, it wouldn't matter if the students themselves put up walls.

"I dunno," lamented Ike. "It's... I can only imagine that this school trip is gonna be a pain. Like, we're gonna have to worry about stuff, and I really don't think I'm gonna be able to have fun!"

Although they knew that there was no way they could change the rules that had been set by the school, there were apparently several students who opposed the idea, like Ike. I guessed that spending time with trusted, like-minded friends was one thing they did not want to give up. Especially Ike, who got himself a girlfriend only a short time ago. It was understandable that he was upset; depending on how the groups were formed, he might not have the chance to spend the trip with Shinohara. The tumultuousness became infectious, spreading to others, but in the midst of it, one young man stood up from his seat to put a stop to it: Yousuke.

"I agree with the school's thinking." While the classroom was filled with a flurry of objections to the idea, Yousuke declared his agreement, as though he were trying to spearhead support.

"Well, that's great for you, Hirata," someone else replied. "I'm sure there are lots of people even in the other classes that you're friends with, but we're good, we don't need to hear you bragging."

It certainly seemed like Yousuke, who had a wide circle of friends, wouldn't have many problems regardless of who he was

partnered up with. However, there was no way that Yousuke would make an announcement just to boast about something like that.

"That's not what I'm saying. There's no one in any other class who I understand better than my own classmates," he said, pointing out that he was still essentially on the same side as Ike and the other students. "I'm saying that I don't think it's a good idea to rush into things carelessly."

"Okay then, in that case, why do you agree with the school on this?" asked Ike.

"I guess because I feel like there's a kind of significance to this," Yousuke replied. "Everything we do in this school is very disconnected between classes in our grade level, except for club activities. There's been hardly any opportunity to make friends with students from other classes."

And that was obvious, as well. Although there had been a few special exams where we'd temporarily allied together, the fundamentally competitive nature of the classes meant that, just as Yousuke suggested, we would avoid carelessly getting too deeply involved with other students. It would likely be even more difficult for a kind-hearted person to go through that.

"But, I mean, wouldn't it still be weird to agree to this, then?" one girl said. "I think it's easier for rivals to work together when they're at, like, arm's length from each other, like a reasonable distance, y'know?"

"Hm... But I consider friends to be friends, regardless of the class," said another.

Opinions appeared to be divided, even amongst the girls in class. It was an issue of perspective.

"I guess this conversation is kind of headed into chicken-and-egg territory," said Yousuke. "Are other students rivals first and friends second, or are they friends first, rivals second? I'm sure that both are correct. Just as Chabashira-sensei said, this school trip is a wonderful opportunity for us to learn about that.

We don't just have one choice. The more choices we have, the more possibilities open up. That's what I think."

"I kinda get what you're sayin', Hirata," Sudou said.
"Besides, even if we fight the school on this, it ain't like they're gonna change the rules, right?"

If the school were willing to listen to our complaints and accommodate us, then it would be worth resisting. But the students in this class understood quite well that wasn't how things worked.

"There's nothing wrong with you engaging in a little heated debate, but first, let me continue, okay?" Chabashira-sensei cut in. "I think it'll be easier for you to talk about this after you hear the specifics."

And with that, the itinerary was displayed on our tablets.

"It's been decided that students will be divided into groups as equally as possible over the four nights and five days of the school trip," she told us. "Each group will consist of eight students. You can generally assume that there will be two students from each class, a boy and a girl, per group. However, at the current point in time, there are 156 students in your grade level. Since it's not possible to divide you all up equally into groups of eight, there will be eighteen groups of eight students and two groups of six students. We've also taken care to ensure that the gender ratio will be as equal as possible."

There was an even split of boys and girls amongst the four students who had been expelled thus far, with two boys and two girls, but the issue of what classes they'd belonged to introduced another problem. Because of that, the school couldn't divide everyone neatly into groups of eight, and there was going to be some offset, with a couple of groups of six. Still, that was completely understandable, since it couldn't be avoided.

Of course, that was riding on the assumption that there wouldn't be any more expulsions before the first day of the school trip, or any absences due to health issues.

"As for the question of how much you'll be doing together with your group and where you'll go, that'll be determined after we reach Hokkaido," said Chabashira-sensei.

As Chabashira-sensei told us the rules for our groups, they were also displayed on the monitor.

Situations where it is necessary to stick together as a group:

When instructed by the school on location

During free time

Situations where it is not necessary to stick together as a group:

When you are inside lodging facilities

We were going to depart from the school on board buses separated by class, which would take us to Haneda Airport. Then, we'd board the plane and land at New Chitose Airport. Afterward, students would be divided into their groups at the airport. From that point onward, the general rule was the groups would be sticking together until we headed back to school by bus. There was a lot of bus travel in our itinerary, between the bus ride to the airport and being taken by bus to our group activities once we arrived in Hokkaido. And, including time spent sleeping, it sounded like we would be spending almost all our time with the people in our group.

"Even when you're on free time, individuals are not permitted to just do whatever they please," Chabashira-sensei added. "Discussion within the group is necessary, and it is absolutely essential that you act together as a group. If a group cannot come to a consensus on a destination, then they will not be allowed to leave the ryokan."

It would be simple enough to come to a compromise if you were with students who you were close to, but that could get tricky. If highly assertive students were partnered up together,

they wouldn't readily agree on anything. It was possible people could end up not going anywhere as a result.

"When inside lodging facilities, you'll generally be free from group activity restrictions. You can go to the bathing area whenever you wish, you can relax in the lobby, and you can go eat whenever you want, as long as you're within the curfew."

The ryokan where we would stay was the only exception to the rule about sticking together as a group. We'd be staying together as groups in our rooms, albeit with girls and boys separated, but we were apparently free to have breakfast or dinner, take a bath, or engage with the other activities available in our lodging as we wished on our own.

"You'll be staying at the same ryokan for all four nights. Even among places in Hokkaido, it's an extremely famous and respectable place to stay. I'm sure that you won't get bored, and you'll be able to spend your time there in comfort."

"Ugh, I guess the ryokan's gonna be the only time we can relax, then..." muttered one student.

"I'm just going to say this once more, but this trip really is an excellent opportunity for you to get to know students from the other classes on a deeper level," said Chabashira-sensei.

After hearing her explanation, though, Yousuke seemed to have a question of a different nature.

"If the idea is to have us interact with a larger number of people, isn't it a little strange that we're going to be with the same group of people for the entire trip?" he said.

"You make an excellent point, Hirata," said Chabashira-sensei. "We did also consider changing groups in a daily rotation. However, if we just randomly put you in touch with lots of different people, you wouldn't really get to know your group mates. If you were together for less than a day, it wouldn't be difficult to just pass the time superficially as acquaintances. However, it's a different story if you're together for four nights. If you cannot open up honestly and spend time with your group as

your true selves, then you won't be able to enjoy this valuable trip."

It was true that if a group were together for only a day, then you could just stick it out no matter who you were with. Even if you were put together with a group you didn't like, it would change the next day, so you could just put up with it until you eventually got put into a more comfortable situation. On the other hand, if you knew that your group was fixed, then you'd have to make things work.

"Someone like Hirata or Kushida, who have a lot of friends in other classes, might get along with whoever they're paired up with, no matter what kind of group they're in," Chabashira-sensei went on. "And on the flip side, for someone with few friends, it's true that they might have a tough time no matter what group they are placed in. Those are definite possibilities. However, don't look at this negatively; think of it as a good opportunity."

Obviously, relationships weren't quite that simple. If you were the type of person who wanted to make friends but couldn't, then yes, you might be able to take a proactive approach like Chabashira-sensei said and see results. But for those who considered friends unnecessary, this was going to be a somewhat burdensome school trip. Well, I supposed that if you thought like that, the very idea of a school trip might be depressing anyway.

"Also, if it's proven that a group is not acting together as a unit, that may lead to free time being revoked," said Chabashira-sensei.

If something like that were to happen, then it would be like more than half of the school trip was rendered meaningless. In other words, it was imperative to stick with our established groups. Most of the students tended to follow the rules, but there were some students who didn't... In unison, the students' eyes all turned to Kouenji at the far back of the class.

"What is it, ladies and gentlemen?" he said. "You're all looking upon me with such envy in your eyes. I don't mind—you may gaze upon me all you wish."

Kouenji hadn't been listening to a word that Chabashira-sensei or anyone else had said. He looked at everyone with a beaming smile as he spoke. In many ways, he was the sort of young man who couldn't read the room, but he still came to school reliably, and he wasn't a rulebreaker. He might be unexpectedly obedient in his group on the school trip... Maybe. It really wasn't clear what the future might hold, so I was sure that many students were hoping not to be paired up with Kouenji if at all possible.

"The group assignments are not going to be determined randomly," Chabashira-sensei continued. "Groups will be assigned based on the tables you made earlier."

So, that was why she'd specifically had us carry out that task before explaining the details of the school trip.

"Also, about your phones—I know you use them every day, and you can still use them during the school trip. That won't be a problem. Restrictions on who you're allowed to call will not change on the trip. Calls to other second-years, or other enrolled students, will be permitted, as will calls to police or emergency services in the event of an emergency, but calls to family or anyone else outside of the school will remain prohibited. The school will keep track of your call history, so please exercise caution."

Chabashira-sensei had laid out the theme for this school trip. It was hard to believe that it was simply to get the students to become friends. It could be interpreted as one of the milestones for our school life in the days to come.

Afterward, Chabashira-sensei continued to tell us more about the school trip, but really, the most striking and unusual point was the matter of the groups being made up of students from across our entire grade level.

Aside from that, I supposed that another thing we needed to be somewhat mindful of was handling our cash. Since we only had Private Points, we had no way of shopping off campus. Therefore, we would need to put in an application with the school to exchange our Private Points for cash in advance, and the school

would provide us with currency. If we ended up short of funds on-site during the trip, the school could exchange up to a maximum of ten thousand yen there. Once the school trip was over and the students returned, then we could go back to using Private Points. It'd probably be better to convert a lot of points into currency ahead of time.

2.3

WHEN IT WAS TIME for lunch, I headed out with Kei to eat together, which had become routine as of late. However, this time, we had some guests with us, which was unusual: Yousuke and Satou.

"Hey, this kinda seems like a double date, doesn't it, Ayanokouji-kun?" said Satou somewhat shyly, standing near me.

"Hey, pump the brakes there, Maya-chan," teased Kei. "That's not the kind of thing you say to *Kiyotaka!*"

The girls were having a friendly chat that sounded like fighting, which I didn't understand much at all. They continued their conversation as we walked.

"This is my first time ever going to Hokkaido," said Kei. "Have you ever been there before, Kiyotaka?"

"Nope, never," I replied.

As someone who came from the White Room, pretty much everything was new territory for me. I'd had simulated experiences in various environments over the course of the curriculum, but I hadn't experienced Hokkaido before. All I knew of the world came from television and books; I was only aware of the fact that Hokkaido was a cold region that covered a vast expanse of land.

I supposed that the main focus of our conversation was going to be the school trip, after all.

"Seriously, though, they're gonna give us that much free time for a high school trip?" Satou said. "Like, don't we get too much free time?"

"I was surprised by that, too," said Yousuke. "I was expecting something like one or two hours of free time per day, at most."

"Isn't it good to have a lot of free time, though?" said Kei. "I think it's a lot better than having to sit there for a long time doing

nothing, like being stuck at some museum or having to listen to the locals yammering on."

Yousuke laughed, and Satou nodded vigorously in agreement. As for me, personally... Well, that kind of orthodox schedule didn't sound so bad. The more freedom you had, the more the trip would deviate from the purpose of school.

"I am a bit worried about the groups, though, I think," Yousuke said. "I do like the idea of making friends with people from other classes, but I can't help but feel like there's something more going on."

"Something more?" asked Kei.

Yousuke nodded and glanced over at me, as though he were looking for an answer to that question.

"As long as we're competing to get into Class A, feelings like compassion are a liability," I told him. "There can only be one Class A."

"I suppose a lot of people think that way, yeah," he said.

I was sure Yousuke was conflicted, since he already had strong feelings on this issue. While he did want to become friends with others, on the other hand, getting to be *too* close with others had its downsides.

"I'm a little scared," he went on. "I'm afraid that if I make friends with someone from another class, I could get too close to them—or find out about their circumstances, how they absolutely have to graduate from Class A, or something."

"Hmm... Yeah, I see what you're saying," said Satou. It sounded like she must be imagining what it might be like, too. "I think I get what you mean, Hirata-kun. Like you'll feel too sympathetic."

"I don't really think that way, though, personally." Kei rejected that sentiment. "I mean, the important thing for me is that *I* get into Class A, not anyone else... Am I a cold person?"

It wasn't being cold, though; it was the honest, true feeling most people shared.

"No one can know the true nature of other people's feelings," I replied. "However, if you want my personal opinion on the matter, I'd say that, by nature, it's easy for humans to become kind on the surface in certain circumstances, if only for a moment. And when that happens, they don't want others to see that they have unpleasant feelings underneath."

Feelings like love and hate were extremely annoying.

"For the sake of argument, let's say there's a student in another class who must graduate from Class A, like Yousuke said," I continued. "If that student doesn't make it into Class A, there's a risk they could end up taking their own life down the road."

"Huh?" said Kei. "Isn't that, like, a huge exaggeration?"

"Yeah, it's an extreme example, for sure," I conceded. "But we can't say with 100 percent certainty that it wouldn't happen."

No one knew where a person's emotional boundaries really lay except for the person in question.

"Suppose that you knew that person's situation, and you yourself had over twenty million Private Points on hand," I went on. "However, you needed to use those Private Points to protect yourself and others in your own class. You could fight without those points, but they were an important insurance policy. What if someone in your class, such as Yousuke, said that they wanted to save just the student who would take their own life in the future?"

"Uh... Well, I..." Kei stammered.

"And what if the class ends up sending the message that it'd be okay to help, but deep down, everyone thinks it's ridiculous? Wouldn't that open up the possibility that some students might feel obliged to put up a front, just pretending that they're okay with lending a hand?"

If someone objected, they would probably be met with scorn for taking the matter of someone ending their own life so lightly. And in truth, there'd be no way to know what the people giving those scornful looks would really be thinking, deep down.

"I'm still exaggerating here somewhat," I said, "but knowing your enemy isn't all positive."

"Then, why is the school making us get along with each—" Kei must have figured it out partway through, because she suddenly stopped mid-sentence. "Do you think it might be something like... You know, like, do you think it might have something to do with a special exam down the road or something...?"

"We can't rule out that possibility."

At the very least, right now, there was basically no one in any of the other classes who we'd be upset to see expelled. Anytime someone we weren't close to was removed from the playing field, we gained a vital advantage and came a step closer to Class A.

"Those tables we made, this school trip—they might just be setting the stage for something," I said. "If so, then it might be the final exam that's the real challenge."

"If that's true, then things could get messy... I'm genuinely scared," said Yousuke.

"Same, me too," Satou said. "I have a bad feeling about this."

Over the course of this conversation, both of them had gained a better understanding of their anxieties about the future. At the current point in time, we didn't know if expulsion would be a factor, but it was looking certain that this year's final exam was going to be harder than the last one.

2.4

THE STUDENTS' FEVERISH ANTICIPATION of the school trip didn't wane after class ended. I received a succession of messages from a certain someone, who apparently wanted to meet with me at a bench near Keyaki Mall. I could've ignored the messages, of course, or changed the date of our meeting, but Kei had plans to hang out with Satou and some other girls at the dorms today, so the timing was perfect for me.

I was curious about what was going on with the person who'd messaged me, so I figured it was a good idea to meet. I immediately replied to the texts saying I could meet today, and I headed to the agreed location. Since I arrived about ten minutes earlier than planned, I decided to sit down on the bench and wait. Classes had just ended for the day, so students were walking past the bench where I was sitting, heading toward Keyaki Mall. I had to say, somewhere this conspicuous was a curious choice of meeting place. Was it out of the fear that I'd be on my guard and refuse to meet up? No, that seemed out of character.

Actually, the fact that I'd been deliberately contacted in advance was also out of the ordinary. Was this simply some kind of emotional or psychological problem, or were there other forces at work?

I spent some time sitting there watching the crowd of students heading toward Keyaki Mall, and then...

The appointed time came and went, but there was still no sign of the person I was supposed to meet. I figured the meeting time was probably supposed to be approximate, so I decided to carry on browsing the internet without worrying about it. Just as I was killing time scrolling on my phone, I heard a girl's voice from somewhere close by.

"Hello!"

When I looked up, I saw that it was Amasawa Ichika, the one who'd been messaging me earlier. She was with Nanase,

though, who was in a different class from her. In contrast to Amasawa, who was all smiles, Nanase appeared a bit surprised. They waved as they approached, stopping about ten centimeters in front of me.

"Sorry to have kept ya waiting!" said Amasawa.

"I see that Nanase is with you, too," I said. I couldn't just ignore Nanase while she was standing right in front of me, so I decided to go ahead and acknowledge that she was there, as a formality.

"Yes," Nanase said. "I'm sorry. Please excuse me for tagging along without telling you."

"Nah, no need to apologize," I told her. "It was just a little unexpected, is all."

I had gone into today's meeting with the assumption that I was going to be talking one-on-one with Amasawa. But any question as to why Nanase was here was quickly dispelled by what Amasawa said next.

"Nanase-chan held me up. That's why I'm late to our meeting." Amasawa pointed her finger at Nanase, indicating that she was the one responsible. "And on top of that, she insisted on taggin' along." She turned to Nanase. "You wanted to see Ayanokouji-senpai that badly, huh?"

"Huh? Really?" I asked.

"Well, no, I—" Nanase got a little flustered, but she regained her composure and immediately corrected Amasawa. "I was curious about what Amasawa-san was up to, so I followed her, but I didn't know that she was meeting with you, Ayanokouji-senpai."

"Huh?" said Amasawa. "Did I not say anything about that? I was pretty sure I did."

"You only said something once we saw Ayanokouji-senpai."

"Ah ha ha ha, you might be right!"

So, that was why Nanase had looked so flustered when our eyes met. I listened to the two first-year students as they

explained the situation to each other. Still, seeing as how Nanase showed no sign of leaving, I figured she must have had her own reasons for being here. Putting that aside for a moment, though, I turned my attention to Amasawa.

"I heard you've been absent from school for a while," I commented.

"You're well-informed," she said. "You investigated me, huh? So, you were interested in me after all. You know, I'd welcome anything from you, Ayanokouji-senpai, even stalking."

After the Cultural Festival was over, and the holiday had passed, Amasawa hadn't been seen in class. I had figured it was unlikely it was due to illness.

"Ayanokouji-senpai knew because I reported it to him," said Nanase.

"Wait, so you're my stalker, Nanase-chan?!" Amasawa exclaimed, raising both hands in the air in a deliberate overreaction. "Hm, a girl, huh? Well, we do live in an age of diversity, right? And you're cute, you know? So, maybe."

"Please stop making self-serving assumptions." Nanase remained calm in the face of Amasawa's high energy. "That's actually exactly why I spoke to Amasawa-san today," she said to me. "She's been absent ever since Yagami-kun was expelled. It was obvious her absence wasn't due to poor physical health, but some kind of psychological condition, and so it was only natural for me to feel distrustful when she suddenly came back to class."

So, it was a natural course of action to watch the movements of a White Room student after they'd suddenly returned to class? Hm.

Yagami Takuya. He'd meddled in my business a few times, but after everything that led to his expulsion, it was clear beyond doubt that he was a student of the White Room—which made Amasawa his fellow student. What had happened must have shaken her up.

"And now that I know that she's meeting with you, Ayanokouji-kun, I've decided I can't just leave," Nanase added.

"Aw, you're like a knight, protecting your senpai," teased Amasawa.

"No, it's nothing as grandiose as that. It's just that I determined that I couldn't know what you might do, Amasawa-san, in your current state of mind."

It might have seemed like a series of coincidences that brought Nanase here, but she must have been making her own speculations. It was difficult to imagine Amasawa deciding to come to school now, after the vacation had ended, simply because she wanted to go back to class.

"Yeah, I guess it's something like that," said Amasawa. The bright, chipper attitude she had exuded up until this point was gone. I couldn't feel the usual energy radiating from her. "I know I'm kind of butting in, but I figured it'd be okay."

"If you're still here at this school, then that means you've found the answer on your own, right?" I asked.

Almost instantly, Amasawa's smile quietly faded. Judging by the wavering I saw in her eyes, she must not have found it after all.

"Why didn't you tell them to take me back too, senpai?" she said. "I think you could've gotten me expelled along with Takuya."

"Because you've been more concerned with enjoying yourself at this school than with getting me expelled," I replied simply. "That's how I see it, anyway. You had no intention of forcing me out of school."

It would've been the same for Yagami, too. Although I had never had any direct, heart-to-heart conversations with him, I likely wouldn't have needed to get him expelled if he had prioritized staying in school.

"It's not what you think, senpai," said Amasawa. "I still haven't found my answer yet. It's because, well... I was wondering, even if I did go back, if there would be a place for me anymore... I just kind of lost track of time, thinking about all that."

She let out a soft, self-deprecating chuckle. In other words, she hadn't yet decided whether she was going to stay here or

move on. Or, I supposed, she could still choose to turn on me, too.

"But you have found some direction," I said. "That's why you called me, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah, I guess," she said. "I'm beginning to think that, since I'm still here, maybe it's okay for me to stick around after all. I can't go back to the White Room, can I? And even if I did leave school, it's not like I know where my parents are or anything. I'd hate it if I just ended up doing shady part-time jobs or something because I didn't have a purpose. Like, what a stereotype, am I right?"

If she were on the streets, she would need to take any means necessary in order to survive. But as long as she stayed in this school, provided she neither dropped out nor got herself expelled, she was guaranteed room and board until graduation. Furthermore, the school had a system set up to purchase back a student's Private Points on graduation. From what I'd heard, it wasn't exactly an equal-value exchange, but even as low as half value, you could still get a considerable amount of money. It would be possible for her to get some money that way and find a decent job somewhere.

There was also a third path. Amasawa didn't seem to be thinking about that, because she didn't know where her real parents were, but there was always the option of trying to find them and returning to them. Still, if she were to officially drop out from the White Room, there essentially wasn't any guarantee about how she'd be dealt with—it would be up to Amasawa's parents whether there was anything for her on the third path.

First, her parents would need to be powerful in some way, either wealthy or prominent. If the White Room knew that she was the child of an influential family, then they were more likely to treat her hospitably. Secondly, her parents would need to want their daughter Ichika back. If those two conditions were met, it was possible that she could start a new life as a normal girl.

Even so, there wasn't any need to force that choice now. Perhaps Amasawa was bothered by my silence, because she

spoke up once more, her voice subdued.

"I'll stay here at this school. Only...if you don't mind it, Ayanokouji-senpai."

"And if I told you to drop out?" I asked.

"I'd drop out," she replied.

I had wondered what kind of reaction she would have to that: pleading, angry, or sad. But she responded immediately and definitively.

"I'm not hearing any hesitation," I said. "You're not thinking of trying to get revenge for Yagami?"

"I don't feel like causing any more trouble."

Which meant that she came to this meeting with that much resolve—fitting for her.

"Those words don't really sound like something a belligerent person like you would say, Amasawa," said Nanase.

"You're right," Amasawa said. "Only Ayanokouji-senpai gets this kind of special treatment from me. As for everyone else, though, don't think I'll be holding off in the future."

Those must have been her true intentions, without any degree of falsehood. Amasawa seemed to value Yagami more than I'd thought, as a compatriot from the White Room; as a brother-in-arms, so to speak. It was quite possible that anyone involved in Yagami's expulsion from this school could become one of Amasawa's targets in the future.

"There's no reason for me to be against you staying here," I told her. "If you want to stay, you can do whatever you want, Amasawa."

I didn't know how much encouragement to give her, but her face relaxed a bit into a happy smile. "So, you mean that my abilities are so far behind yours that I'm not even a threat?"

"That's not what I meant. I'm nothing more than one person who plans to remain here in this school, and it would only be natural for me to want to support you if you wished to make that same choice, Amasawa."

Whether she was an ally or an enemy was a trivial problem. Of course, if she tried to interfere with my plans, then I wouldn't be able to just leave things be, but I'd hope she already understood that, after what happened with Yagami.

"...I see," she said.

"If what you're saying is how you truly feel, Amasawa-san, then I will support you, too," added Nanase—though the look on her face made it clear that she hadn't completely dropped her guard.

"What's this?" Amasawa said. "There's like, water coming from my eyes... What is this...? I've never felt this before..."

"Uh, no matter how hard I look, I'm not seeing any tears flowing," I pointed out.

"Ah ha ha, that's *so weird!*" she laughed. "I'm so moved, though!"

She was back to acting how she usually did, but it looked to me like she was putting on an act to try and force herself to cheer up.

"I'm guessing you may not want to hear this question, but what sort of person was Yagami, anyway?" I asked.

"I'm curious, too," Nanase said. "I still don't quite understand why he kept doing such roundabout things, even before trying to get you expelled, Ayanokouji-senpai."

Why had he hurt those two students in Shinohara's group even though he knew it was risky? Why had he driven an unrelated student from Class 1-C to expulsion? His scandals had drawn so much attention that the school even made an announcement about it. Nanase must have been wondering about a great many things as well.

"Let's see..." Amasawa posed like she was lost in thought for a moment, but she immediately started speaking again, if slightly stiltedly. "I think Takuya was scared. I think he was scared to fight you, Ayanokouji-senpai. But I think he kept those feelings buried so far deep down in his heart that not even he was aware they were there."

So, that was her analysis. Amasawa had likely known Yagami better than anyone else. I was sure that I didn't need to interject or ask her for additional details. What she told us was likely the correct answer.

"So, in order to escape from those feelings of terror," she went on, "he kept making long detours, over and over, without even realizing it..."

And that had ultimately led to him digging his own grave.

"I think it might take me a little bit longer to get back to my usual self," Amasawa said. "But I'm sure that...I'll be fine again soon."

There wasn't any need for her to rush things. It hadn't even been a full year since Amasawa had started her life here at this school. It'd be fine for her to take her time and think about the path she wanted to take from here on.

"That's all I wanted to tell you today," she concluded. "So, I think I'm going to head on back for now. What about you, Nanase-chan?"

It sounded as though Amasawa was inviting Nanase to come along with her, but Nanase shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I'd like to speak with senpai a little. Do you mind?"

"I see. Well, I'll lend him to you for today, as a special occasion," said Amasawa magnanimously.

I'm not your property, I thought to myself, but I figured that was just Amasawa putting on a brave face, trying her hardest to make it look like she was okay.

She didn't stick around for too long; she started walking toward the dormitory. Nanase and I both watched her in silence until she disappeared from view. Looking at Nanase's side profile, she had a grim expression on her face.

"From what you've observed," she said, "what do you think about the things Amasawa-san said, her behavior, and her mannerisms?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I'm still a little worried about her actions causing problems in the future." So, Nanase was anxious about that. No wonder she kept looking at me so intensely.

"You can't trust her?"

"I'm not saying that I don't want to trust Amasawa-san," Nanase said. "But I don't think we can let our guard down." It was a rather diplomatically phrased response, but it was obvious that she didn't trust Amasawa.

"I'm not going to drop my guard," I assured her. "Or rather, I'm just going to carry on the way I always have."

I was here at this school so that I could live an ordinary school life. I wasn't going to allow myself to be swayed by adversaries, near or far.

"I suppose that's just...me being needlessly overanxious, huh?" said Nanase.

"I appreciate your concern. Even if it's just one person on my side, it's great to have allies."

Although Nanase seemed somewhat satisfied with how I was approaching this, she still had more to say. "At the risk of coming off as obstinate, please allow me to say this once more. While I do understand your abilities, Ayanokouji-senpai, as well as the possibility that Amasawa-san has truly had a change of heart, please be careful. It is an undeniable fact that Amasawa-san is a student from the White Room. We don't know what kinds of methods they'll use."

She was pleading with me strongly, desperate that I be prepared in the event something might happen.

"I want you to remain at this school and graduate, Ayanokouji-senpai."

It wasn't that I thought we should have nothing to do with each other, but it did seem like Nanase was more concerned about me than herself.

"If you are ever in trouble, no matter how trivial, you can always come talk to me," she added.

"I understand what you're trying to say," I said. "I'll keep that in mind."

Even Nanase finally seemed to be satisfied with that response. "In that case, I'll leave it at that," she said.

Perhaps she thought that she would be a bother if she hung around any longer, because now she turned away from me and started back toward the dormitory. But despite all her warnings to watch out for Amasawa, something struck me as strange. I decided to pry a little.

"Hey, I forgot to mention this, but I guess we're going on our school trip this week," I told her.

"Oh, I see," she said. "Yes, that's right, that is this week. Senpai, please enjoy yourself to the fullest. School trips truly are the highlight of one's school experience, after all."

"I intend to."

Yeah, something really did feel off. Whether Nanase had known about this school trip or not, she should have had something to say to me about it. But she didn't even show the slightest sign of doing so. It was almost as though she had completely forgotten about it.

"Is there anything you want as a souvenir?" I asked.

I'd decided to try and stop Nanase from leaving and dig a little deeper into the subject of the school trip.

"Oh, speaking of your trip, where are you going, anyway?" she asked.

"Hokkaido."

"Oh, Hokkaido, that sounds nice. When you think of Hokkaido, you think of... What was it? Butter, and things like that, right?"

"Getting butter by itself as a souvenir might be a little weird," I replied.

I wasn't going to deny her request or anything if that was really what she wanted most of all, but I didn't get the sense that it actually was.

"Oh, I think that I would like chocolate-covered fries," she said. "They're famous, aren't they?"

"...I have no idea."

Our conversation was getting kind of mutually incoherent.

"Okay, chocolate fries," I said. "I'll look into that a bit later. If I find any over there, I'll buy some."

"Thank you very much." With that said, Nanase turned to leave again, but before she could, I spoke up once more, in a firm tone.

"Nanase. Is it okay if I ask you one more question?"

"Yes? What is it?" she asked.

The matter of Amasawa and the school trip. Even if an ordinary student couldn't see the link between the two, Nanase would be able to. Honestly, it would've been strange if she couldn't.

"For someone who worries about me so much, you didn't mention anything about worrying about me on the school trip."

"Huh...?" Nanase cocked her head to the side, as if she didn't understand what I was talking about.

"You don't understand what I'm getting at?" I pressed, urging her to think harder.

At once, Nanase's soft smile hardened for a moment.

"This school has tight security," I said. "It's more or less protected from the outside world twenty-four hours a day. In fact, Tsukishiro had to try to get inside in order to get me expelled. However, school trips are quite a different matter. The teachers can't see everywhere, and there are more opportunities for someone to do something, so you must be vigilant, even more so than back on the uninhabited island."

Yes, the risks in a situation like that would be much greater than anything Amasawa could accomplish by baring her fangs at me.

"If you know the people we're dealing with, then you can imagine that they could go with more aggressive methods, like forcing me into their car or something like that," I went on. "If you're so wary of Amasawa, then you should have at least offered a word of caution about that. Something like, 'Please be careful.' Am I wrong?"

Nanase had been checking in on Amasawa up until she came back to class, not knowing what kind of action she'd take. And when she'd figured that Amasawa was going to try and contact me, she even came all the way here. There was no way that Nanase, who did all that, would not have sensed the dangers presented by the school trip.

"You've defeated Yagami-kun and Amasawa-san, Ayanokouji-senpai," she protested. "For someone like me to worry about you, that'd be—"

I cut her off. "That's peculiar, though. If you really believed that, then there wouldn't have been any need for you to stick by Amasawa's side today and stand watch. The fact that you've been warning me so persistently itself is also a contradiction. Unlike out there in the outside world, where it was possible that a large group of adults could come after me at once, Amasawa is just one person, even if she is a White Room student. When it comes to how dangerous those two scenarios are, there's no comparison."

Nanase was bewildered, and immediately opened her mouth to speak...but no words came out.

"Can't think of an excuse?" I asked.

"What are you saying? It seems like there's some kind of misunderstanding, Ayanokouji-senpai."

Nanase had very obviously been shaken just moments ago, but right now, she was completely calm again.

"Sure, it might be a misunderstanding on my part," I said. "In that case, go ahead and tell me your opinion on the school trip again. You were worried about Amasawa, who might do something reckless out of desperation, and kept an eye on her.

So, why didn't you have a single word to say about your concerns about the school trip?"

"I'm ashamed to say this, but I think that I was naïvely unaware of the dangers. Now that I think about it, yes, I suppose the outside world would be full of dangers, as you've said, Ayanokouji-senpai, and yet..."

She was trying to claim that she was simply unaware. Indeed, if that were the case, it wouldn't be difficult for me to understand how the conversation got here. But unfortunately, drawing a conclusion based on that was out of the question for me.

"There's been a nagging question in the back of my mind ever since I met you," I said. "About the relationship between Tsukishiro, the White Room students, and you, Nanase. I'm sure you were given a lot of instructions by Tsukishiro, but why weren't you told anything concrete?"

Tsukishiro had taken advantage of Nanase Tsubasa's desire to avenge Matsuo Eiichirou to make her obey his orders. But on the other hand, Tsukishiro had never revealed anything about the identities of the White Room students to her.

"I think it's...because I'm a normal person, wouldn't you agree?" she replied. "Since I'm not as capable as a White Room student, it's no wonder that I couldn't be trusted with that information."

"At first, I didn't see the man known as Tsukishiro as someone of particularly high value," I said. "That was because I thought there was a more efficient way for him to get me expelled from school than what he was doing. However, as I got to know him, I changed my mind. I started to think that someone like him really could push me out of this school."

He was so good that it made me think that he was holding back on purpose.

"But in the end, you weren't expelled," Nanase said. "Isn't that because your abilities exceeded Acting Director Tsukishiro's expectations?"

"If the story simply ended there, then yes, you might be right about that," I answered. In other words, there was a possibility that this sequence of events wasn't as simple as it appeared. "Getting back to the topic at hand, I think there's another reason why you're wary of Amasawa, but made no attempt to alert me to the dangers of the outside world."

"The truth is that it was just due to a lack of awareness on my part," she insisted. "What other reason do you think there could be?"

"Wasn't it because you couldn't guess what Amasawa was going to do today? And you didn't warn me of the dangers of being out on the school trip because you already knew that the White Room had no plans to try anything?"

If there was no chance whatsoever that they would try and come after me, then it was understandable that Nanase wouldn't be worried.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," she said. "How could I say with such certainty that there was no possibility of them trying anything on the school trip?"

"That's what I want to ask you," I replied.

"Our conversation has given me a keen understanding of the risks involved with the school trip. I'd like to ask you to be even more vigilant regarding Amasawa-san."

Apparently, no matter how many times I repeated the question, Nanase was going to stick to her story that it was just a lack of awareness.

"This is nothing more than a theory, but would you mind hearing me out?" I asked.

"I don't mind at all. Go ahead," said Nanase.

"Tsukishiro never had any intention of getting me expelled from the very beginning. That's my theory."

Although that theory overturned a lot of the assumptions I'd made up until this point, it did suggest that quite a few things were connected.

"But wouldn't that be odd?" Nanase said. "How would you explain the existence of people like Amasawa-san and Yagami-kun, then? Yagami-kun was specifically working to get you expelled, Ayanokouji-senpai. That much was clear from our conversation with Amasawa-san."

"If Amasawa and Yagami were only serious about getting me expelled because they weren't informed of the true goal by their superiors, then it makes sense," I replied.

"But what about Acting Director Tsukishiro? He took advantage of his position of significant power to employ several aggressive measures."

"If he was really trying, I would have been expelled."

Honestly, before even talking about how my abilities might've played into it, he should have taken advantage of any one of the countless options at his disposal to bury me completely.

"I understand your thinking, senpai. Perhaps such intentions really were hidden, as you've suggested. But I have to say...the fact I'm being included in this is a little upsetting. I don't want to be thought of as an enemy just because I failed to mention the dangers of the school trip."

"Okay then, while we're on the subject, what about the Cultural Festival?" I pressed her. "Someone affiliated with the White Room even came close to me, and yet you never appeared. Was that another instance of you simply being unaware?"

"...That was..."

"Was it just that you were too busy with your class's offerings for the festival, and you weren't able to get around to it? Meaning that your worries about me were secondary?"

"Th-that's not it," she sputtered. "Of course I was worried about you. And I was still watching over you from time to time then, senpai, and—"

"Are you sure about that? Can you say for certain that you've actually been watching out for me? If so, then next, I'd like to ask you when and from where you were watching me."

Whatever kind of person Nanase was, no matter her position, she should have understood very well what kind of person I was. If she carelessly gave me some false testimony, there was no escaping the fact that I would quickly expose her. I still remembered every minute detail of what happened on the day of the Cultural Festival.

"Even at the Cultural Festival, they didn't try anything to force me out of school," I added. "They urged me to come out willingly, but I'm sure that they already understood that I wouldn't drop out of school just for something like that. That was why you didn't show up then, Nanase."

Nanase gasped silently as she tried to suppress her emotions.

"The White Room had no intention of expelling me," I went on, "not during the Cultural Festival before, and not now, during this school trip, either. In fact, it was never their plan from the very beginning. If my theory is correct, Nanase, then your presence here is extremely curious."

"....."

"Did Matsuo really commit suicide? And did his son Eiichirou die? I always assumed you were a third party, Nanase, and I thought that increased the likelihood of what you told me about Matsuo's death. But if you being here was part of a calculated plan from the very beginning, then all that credibility is lost."

That meant I would lose the assurance of what she said on the uninhabited island, about how she had formerly stood before me as an enemy and then turned into my ally.

"It's all true, Ayanokouji-senpai," she insisted. "However, even if you've presented your thoughts as hypothetical, I'm sure that I can't dispel your doubts easily just by saying so."

The only way to find out whether it was true was to look up the information in the family register, or something similar—but of course, if the White Room was involved, then even that would be suspect.

"And if we're following your theory, what would be the reason for me coming to this school?" Nanase said. "It doesn't explain anything."

"No, that can be explained. If we assume that you were sent here to aid me, then it makes sense. Your role is to provide support if a White Room student such as Yagami or Amasawa tries to get me expelled. Even that one instance of us fighting over the matter of Matsuo was simply to get me to drop my guard around you. If you think about it that way, it fits."

Someone who once fought against me as an enemy who then turned into my ally. Depending on the time, conditions, and circumstances, trust could be built over a brief period.

"That's exactly what Amasawa meant, about you being given the role of knight," I added. "That's what it all means."

Tsukishiro had assigned Nanase, as well as Yagami and Amasawa, the job of getting me expelled. But he gave Nanase the role of first pretending to be my enemy, to see what I was capable of, and then becoming my ally. By performing that role, it was possible for her to make accurate, truthful deductions as she stood by my side, while intentionally not giving me any information about the White Room students.

"It's just a theory," I said. "There's still a good chance that Tsukishiro and the White Room are serious about getting me expelled. Either way, there's no harm to me. If my theory is correct, then that means you're a genuine ally, Nanase. And even if my theory isn't correct, that doesn't change the fact that you've been my ally all this time."

This scenario wasn't like a coin with two different sides; rather, it was like both sides had the same pattern. But I figured I'd keep that tucked away in the back of my mind for now. There was the possibility that *he* might really not be working to get me expelled. Then, what was he after? At what point had he started all of this? Was Matsuo dead or alive? Was his son dead or alive? Whether it was true, or it was all a lie, it didn't affect my situation very much.

If everything up until this point were turned on its head, then... Maybe it had already been decided from the very beginning that I would enroll at this school.

"It doesn't seem like you'll accept anything I tell you right now, Ayanokouji-senpai, no matter what I say," Nanase said. "I think I have no other choice but to take my time to dispel your doubts."

"I don't know if there's any way for you to dispel my doubts, but I guess that's just the way it is. As far as I'm concerned, though, you can keep treating me as you have until now, I don't mind."

"I cannot do that. I...I cannot accept that."

She quickly bowed and then briskly walked back to her dormitory.

Nanase wasn't physically capable enough to stand toe-to-toe with the White Room students. And while I couldn't see exactly what her academic abilities were, she was still a step behind the likes of Amasawa and Yagami as of now. However...

There was still something about Nanase Tsubasa. Maybe it was just a hunch, but I felt certain of it.

2.5

AFTER SEVEN O'CLOCK in the evening, around the time that the sun had completely set, Sudou dropped by my room.

"Hey man, sorry for suddenly stoppin' by without callin' and junk..." He sniffed. "Havin' curry today?" He must have picked up a whiff of my supper after the scent wafted all the way to the entrance. He then suddenly looked down and noticed there were two pairs of shoes lined up near the entryway. "Someone else here?"

"Yeah, I was just in the middle of making dinner. I was thinking of having curry with Kei," I replied.

"Oh, Karuizawa..."

Just then, the door to the living room opened and Kei peeked out, clad in her street clothes.

"And is it a problem if I'm here?" she asked.

"N-no, not at all, ain't a problem. Dude, are you guys like always together or somethin'...?"

Based on his reaction, he had clearly come by on the assumption that no one was here but me.

"Of course we're always together, duh," Kei said. "We're a couple."

"A couple bein' together twenty-four hours a day, that's... Well, I guess it ain't tough to imagine it's like that."

Sudou was about to argue, but then he accepted Kei's statement dejectedly. I guess he must have visualized various scenarios with couples he knew personally. Ike and Shinohara, for example—recently they'd started holding hands in public and things like that, and Shinohara had even been sitting in Ike's lap. The two of them didn't seem to care about other people seeing them, or what they might think. I was pretty sure I'd heard Ike say the two of them were going to karaoke right after classes were over today, too.

"I'm guessing you just got back from your club activities," I said. I had the impression that Sudou generally came back to the dorms around this time.

"Well, I ain't got a girlfriend," he said. "Basketball's pretty much all I have."

That was... I had no idea what to say to that.

"Look, I'm real sorry to interrupt you before you eat, but do you got a second? It won't take very long."

I wondered if it was something confidential; the first thing Sudou had done when he arrived was checking to see if there were other shoes at my door.

I turned to Kei. "Go ahead and get started eating dinner without me," I told her.

"Huh? I'll wait. Besides, you'll be done right away, right? He said it wouldn't take long."

Sudou stopped to think for a minute, and then assured her it would take less than five minutes. Kei must have been satisfied with that, because she closed the door.

I slipped my shoes on and stepped out into the hallway with Sudou. No matter what this conversation was about, I couldn't imagine that Kei would divulge it to a third party, so I could rest easy on that point.

"Hey, uh," Sudou mumbled, "Ayanokouji, you... No, I mean, um, like, y'know... Have you and Karuizawa...already...?" He was trying to confirm something with me using incredibly vague expressions.

"I'll leave that to your imagination," I replied.

"Uh... Wait, isn't that, like, uh, practically the same as saying you have...?"

How my answer was interpreted was up to the listener.

"So? What did you want to talk about?" I asked.

"O-oh, yeah. I mean, it's no wonder, since you're so popular, and it ain't like I'm in any position to be worrying about your

business."

Sudou shook his head as if to clear his mind of wicked thoughts, and then proceeded to check to see if anyone was around.

"Well, to tell you the truth," he said, "lately, it's like, Onodera's been, y'know, givin' off some vibes. And like, pretty strongly, too. It's got me all confused."

He sounded...well, not exactly happy, but rather puzzled, as he spoke. I knew that what I'd said to Sudou at the Cultural Festival had been weighing on him heavily every day since. As the person responsible, I needed to listen to what he had to say now with the utmost seriousness. Despite that, though, I figured I should correct him on something that needed to be amended.

"You said that Onodera's been 'giving off vibes,'" I repeated, "but, looking at it from an outsider's point of view, not much has changed since the Sports Festival. Perhaps you're just feeling this way because it's your perception that's changed, Sudou."

As for Onodera, I didn't think she was even aware that she had feelings for Sudou. On the surface, I was sure that she felt like she was just a friend inviting another friend to eat together or to hang out, like normal.

"...Yeah, maybe you're right about that." Sudou scratched his head briskly. He seemed restless. "After that stuff you told me about her, though, I can't stop thinkin' about it. I can't calm down —or like, I just feel uncomfortable, I guess. Even when I'm talkin' to her, I keep wonderin' what she really thinks about me."

Before, Sudou had only seen her as a good friend, someone on the same wavelength as him, who'd made an impression on him as an athlete. Now that he'd been told Onodera might have taken a liking to him, it wasn't difficult to see how that would change how he saw her. The conversation stopped there. There were about ten seconds of silence.

I urged him to continue. "So? What did you want to talk to me about? I think there's more you want to tell me."

That seemed to get Sudou to make up his mind, because he started speaking again.

"It's just, when I'm with Onodera...there's all these messy feelings that start wellin' up inside of me. I think, hey, if I started datin' her, I'd be able to say I'd got my first girlfriend, and if Suzune ain't gonna ever look my way anyway, then that'd be just fine. I don't know if I'm really lookin' at things, like, objectively right now or whatever, but Onodera is pretty damn cute."

Not only that, but she and Sudou talked about the same things, and they were both self-disciplined athletes. Strictly going by their compatibility, they'd probably be the best-suited people for each other out of everyone immediately available.

"It's not really bad at all for you to think so, though," I said. "Besides, even if you like someone that way, it doesn't mean the other person will reciprocate. Often, it's one-sided."

Of course, it wasn't like everyone could just take that kind of situation in stride. Sudou was struggling with just that, right here and now.

"Maybe... But there's somethin' else I've been thinkin' about, too. I mean, you might have been wrong about how she feels in the first place, and she might only think of me as a friend, right? If that's true, then that means I'm bein' full of myself thinkin' this stuff, and it makes me embarrassed, and my head just gets all jumbled up."

There was basically zero doubt in my mind that Onodera liked Sudou. However, it was true that there was no ironclad guarantee that was how she actually felt. And anyway, tomorrow, she could have someone else in her sights instead.

"You've had a lot of worries too, though, yeah?" Sudou said. "I mean, Karuizawa used to date Hirata."

"Well, that's true, yeah," I replied. The reality was actually completely different, but I figured that I'd just keep the conversation going.

"Man, i-if Onodera were to come up to me and tell me how she feels, then... I'm scared about what'd happen."

"What would you plan to do if she told you how she felt about you, right now?" I asked.

"...I dunno, dude... Well, no, that's not true... Yeah. I mean, probably, I'd tell her that I couldn't reciprocate."

So, he'd waste his chance to grab hold of happiness.

"I really do like her, after all," he added. "Suzune, I mean." That was one of the certainties that Sudou had as of now. "Just imagining how hurt Onodera'd be if I turned her down is pretty upsetting, though."

"So, you came to me because you don't know what path you should take?" I asked.

"Nah, that's not it... I didn't come here for advice from ya. This issue is about how *I* feel, ain't it? It wouldn't be right for me to get someone else to figure out the answer for me." It seemed like he hadn't come here seeking help, then. "I came up with an answer myself. I wanted you to hear me out."

"Let's hear it, then," I said. "What kind of answer is it?"

"I'm...I'm gonna officially tell Suzune how I feel about her on the school trip. I'm gonna ask her to go out with me. For real."

"I see."

From what he was saying, it sounded like, right now, it didn't matter whether she'd actually say yes. He had come to this decision because he needed to do something to break out of the situation he was in.

"I'm gonna do it because I still like Suzune, and I just can't even imagine datin' anybody else right now. No matter how it turns out, I just want to make things clear."

Sudou had demonstrated rapid growth so far. And I was sure Horikita herself appreciated that very highly too.

"The odds are probably low," he admitted. "I might just embarrass myself. But still..."

He clearly felt that if he didn't convey his feelings, he wouldn't be able to move forward. That was why he was expressing his determination like this.

"If I do get turned down, though, it ain't like I can turn around and decide, 'Oh, I'll just go see Onodera now,' right? If anything, I might get this strong feelin' like, 'I can't give up...'" He clenched one hand into a tight fist. "But the reason I came to see ya today is 'cause I want ya to witness my determination, Ayanokouji."

"Witness?" I repeated. "You mean, like, the moment you tell her how you feel?"

"I know, like, normally when you do that with somebody, you don't do it out in the open for everyone to see, but I feel like maybe I need someone there."

Maybe he just needed that to help him muster the courage, to give him the necessary push. By cutting off any retreat, Sudou would be able to vocalize his feelings for Horikita.

"I'm gonna hold out my hand and ask her to go out with me. And if she accepts, she'll take my hand, and..." said Sudou, proceeding to hold out his right hand, as though he were rehearsing that moment.

We weren't close to that stage yet, but I could already clearly see that he was putting quite a bit of passion into this. And when he was standing before Horikita, he'd put all of those feelings into words and bare his heart to her. If I were to evaluate his chances at present, I certainly couldn't say that he had a high probability of success. But... Well, perhaps the strength and passion of his feelings, and his determination, would get through to her. For Horikita's part, she might not immediately respond to him, agreeing to become lovers right then and there. But it was possible that she could say that they'd start out slow, beginning as friends.

"I understand," I said. "It'll depend on the time and place, I think, but I'll try my best to be there to witness it. That okay?"

Sudou must have been relieved to hear that, because he patted his chest and sighed. "Yeah. Sorry again, dude, for askin' ya for somethin' like this. Welp, that's pretty much it, so, uh... I'll get in touch with ya later. Sorry for interruptin' yer time with Karuizawa."

With that, not wanting to take up any more of my time, he returned to his own room. I watched him go and then went back inside, where I saw Kei sitting down on a cushion by the table. It looked like she was waiting for me; she hadn't even dished up the curry.

"Welcome back! What did you guys talk about?" she asked.

"Lots of stuff," I replied.

"Lots of stuff? Now I'm kinda curious! Come on, tell me. I can keep it a secret."

"I don't mind telling you, but would you mind standing up for a second first?"

"Okay." She cocked her head to the side, puzzled, as I asked her to stand.

I touched the cushion she had been sitting on. It was cool. "So, you were listening after all," I observed.

"...You found me out, huh?" she said with a smirk.

If she had been sitting down the whole time while waiting for me, then the cushion would have been warm.

"Was my acting bad?" she asked.

"Your acting was perfect. I just figured that you would've been listening in, is all, knowing you."

"Hey, I... Yeah, okay."

"And also, if you were going to trick me, you should've come up with some excuse about the cushion. Like you had gotten up earlier because you went over to the fridge to get a drink. There's stuff besides water in there, like milk and tea."

"Really? But wouldn't that have been strange, when I haven't even eaten any of the curry yet? And there's still water in my cup. Plus, knowing you, Kiyotaka, you probably would've checked, right? Like, you would've looked inside the fridge to see how much there was left."

"If you want to eavesdrop without being found out, you need to do at least that much. You could have just drunk the

water, in that case—or, if you couldn't drink it, you could've just poured it in the sink in the kitchen. There was already a lot of water in the sink anyway, because I'd been cooking."

It would have been impossible for me to discern water that she had poured into the sink from water that was already in there. But if there hadn't already been water in the sink, then she could've poured it down the toilet, too.

"W-well, enough about that. Come on, let's talk about the school trip," Kei said hastily, pitching forward as though she were physically trying to run away from that topic.

There wasn't any point in pursuing that topic any further anyway, so I decided to just go with the flow.

"Oh, speaking of that, what did you think of the school trip itinerary, Kei?" I asked. "A lot of people in class were talking about how much free time we had."

"Yeah, for sure," she said. "But personally, I feel like it's a downside. I mean, we have to spend all that time with the people in our groups, right? And my chances of being together with you seem low. Right?"

The chances that we'd be placed in the same group were about five percent...but only if you were determining the probability assuming the selection would be completely random.

"Ugggh. Please, God, please let me and Kiyotaka be together!" Kei brought her hands together, fingers interlaced, as though she were praying to heaven.

"Even if we can't be together during free time, there aren't any restrictions when we're at the ryokan," I pointed out. "Still, personally, I consider this a fantastic opportunity to get to know the students from the other classes better."

If I were in the same group as Kei, then naturally, that would mean I'd probably end up spending all the hours of the day with her. I wouldn't say that'd be a bad way to spend my time, but I did feel like it would be a little bit of a waste. We already had plenty of chances to spend time together, just like we were doing right now.

"I kind of get the feeling that you don't want to be in a group with me," said Kei.

"It's not like that," I said. "I'm just saying that it'd be better for you to try and enjoy yourself, even if we're not in the same group."

I was sure that Kei already understood that, but she didn't seem like she was honestly willing to accept it.

"But..." She pouted, puffing out her cheeks, and hugged my shoulder. "I might die from loneliness if you're not there, Kiyotaka."

"You're exaggerating."

"But, but..."

I got the feeling that some ingenuity might be needed here to motivate her.

"There's a reason I think it'll be a good thing if you and I are in separate groups, Kei," I said. "We're getting to the point where we need information on each class if we're going to move up to Class A. And I'm sure that many of the students are going to be completely open and defenseless, so to speak, during the school trip."

Kei still seemed disgruntled. I went on, "When I heard about the school trip schedule, and the groups, I did a little research online about other schools. I came to understand that it's quite unusual to have almost two full days of free time. With that in mind, I figured the school's goal may be to introduce change in the relationships between classes while they can."

"Why would they want to do that?" asked Kei.

"I still don't know, but it's possible that the information gained from the school trip could come into play in the near future. Perhaps by the end of the second semester or the third."

"So, you're saying that you want me to gather information that we could use as a weapon?"

"Because I'm amazed by your talents," I said, patting her head. "I figured that since we're being presented with this

opportunity, I'd like to put them to effective use."

Her dissatisfaction wasn't completely gone, but now she appeared not entirely displeased. "W-well, sure, I guess I can understand you wanting to rely on me."

"Of course, I'd plan to have a lot of fun together if we were in the same group," I added. "But if that doesn't happen, try to have fun without losing your motivation—and take the opportunity to be useful to the class, too."

"...Okay. If you say I should, Kiyotaka, I'll try my best."

As I repeatedly stroked her head, I decided to go ahead and change the subject. "So, about that thing with Sudou earlier—"

"Oh, you mean your conversation with Sudou-kun about how he's going to tell Horikita-san how he feels?" she said. "Yeah, I have to say, I'm a little curious."

I wasn't confident that Kei was going to bite, but she appeared more interested than I had thought. "Girls seem to like hearing stories about people confessing their love," I remarked.

"Well, sure, yeah. I think he's definitely going to get rejected, though."

"Really?"

"Huh? Kiyotaka, you think it'll go well?"

"I feel like there's a possibility. If the two of them deciding to start off with being just a little more than friends still counts as success, then I'm betting he'll succeed."

"No way, seriously? In that case, I'll take that bet. We'll wager on whether he'll succeed or fail."

"What are the stakes?"

"Hmm," Kei mused, already starting to fantasize about the possibilities. "Okay, how about if I win, I ask you to get me something kind of expensive as a Christmas gift?"

"Okay, that's easy enough to understand," I agreed. "So, what if I win?"

"If that happens, I'll do whatever you say," said Kei.

"You sure? You're making an awfully big bet there."

"Because it's totally impossible it'll work out," she insisted. "It's not really about whether Sudou-kun is a good or bad guy. It comes down to the person he's asking, Horikita-san. She has no interest in things like romance."

"I have to wonder about that," I said.

It was certainly true that, at first glance, Horikita didn't seem to be the type to fall in love. And if you were to ask if she liked anyone in particular at this point in her life, well, I'd have some serious doubts about that. However, I didn't think you could say definitively that Sudou's confession of romance would fail just because she didn't have feelings for him.

Right now, Horikita was also at the stage where she was learning from a lot of new experiences. I couldn't deny the possibility that she might decide to step up to the challenge, so to speak, just as I had. And if the person reaching out to her was Sudou, she'd probably feel like he wasn't a bad choice.

"Ah, I'm looking forward to Christmas!" said Kei. "I wonder what I'll have you buy for me."

"In that case, I'll think long and hard about what I'll have you do for me, Kei," I replied.

"Whoa, that feels a little naughty!"

That was nothing more than Kei's own imagination.

Chapter 3: Self-Explanatory School Trip

IT WAS THE MORNING of the first day of the school trip. A total of four buses had gathered, and all the second-year students were wearing their casual clothes as they stood in line. It was just under five degrees Celsius that morning, and it felt like the cold was occasionally prickling my skin. However, the temperature was going to be even lower in Hokkaido.

The school made sure that the students didn't forget their gloves and coats and such, just to be safe. We were also going to do a final check of our luggage, including clothing, and confirm that we had essential items with us, such as our cell phones.

Mashima-sensei, the homeroom instructor for Class 2-A, addressed us in a loud, clear voice before we boarded the bus. "First and foremost, I'm relieved to say that no students will be absent from the school trip due to illness," he said.

The homeroom instructors for the second-year classes then proceeded to oversee boarding for the four buses. Mashima-sensei boarded bus number one, Chabashira-sensei boarded bus number two, Sakagami-sensei boarded bus number three, and Hoshinomiya-sensei boarded bus number four. In short, they boarded in order based on the class rankings, from A to D.

As I waited to board, I went ahead and checked the schedule on my phone for what was going to happen next. The bus would head to Haneda Airport, and we would take a plane to New Chitose Airport. Once we landed, we'd board a local bus there, and head to the ski resort for our first day.

I quietly browsed the page where the list of groups was displayed. There, I saw I had been placed in group six, along with seven other students. From Class A, there were Kitou Hayato and Yamamura Miki. From Class B, me and Kushida Kikyou. From Class C, Ryuuen Kakeru and Nishino Takeko. And from Class D, Watanabe Norihito and Amikura Mako.

I didn't have any complaints about the group the school had assigned, but I hadn't imagined that I'd be placed in the same group as Ryuuen, who was perceived by many as the biggest troublemaker. As for Kitou, Yamamura, Watanabe, Nishino, and Amikura, I didn't know much about them at all, because I hadn't ever interacted with them before. Still, I was sure I could come to understand them during our time as a group. After all, it had been decided that these groups would spend almost the entire four nights and five days on the school trip together.

It was certainly a strange group, and it was difficult to determine whether or not the members' relationships would be solid.

Incidentally, the numbers I had assigned to the students in the group were as follows: Kushida, 6; Watanabe, 18; Amikura, 14; Ryuuen, 6; Nishino, 18; Kitou, 9; and Yamamura, 14. I ranked them chiefly based on OAA, the metric derived by the school, rather than whether I was personally close to them or not. Of course, I had assigned the highest ratings to Kushida and Ryuuen.

But...the seven other people in my group hadn't necessarily given the same ratings I did. In Ryuuen's case, in particular, I wouldn't have been surprised if a lot of other people had given him an especially good rating, even the students who disliked him. Kitou especially, as someone who stood by Sakayanagi's side, would likely have given Ryuuen a respectable number. Ryuuen had the qualities and characteristics of a leader, so it would make perfect sense for him to be given a high ranking—or, if not that, at least a fairly good score.

Of course, in the end, all this was nothing more than my own speculation. I knew that they had based these groups on the numbers we came up with the other day, so it wasn't like they were entirely random. Still, I might not be able to find an exact answer as to how the groups were formed no matter how much I let my imagination run wild.

"I don't even know five out of these seven people..." I muttered to myself.

Well, technically, could I even include Ryuuen among the people who I knew? I'd thought that I had expanded my circle of

friends in my own way over the past year and a half, little by little, but I supposed that wasn't really the case when it came to the other classes.

Anyway, it seemed like it was going to be time to board the buses soon. The students all began gathering with their close friends.

There were no assigned places for us to sit on the buses. The me from ages long past would have personally appreciated having a fixed seat. But since Kei currently occupied the position of my girlfriend, it was, of course, easy to know who was going to sit by me in the end. Kei waved at me and came to stand next to me, almost as though we had already decided upon it in advance. However, Yousuke happened to appear at almost the exact same time that Kei did.

"Kiyotaka-kun, could I have a second of your time?" he asked.

"Hm?"

"It's about where we'll be sitting. I was just wondering, if you wouldn't mind, could I sit next to you on the bus on the way to the airport?"

"Next to me?" I repeated. "Why?"

Sitting next to Yousuke? That was quite a coveted spot. Someone like me claiming that seat would most likely provoke some animosity from other people in our class. The fact that Mii-chan was in love with Yousuke was now public knowledge, since Kushida had exposed her secret, but I didn't imagine that she had the courage to openly invite him to sit next to her. Even so, she was eyeing him like a hawk, and she wasn't the only one. I could tell that many girls were looking this way with great interest, as if to prove me right.

Yousuke looked me in the eyes and pleaded with me. I guessed he must be concerned about the firestorm that might ensue as people competed for this seat, and this was his plan to avoid any issues.

"It's tough being popular, huh?" I remarked.

"I'm not trying to be popular." He wasn't being smug at all; he simply stated it plainly. His ability to pick up on the unwritten social rules of the class was truly incredible. He cared about others' feelings as if they were his own, and always did his best to avoid conflict.

"So, Kei, is it okay if I let Yousuke sit next to me, then?" I asked, turning to her.

"Say *what*?! Nah, just kidding. It's easier that way, right? It's okay." Kei seemed to be very receptive to Yousuke; she was indebted to him, after all. "In exchange, though, Kiyotaka has to sit in the aisle seat. Because I'm gonna sit in the aisle seat on the opposite side."

Well, I supposed that was a simple yet satisfactory solution. As a result, four of us all sat together in a row a little past the middle part of the bus, with Yousuke on the far left and me sitting next to him in the aisle seat, Kei in the aisle seat on the other side, and Satou next to her. A few minutes later, all four buses were fully loaded, and we departed for the airport. We weren't allowed to get up from our seats while the buses were in motion, but we were free to chat amongst ourselves, and to enjoy whatever food or drink we brought with us on the bus, too. So, some students almost immediately started taking out their snacks.

"Now it's starting to feel like a trip, huh?" said Yousuke happily, noticing the mood around him.

I supposed that for this young man, who considered the happiness of others to be his own happiness, it must have been comforting to feel other students being so merry.

"Ahhh, it still would've been awesome if I had been in a group together with you, Kiyotaka," lamented Kei.

The boy from our class who she had been partnered with for her group was none other than Akito—someone she hardly ever talked to.

"Like I told you, this is a good opportunity, though, isn't it?" I said. "We don't get many chances to interact with people from other classes."

"I wasn't really looking for that opportunity, though... Tch."

I guess she had been expecting me to say that I was going to be lonely without her too, because she pursed her lips in a frustrated pout. Still, I was sure that she remembered very clearly what I told her the other day. Kei's eyes were going to be especially important when it came to learning about the other classes' situations.

Incidentally, Yousuke was in the same group as Matsushita, and Satou was with Okiya.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun," Satou called over, "how have things been lately with you and Kei-chan? Is everything going well?"

"Hey, obviously it's going well, right?" Kei interrupted. "You don't even need to ask."

"Maybe it's just that Ayanokouji-kun is being extra careful," teased Satou.

"Don't be stupid. We're doing well because we're super-crazy-head-over-heels in love," said Kei. "Y'know?"

We continued engaging in completely childish conversation like that until we reached the airport.

3.1

ONCE WE TOUCHED DOWN at New Chitose Airport, we started lining up in the airport lobby. On the buses bound for Haneda Airport, we'd been with our own respective classes, but from this point onward, we were to move with our respective groups. Mashima-sensei oversaw groups one through five, Chabashira-sensei was in charge of groups six through ten, Sakagami-sensei was in charge of groups eleven through fifteen, and Hoshinomiya-sensei was in charge of groups sixteen through twenty.

"Once everyone in your group gets together, we'll begin seating arrangements," Chabashira-sensei told us. "Please talk with your groups and decide where you'd each like to sit."

Eight bus seats were allocated to those of us in my group, group six. We were going to have to determine ourselves where we'd each sit out of those eight seats. They were spread between two rows at the front of bus two, with two seats on each side. I went over to the area overseen by Chabashira-sensei to join group six.

Kushida came up to me. "Looks like we're in a group together, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Looks like it," I said. "I'm guessing you're fine with any group, then, no matter who you're paired up with?"

"Yeah, pretty much. But... Well, I'm not exactly thrilled about Ryuuken-kun."

I didn't know specifically to what extent Kushida had shown her true nature to Ryuuken, but I knew that they had worked together for a time. That might make it difficult for her to be partnered up with him now.

"He probably won't be a scary opponent to deal with anymore," I told her. "Besides, Kushida, you aren't the cowardly type to begin with. Even if he were to make some careless remark, it probably won't have any effect on our classmates."

"I know. It's Ryuuen-kun, after all, and he's reaching for Class A—I wouldn't be surprised even if he tried to threaten me at some point. I wasn't sure how to deal with the situation, but maybe things have eased up."

It seemed like Kushida had built a firm resolve; even if her true nature was exposed, it wouldn't have that much of an effect. It sounded like she was prepared for that.

"Kikyou-chaaan!"

A boy and a girl from Ichinose's class emerged from the crowd of students, waving at Kushida. Watanabe Norihito and Amikura Mako. Kushida and Amikura seemed like they were awfully close, almost like it were completely natural, and they took each other's hands in clear joy at being in the same group. On the surface, they were acting like they were close friends, but when I thought about how Kushida probably felt nothing at all deep down, I felt like this was an utterly amazing sight.

Watanabe called out to me, "I hope we all have a nice time together over the next five days."

I responded to him with a gentle wave. I had never interacted with him before this point, so this would be a good opportunity to get to know what he was like. With that, half of our group had assembled. The next person to appear was Nishino, and following a little after her was Ryuuen.

Kushida took the initiative and greeted them with a smile. "Good morning, Nishino-san. And to you too, Ryuuen-kun."

Watanabe and Amikura followed suit and greeted them as well.

"...Hi," said Nishino.

This girl, Nishino, struck me as somewhat awkward, perhaps because she had hardly ever interacted with Kushida or Amikura before. Ryuuen, on the other hand, didn't reply to anyone, and stood some distance away from the rest of us.

"Now all that's left is Kitou-kun and Yamamura-san, right?" Kushida said.

"They're already here," I replied.

"Huh?"

When I pointed behind Kushida, she noticed that the two of them were already standing there, lined up quietly. Kitou had been glaring at Ryuuen ever since he'd arrived, with some sort of silent pressure mixed into his expression. Yamamura, though, wasn't looking at anyone; she walked over while keeping her eyes downcast.

"It looks like everyone is here," said Kushida, "so let's figure out where we'll be sitting right away."

Having someone in the group who could take the initiative at times like these was a major plus. I was a bit concerned about what Ryuuen, the leader of Class C, was going to say if he had any issues with the arrangements, but...surprisingly enough, he never interrupted. Was it just that he had no intention of leading the other classes, or did he think that there was no need for him to bother with something so trivial as seating arrangements?

"Maybe it'd be a good idea for the boys to stick together and the girls to stick together," suggested Amikura, picking up the baton from Kushida. "How about that?"

"What does everyone think?" asked Kushida. "No objections?"

No one objected to the idea of boys and girls sitting separately. Neither Nishino nor Yamamura seemed interested at all. As for the boys, they didn't seem to have even the slightest complaint about what Amikura said. If they carelessly objected to the idea, then that meant we would be advocating a different arrangement, saying that we boys wanted to sit with the girls.

"Okay, if we're doing things that way, then it'll be fine to have the boys and girls discuss amongst themselves, right?" said Kushida, deftly separating the girls from the boys.

It would have been much easier if we just let Kushida make all the decisions on where to sit, as the person who'd been taking charge, but... Well, there was no use complaining about it. Watanabe and I naturally gathered closer together, but Ryuuen and Kitou didn't budge an inch.

"What do we do, Ayanokouji?" said Watanabe. "I'm getting the feeling that this is going to be really difficult."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"I don't really mind who I sit next to," he added, "but I can't really envision myself chatting away with Ryuuen or Kitou."

"But you could see yourself talking to me?" I asked.

"Huh...? Well, uh... Umm... More than those two, anyway."

Considering who I was being compared to, it wasn't much of a compliment. Personally, I would rather have just sat down next to Watanabe and gotten through this without getting mixed up in any trouble... But just as I was starting to think that I should go ahead and make my decision, Kitou stepped forward without making a sound.

"As long as I'm not next to Ryuuen, I have no complaints." He quietly mumbled the most troubling statement possible, and then returned to his original position.

"...What do we do?" asked Watanabe.

"If we try and force those two to sit side by side, it'll probably be trouble," I replied.

It seemed like Watanabe was easily able to imagine how that would turn out, and he nodded dispiritedly. "Okay, so I guess we don't have any choice but to spread ourselves out," he said.

"Where do you want to sit?"

"I'm fine with wherever," I replied. "Sit wherever you want, Watanabe."

"Wherever...I want, huh?" Watanabe, faced with only two choices that left him at his wits' end, agonized over the decision for a while before giving me his answer. "In that case, I'll sit by Kitou. I mean, that guy seems like he's generally mature. I don't think he'll do anything as long as I'm not antagonizing him or anything."

It was certainly true that Kitou wasn't as scary as he looked. The impression I had was that he was the harmless sort, except when someone was being hostile toward him. Anyway, I figured I

might as well go ahead and wrap things up on my end, too. The school trip was going to be long, after all: four nights and five days.

"Hey, I know this might not be what you want," I said to Ryuuen, "but I'll sit next to you during the school trip, unless something goes wrong. I'll be as considerate as I can, though, and I'll give you the window seat. Are you okay with that?"

"Whatever." For the time being, Ryuuen was acting as quiet as a lamb. He was also quite incredible in the sense that that he was earnestly sticking to the rules during the school trip, even though, if you thought about it, it wouldn't have been out of character for him to just skip it without getting permission.

"Seems to me like you're misunderstandin' somethin' here, Ayanokouji," he said.

"Misunderstanding something?"

"The first shots between me and Sakayanagi have already been fired."

Ryuuen shot a quick glance over at Kitou. Kitou seemed to have been expecting it, because he glared back at Ryuuen.

"I see," I said. "Interactions with the other classes are inevitable during the school trip. So, you're saying that this is the perfect opportunity for classes to look for openings to exploit in each other?"

"It's an opportunity to see how good that Kitou guy really is," said Ryuuen. "Dependin' on how things go down, I might crush him while the time's right."

That was a very disturbing statement. So much so that it made it difficult to imagine that we were about to be embarking on a fun, happy Hokkaido adventure. It seemed like this wasn't going to be a simple trip.

If I recalled correctly, Sakayanagi was in group four. Who else was assigned to group four? I sorted through my memories. From Ryuuen's class, it was Tokitou Hiroya and Morofuji Rika. The second semester wasn't over yet, but it wouldn't have been a bad idea for them to have already started investigating the other

classes in preparation for the end of the school year. If we ended up clashing with those two classes, who had already prepared for battle, then it'd be quite the challenge.

Once the teachers saw that the groups were finished with their discussions, they started ushering us onto the buses. I ceded Ryuuuen the window seat and sat down next to him. On the bus earlier, all together as a class, there'd been a lively atmosphere, but now it was so quiet that it almost seemed like what happened before was just my imagination. Now, as designated by the school, we were in groups with students from the other classes.

It would take some time for the students to get to know each other and to be able to talk to each other casually, since not everyone was close friends with each other. Almost as if to prove this point, nearly half of the students on this bus had preferred to stick together by class rather than separate based on gender. That was an example of what inevitably happened when you couldn't take the initiative and decide who would sit next to whom, like Kushida did with our group.

Even so, all the students were on the same page in their desire to have fun. By the time the bus started moving about thirty minutes later, self-introductions were mostly over and done with, and little by little, students were starting to chat within their groups, rather than with just their own classmates. Then, when we were told that karaoke was available to us, one of the boys picked up the microphone and started singing.

"I got a little of that same vibe from that first-year that I get from you, weirdo. How do you two know each other?" I had thought that Ryuuuen wasn't going to speak to me at all during the trip, but he'd just suddenly asked me a question, without any warning. He was leaning forward on his elbows, though, not even looking at me, making it seem like he was talking to himself.

"And if I told you that we have nothing to do with each other?" I asked.

"I'd say you're wrong. He was gonna try and beat the shit out of a teacher just to get to you."

Yes, I'd have to say it'd be impossible to imagine there was no connection if you saw something like that.

"We're barely acquainted," I told him. "Nothing more, nothing less."

"So, you're sayin' not to worry about it? Hard not to do that when I'm catching a whiff of somethin' interestin' about this."

"There's no point in turning your attention to the first-years. The important thing is reaching Class A, isn't it?"

"I do what I want to do. Sooner or later, I'm gonna beat you to death—it might come in handy then."

I see. So, it wasn't really that he was interested in Yagami; he just saw him as a means to exploit my weak points. Well, he wasn't going to find any weakness, but I couldn't deny that Yagami was a bothersome element.

"Those dangerous-lookin' guys hauling that first-year away was a big enough deal," Ryuuen went on. "Hell, the school even seemed to be okay with it, like it was no bother. For a second there, I got an idea of who you really are, you shady creep."

"That's too bad," I said. "Yagami's not here anymore."

"Yeah, it's true he's gone, but I hear that other first-year's still around. Some girl named Amasawa. I can play with her all I want."

From the sounds of it, Yagami had left behind a bit of information as a parting gift of sorts. It was entirely possible that Ryuuen would try and mess with Amasawa if I remained silent on the matter. If it came to a one-on-one fight between them, I doubted Amasawa would lose. But with Ryuuen, that wouldn't be the end of it. It was easy to imagine that he'd persistently stick to Amasawa, looking for an opening to exploit, repeatedly trying to get to her. Of course, Amasawa was capable enough to handle that under normal circumstances, but now that Yagami had been expelled, the situation was uncertain.

"Well, whatever. It'll be a little while until I mess you up, anyway," said Ryuuen, responding to my thoughts.

There were many things I wanted to say, but it was true that he should be focusing on the battle with Sakayanagi's class, which was certain to materialize by the end of the year, rather than the more uncertain prospect of facing Horikita's class.

"By the way, Ryuuen, I actually have one question I'd like to ask you," I said. "To tell you the truth, it's been on my mind since this morning."

"Huh?" he grunted.

I reached out and put my hand into the netted pouch on the back of the seat in front of me. I then pulled out a black plastic bag that was bundled in there.

"I'm curious what this bag is used for," I said.

"What?" He furrowed his brow suspiciously and then snorted. "It's a bag you use if you get sick and you gotta hurl. Are you screwing with me right now?"

"I see. I suppose, yes, it's possible someone could vomit if they get motion sickness."

So, this was what was commonly referred to as a "barf bag."

"These weren't placed on the buses during the Uninhabited Island Exam, for example, though. Are they not always available, then?" I asked.

I had ridden buses several times now, but this was the first time I had seen them placed in the pouches on the backs of seats like this. I supposed it was done out of consideration for us, the passengers, and for the bus company as well. It would be much more difficult to clean up if someone were to spray vomit all over the seats and the floor of the bus, after all.

Even though I thought that I'd learned quite a lot, there were still countless things I didn't understand. If I could make it outside of school, I'd likely encounter the unknown quite often.

"You're as weird as ever," said Ryuuen. "What, are you some kinda rich kid who never rode a bus before or somethin'?"

"It's true that I haven't had much experience," I admitted.

I had seen plenty of children who vomited due to issues of semicircular canal imbalance, but never in an environment where we were allowed to vomit into a bag, like here. I didn't think it was unreasonable for me to ask, though, since I hadn't considered that they might be suggesting it was okay to throw up. I had experienced some degree of motion sickness myself a few times, so I'd keep in mind that there were conveniences such as these out there in the world.

3.2

AFTER WE FINISHED having our lunch in the large cafeteria connected to the ski resort, we second-year students were finally about to begin our skiing lessons. We were told that we were forbidden from taking our cell phones up on the slopes due to the substantial risk of losing or breaking them. Some students voiced their dissatisfaction over this—the ones who were dependent on their phones, and the students who were high-level skiers, who claimed that they could handle themselves just fine—but we couldn't break school rules, so there was nothing we could do. Fortunately, though, the school had also informed us that, from tomorrow onward, we were allowed to bring our phones along if we chose to go to the ski resort by ourselves. However, in the event we lost or broke our phones, it would cost us a considerable amount of Private Points.

I went ahead and put on the skiwear that I had rented, then picked up my ski boots. The exterior of the boots seemed to be made of plastic. Following the instructions, I unbuckled them, opened the inner lining, and put my feet inside. After making sure that the heels fit properly, I straightened the inner lining and fastened the buckles from bottom to top. Lastly, I put on the booster straps and powder guard.

And with that, I had apparently completed the bare-minimum level of preparation. I tried to walk forward like normal, but that didn't seem to be the right kind of motion. When I did as the instructor said, though, and walked on my heels, I was able to move easily. Once I was ready, I went outside. We were divided into three separate groups for lessons: advanced, intermediate, and beginner. Having no experience with skiing, I didn't hesitate to go with the beginner group, joining up with the crowd of others interested in being part of it.

I could have looked up skiing in books or online ahead of time, but I hadn't wanted to pick up any extraneous information before the trip; that way I could learn on-site, since that was how the trip was structured. About 60 percent of the students in our

grade had requested to join the beginner's course. I wasn't sure if that was a lot or a little, but I was slightly surprised that about 40 percent of students were in the intermediate or advanced levels. It didn't seem to me that people in the Kanto area had many opportunities to go skiing, but these students must have had at least some experience.

Out of group six, there was no sign of Ryuuuen, Kitou, Nishino, or Kushida, perhaps because they were in the intermediate or advanced courses. The rest of us were apparently beginners. There were a lot of people in the beginner's course, so they had subdivided us into groups of ten. The instructor taught us how to ski, starting with the basics. Though I was deeply curious about the skiing equipment, which I was using for the very first time, I made sure to listen to the instructions attentively. Meanwhile, the advanced group, which had the fewest people out of the three major groups, were given just a brief explanation—then they were free to start skiing straight away, and they were already getting ready to hit the slopes. Ryuuuen was among them.

I brushed the snow off the soles of my boots. Then, I took a step forward on my heel, aligning the bindings on the front and back of my boots.

I see. I walked forward with both feet in the same position. I was a little surprised that I didn't fall over as I tried to walk, and I was puzzled by this new sensation.

I see... Okay, for the time being, I'll...

Using the poles, I tried to start sliding forward a little more forcefully, and I deliberately tilted my center of gravity to the left. When I did so, though, moving forward with the skis on both of my feet, my body tumbled backward.

"...Are you all right?" asked Yamamura in a quiet voice, having seen me from close by.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I replied. "I just wanted to try taking a little tumble."

"Okay..."

I heard some chuckles from the people around me, but it was nothing to worry about. After all, it was important to try and fail.

I'd assumed that Ryuuen had already headed toward the lift, but he was still there. I saw the corners of his mouth curve ever-so-slightly up into a smile when he noticed me fall, and he walked away, seemingly satisfied. Perhaps he had been waiting to see me fail.

"Be careful!" the instructor warned me.

I bowed slightly and apologized to the instructor, then proceeded to do as instructed. Afterward, we each got to try some actual skiing. Surprisingly enough, a lot of people fell down. I had a couple of unintentional spills, but I was starting to get a general feel for it.

It took about thirty minutes to get through the lesson. After we completed all the steps, we were free to do what we wanted.

3.3

AFTER THE TRAINING WAS OVER, Watanabe and some others got together to head to the beginner's course, which looked to be a gentle slope. Watanabe started heading over there on his skis, and then turned around to look at me.

"You're not coming, Ayanokouji?" he asked, puzzled.

"I think I want to try skiing somewhere else for a bit," I replied.

"Oh, okay. All right, see you later, then."

I watched Watanabe and the others go, and then started heading somewhere else.

"Hey, Ayanokouji. Get your goofy ass to the beginner's course over there," said Ryuuuen, pointing. He himself was headed toward the advanced course. He sounded exasperated. "This is the advanced course."

"No, it's all right," I said. "I kind of want to try it."

"Huh? That's rich, comin' from a guy who was shufflin' around like an awkward penguin just now."

"I really don't think you should, Ayanokouji-kun," Kushida cut in. "It's about 70 percent steep slopes and slopes with hard bumps. Even I was a little scared."

The two of them must have tried it at least once, to be advising me against it.

"I suppose you're—"

Since they had gone to the trouble of warning me, I was planning to back down, but then... Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Yamamura rather unsteadily getting onto the lift bound for the advanced course. I couldn't imagine that she had consciously chosen to go for the advanced course. Perhaps it was because she was slightly behind Kitou, and she saw him get on, or maybe she had simply gotten on by mistake and no one nearby stopped her.

"Seems like Yamamura wasn't kidding about what she said back on the bus, about how she kind of blends into the background," I remarked.

"Huh?" said Kushida.

"That was Yamamura," I told them. "I think she probably got on the lift not knowing it was for the advanced course."

"Oh no... We should probably go after her," said Kushida.

And so, we all headed toward the advanced course together, and I got on a ski lift for the first time in my life. Since two people could ride a lift carriage at the same time, Kushida and I rode together. The lift never stopped moving, and soon, we were gradually lifted into the air, and our feet left the ground.

"This is an interesting ride," I said.

"It's your first time, right?" she asked. "You're not scared?"

"I'm not, no. At this height, even if I fell, it wouldn't cause much damage."

"Wait, that's the way you look at it...?"

"Hm? Isn't it the impact of the fall and the danger of it happening that people are afraid of?"

"Well, yes, I think so too, but..."

She was visibly perplexed, seemingly caught up on my choice of words, but I didn't understand the reason.

"Well, never mind," she said. "Lately, I've started feeling like it's meaningless for me to bother thinking about you, Ayanokouji-kun."

She sighed deeply, and, for just a brief moment, I caught a glimpse of the real Kushida's face. She must have decided that there was no need to worry that Ryuuen or the other people behind us would hear anything, since there was some distance between each lift carriage, and the wind was blowing, too.

"I'm not exactly delighted over your choice of expression," I said. No one would be overjoyed at being told that it was meaningless to think about them.

"Well, I can't help it. It's just how I honestly feel." Kushida looked over at the mountains far off into the distance. "I'm usually confident that I can read situations and people's thoughts. The same goes for people like Horikita-san and Ryuuuen-kun. Of course, there are times I'll still lose, because I'll be outdone in other areas."

It was true; you wouldn't necessarily always win just by reading what your opponent was thinking.

"As for you, though, Ayanokouji-kun... I thought I could read you, before. But I was completely wrong. You're the first person I've ever met where I can't guess what you're thinking at all."

"Just for reference, what does that feel like?" I asked.

"Hm? You really want to ask me that?" she said without even turning around. All I could see was the back of her head.

"I suppose I probably shouldn't, after all," I said. The feeling I was getting strongly suggested that she was unwilling to answer my question. "Anyway—"

Kushida suddenly turned around, a demonic look...completely absent from her face. She looked like she normally did.

"This is important, so I want to make sure right here and now," she said. "You're not planning to get me expelled, are you?"

"Wow, you're really asking me that straight out."

"Since I can't tell what you're thinking, the only thoughts I can go on are my own. If I were you, Ayanokouji-kun, how would I think and how would I act?"

"And you're trying to figure out whether the decision you'd reach, if you were me, would be to get you expelled."

Kushida nodded without hesitation, looking me square in the eyes. It felt like she was trying to rattle me, to draw out my true intentions. I decided to deliberately avert my gaze and give off the impression that I *was* trying to get her expelled. From a normal person's perspective, it would look like Kushida was right on the mark, and I was upset that she had pointed it out, so I could only avert my eyes in frustration. I thought it would be interesting to see how Kushida would take it.

"Are you screwing with me?" she asked.

"I'm sorry..."

She'd clearly spotted my trick. Having been exposed, I immediately apologized, understanding that even though she was smiling at me, she was glaring at me fiercely.

"I mean, you're obviously making fun of me, aren't you?" she said. "Is it that funny to you?"

"No, it's not funny at all," I said. "I'm sorry."

I was sure she hadn't intended for it to happen that way, but that interaction just now showed that Kushida had brilliantly read what I was thinking.

"I have no intention of getting you expelled," I told her.

"...Really?"

"The idea of your expulsion was removed from the table once Horikita decided to keep you in class. Even if Horikita were to consider the possibility of expelling you now, I would choose to talk her out of it."

It was unlikely that it would fully dispel Kushida's suspicions, but what I'd just told her was the truth.

"The Unanimous Special Exam..." murmured Kushida.

For her, the Unanimous Special Exam must have been a humiliation that she'd never forget. Still, the prerequisite for not expelling her was that Kushida didn't repeat the mistakes she'd made, but I figured that I didn't need to explicitly mention that fact here. Besides, all her classmates already knew about her now, so the idea of her doing it again wasn't realistic.

"There is a possibility that, even if I don't get rid of everyone else in class, I could abandon the class myself," Kushida said. "There are methods I could use to get out—I could either get a Class Transfer Ticket or save up Private Points. Can you really turn a blind eye to a risk factor like that?"

The fact that Kushida could refer to herself as a risk factor was another interesting thing about her.

"That wouldn't be a betrayal, though," I said. "That would simply fall into the category of personal strategy. In truth, there's nothing wrong with making use of the systems the school provides to move to a winning class. If you don't think that your own class has a chance of winning, you can move when the opportunity presents itself."

Besides, who had the right to tell someone that they had to stay on a sinking ship?

"I really can't read you at all, Ayanokouji-kun," she sighed. "I can't even tell if you're speaking from the heart or not."

"That might be because I don't show it on my face," I replied.

"It's not just that, though..." Exasperated, Kushida turned her attention to the end of the lift, which was fast approaching. "Still, I have to wonder why. My secret was exposed when I wanted to keep it hidden at all costs. I was so frustrated, bitter, and hurt, and nothing was supposed to matter anymore, and yet... Here I am, on the school trip, going skiing, and having fun. And I'm even starting to feel like it's not a bad thing."

"A school trip should be a fun event for lots of students," I said.

"For a lot of people, sure. But personally, up until now, I've always found events like this to be a struggle."

I supposed that was because of the effort she had to put into pretending she was something she wasn't. It was precisely these kinds of events that required that effort.

"Hey, um... Can I ask you something about Yagami-kun and Amasawa-san?" asked Kushida.

"Those two first-year students, huh? I interacted a little with Amasawa, but I barely know Yagami." I kept it vague just in case, but Kushida might have simply wanted to get out some questions that she had been keeping inside.

"Well, if you don't know, Ayanokouji-kun, then there's probably no point in me asking," she said.

"It's okay, go ahead. So? What about them?"

"You know that Yagami-kun was expelled, right?"

"I guess the things he did during the Uninhabited Island Exam were brought to light, then," I said. "And there was talk about him punching a teacher, too. It's understandable that he got expelled after all that... Anyway, he went to the same junior high as you, right? In the year below you? You two seemed to get along, so you must have been shocked, huh?"

Yagami was a student of the White Room. It was impossible that he really had any connection with Kushida in the past. He had likely been provided information by Tsukishiro and pretended that he had gone to her school, forcing Kushida to play along to avoid the risk of people finding out about her past. However, there was no way an outsider like me should have been able to deduce that, so I had no choice but to provide the answer I did.

"No, he wasn't," Kushida said. "Yagami-ku—that kid knew about my past. The only people who attended my same junior high were the Horikita siblings."

"In that case, you're asking me how he knew about your past?" I asked.

"Someone must have told him directly," she mused. "So, I was naturally suspicious of you and Horikita-san, Ayanokouji-kun. Ryuuuen-kun knows my true nature, but he doesn't know about my past, so I could rule him out."

It was true that a person's true nature and their past were completely different things.

"But it just doesn't add up that Horikita-san would do that, does it?" she went on. "There's no benefit for her in talking about my past. So, by process of elimination, you're the only one, Ayanokouji-kun. It's been on my mind for a long time now."

"I see."

It was true that I was one of the few students who knew about Kushida's past. Her turning hostile during the Unanimous Special Exam had been inevitable, but I supposed that one of the reasons why she had gotten so hostile then was because of these suspicions. Moreover, it was obvious that Amasawa had gotten

involved with Kushida, and my connection with Amasawa must have made me look increasingly suspicious. Even if I casually denied everything right here and now, the question of who'd told Yagami would likely continue to weigh on Kushida's mind. Whether or not her suspicions would be dispelled was another matter.

"I don't care either way," she said. "I just want to know the truth."

"So, even if I was connected with Yagami and Amasawa, you'd forgive me, then?" I asked.

"What? There's no way I'd forgive you. It's just... I'm just saying that I won't do anything to you over it, Ayanokouji-kun. In fact, I think it's making me realize all over again that you're an opponent I'm no match for at all."

Right now, her fangs were meekly hidden. And she was saying that she would conceal them even further.

"No, but that doesn't make sense," she added. "I can't think of anyone else it could be, but I think it might not have been you after all, Ayanokouji-kun. After all, he wanted to get you expelled, and he wasn't pretending, either. He really, really wanted that. That would be a contradiction, wouldn't it?"

It was true that Yagami's actions raised doubts about the idea that I had the kind of connection with Yagami and Amasawa where I'd be passing them information about Kushida. Deliberately going out of my way to chase Kushida into a corner by doing something like that would only have been a hassle for all of us. I was sure that spending her days at school with those doubts in mind must have been a little stressful. That being said, though, I couldn't talk about the specifics of the White Room.

"A long time ago, Yagami and I...we went to different schools, but we did know each other," I said. "We lived in the same neighborhood."

"Huh...?"

"Amasawa, too. I think I gave those two the wrong idea about me, and they've been holding a grudge for a long time. I was able to clear up the misunderstanding with Amasawa, but not

with Yagami. I tried dealing with it by ignoring him, but I never expected him to contact you without my knowledge."

"Wait, hold on. What? Even in that case, this is still weird. How would he know about me?"

"I don't know how he found out, but I think he saw that we were classmates and looked into you because of that. Don't you think? He was looking for an opportunity to get revenge on me. You simply got pulled into it." I bowed my head slightly to Kushida in apology. "Even though I didn't know, I'm sorry that you got pulled into it on my account."

"...Ayanokouji-kun..."

I didn't expect that this was going to completely clear everything up, but I figured that admitting I had some past connection to those two would help answer some of the questions Kushida had been wrestling with.

"So, by any chance, was Yagami-kun getting expelled...your doing, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Kushida.

"If I'd let things be, there was a strong possibility that it would put you in harm's way, even after you'd chosen to help the class," I said. "Even the fact that Amasawa contacted you before was likely because she knew that Yagami was going to do something to you."

I'd decided that, on this point, I'd just openly admit to the truth. Nagumo, Ryuuen, and even Horikita—several people knew or suspected that I was involved. If I denied the facts right now, and they came to light later, it would make more trouble for me.

"I let Amasawa stay in school," I went on, "but as I said before, I cleared up the misunderstanding with her. She shouldn't bother you anymore. There might still be some problems with her behavior, though."

Through this unexpected conversation we were having, it was possible I could succeed in creating an environment where Kushida could put her abilities to their best use in school from here onward.

"I—"

A strong wind blew, and the loose white knitted hat she was wearing on her head was at risk of being blown away. To stop that from happening, I reached out and gently held the hat down on her head with my palm. At the exact same time, Kushida's hand rested on top of mine.

"Oh, sorry, thank—"

It was highly likely that her hat wouldn't actually have flown away even if I hadn't put my hand out, but Kushida turned toward me and thanked me. Then she immediately stiffened, looked into my eyes, and didn't move.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"...Nothing," she replied.

She had a blank expression on her face. I couldn't tell what she was thinking, but she soon tore her eyes away from mine. Then, as the lift reached its intended destination, we began preparing to disembark.

"Can you handle it?" said Kushida.

"I think I can manage, more or less."

Despite me saying so, Kushida got off the lift first, to give me an example of how it was done, and I followed suit, copying her movements. Now that the long lift ride was over, we'd arrived at the advanced course. There seemed to be fewer people up here than down below, but there were still enough.

"This really is incredible," I remarked.

"The slopes are even steeper than you thought, aren't they?" Kushida said.

It was true, the slopes looked even more treacherous than what I'd seen when I looked at them from down below.

"Will you really be okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, I think I'll manage."

"If you do have any trouble, it might be a good idea for you to remove your skis and walk down the side of the hill. It might not look cool, but still."

"Got it," I said. "But Yamamura is more important right now."

There were members of the general public at the ski resort mixed in amongst the students, so it was difficult to search for her.

"I thought she would stay by the lift when she realized that she couldn't ski down," said Kushida, "but..."

The two of us looked around the area together, but we couldn't see where Yamamura was right away.

"Maybe she already started going down the slopes...?" Kushida suggested. "But there's no way she would, right...?"

There were many people skiing, but it was clear at a glance that none of them were beginners. On the other hand, there seemed to be several boys and girls gathering around Ryuuuen.

"Those are students from Ryuuuen-kun's class, right? He's surprisingly popular," observed Kushida.

"They don't really look like they're having a fun talk, though," I remarked.

"No, they don't."

The students gathered around Ryuuuen were telling him something with rather serious looks on their faces. Ryuuuen, standing in the center of the circle, wasn't looking at anyone in particular. He seemed to be listening to what was being said, disinterested. What was the purpose of deliberately gathering up here on the advanced course, where there were fewer people around? If he wanted to stay connected with his classmates, they could just have used their phones later. In that case...I could only assume that he had formed this gathering intentionally.

"Maybe they're giving him some kind of report?" said Kushida.

"Looks like it," I agreed.

I saw that everyone who was gathered there was somebody who often took instructions from Ryuuuen, including Kaneda, Ishizaki, and Kondou.

"There she is, Ayanokouji-kun," said Kushida. "It's Yamamura-san."

Lo and behold, Yamamura really was right there where Kushida was looking. She wasn't going skiing. She was just standing there, staring at Ryuuen and the others in his group, even as they started to disperse.

"Yamamura-s—"

Kushida was just about to call her name, but I signaled her with my eyes to remain quiet.

"Huh? What's wrong?" she asked.

"Just wait a second," I told her.

Yamamura's behavior seemed a bit puzzling to me. She should have known that she was making a mistake in coming up here, yet she quickly headed up to the advanced course, and then stuck around, concealing her presence by keeping her breathing quiet.

"What kind of student is Yamamura?" I asked.

"What kind of student?" repeated Kushida. "I don't even know her that well, really."

"You have the widest social circle in the school, but there are some students even you don't know, huh, Kushida?"

"Well, yeah. I could get an understanding of her if she were someone who came up to talk to me voluntarily, but Yamamura-san isn't like that. She hasn't approached me a single time, and even when I've tried talking to her, she just gives me short replies or nods silently, and the conversation ends there. I can't really get to know her like that, can I?"

If Yamamura was closing herself off from others, then it was true that Kushida couldn't do anything about that.

"Who is she close with in Class A?" I asked.

"I don't know that, either," Kushida said. "I can't imagine her talking to anyone, frankly. She's really lacking in presence, isn't she?"

We'd only just come together as a group, but I definitely also had the impression she lacked presence. From Yamamura's

individual OAA scores, it was clear that she had low physical ability, but high academic ability.

Before long, the students gathered around Ryuuen dispersed and returned to their respective groups. At the same time, Yamamura pulled her gaze away from Ryuuen and his classmates and slowly began to move. Kushida and I kept our eyes on her so we wouldn't lose her. But just then...

"Oh, she tripped," I muttered.

Her feet must have gotten caught in the snow, because she fell down. There were some people around her, but either no one noticed, or no one cared enough to help her.

"It really must be tough to have so little presence," said Kushida.

"Why did you look at me when you said that?" I asked.

"Because you're the poster child for lacking any presence, you know? You're like the original, I guess."

That was a sad fact that I couldn't deny. No matter how hard I tried, it wasn't that easy to get things right in that area.

"By the way, what do Yamamura's actions look like to you, Kushida?" I asked.

"Trying to change the subject, huh?"

"It's not like that."

I denied it, but Kushida chuckled in amusement. "As for Yamamura-san... Maybe she's acting on someone's orders to keep watch over Ryuuen-kun's movements?"

"That seems likely," I said. "And that someone could only be one person."

"Sakayanagi-san, right. But I don't have the impression that Yamamura-san has any point of contact with her."

"But couldn't that be exactly why Sakayanagi would choose her? No one is aware that there's any connection between them. Even I might not have noticed anything if we hadn't been in the same group."

Yamamura and I were both beginners at skiing, so I'd been curious about what she was up to—that was the impetus that brought me this far. If I'd been in the intermediate or advanced level instead, I probably would've started skiing already without even wondering what she was doing.

"If we can confirm whether there's a connection, then we should do it," said Kushida.

"That'll be important for when we fight against Sakayanagi in the future, yeah," I agreed. "It's vital for us to figure out which students she's relying on as agents, after all."

"Right," said Kushida.

"Yamamura's on the move," I observed.

Kushida and I kept watching as Yamamura took off her skis, then started nervously walking down the steep walkway at the edge of the slope.

"I'll go help her out a bit. Maybe I can get a little closer to her." Kushida, determining what she needed to do, started pushing herself toward Yamamura on her skis.

"She sure moves fast," I said.

Kushida was quick-witted, and she smoothly read my intentions. On top of that, she had strong conversational skills that allowed her to get on friendly terms with most everyone. Since this was how she was going to survive in her own class, she couldn't cut any corners.

Now then... I decided I'd go ahead and try the advanced course by myself.

3.4

AFTER WE WERE FINISHED on the ski slopes, we headed to the ryokan, arriving just a little before five o'clock. We all filed into the lobby in order, starting with group one, so that we could go to our assigned rooms. Soon it was group six's turn, so we headed inside, following the groups in front of us. The ryokan's exterior gave the impression of a building with a rich history, but inside, in the lobby and other areas, everything looked very well-maintained, exuding a feeling of cleanliness. We put on the slippers we would wear while inside the ryokan. Then we set our luggage, which included our clothes and such, down by our feet and waited to receive our keys.

Watanabe sighed as he got his key in the lobby. "I already knew it, but man, we really all got to sleep together as a group, huh?" he muttered, sounding a little depressed.

We would be sharing a room with the same group of people that we'd be going around with starting today. We had no way of changing that. Whether or not we could make it a comfortable space was up to us, and us alone.

"Hey, Watanabe."

When Watanabe turned around as his name was called, he saw a duffel bag flying toward his face.

"Wah!" Watanabe managed to catch the bag with both arms. He was shocked, unable to wrap his mind around what had just happened.

"Take that to the room," said Ryuuen. "I'm hittin' the bath."

He was the one who had hurled his bag at Watanabe. Watanabe didn't have the guts to say no to Ryuuen, so he just forced a smile. Ryuuen disappeared toward the back of the ryokan, presumably headed to the bathroom with the large bath.

"Ugh... I don't feel like this is going to go very well," said Watanabe.

"I'll carry it," I said.

"Oh no, it's okay. I was the one he asked to do it, anyway."

Well, rather than saying Watanabe was "asked" to do it, I would say it was more like Ryuuen had forced it on the person it seemed easiest for him to push around.

Kitou, after witnessing Ryuuen's high-handedness, tried to snatch the bag out of Watanabe's hands. "Hand it over here," he said. "I'll give it back to him. Or, no, I'll send it to hell."

I stuck my arm out, barring his way. "It'd be better not to do anything reckless. Watanabe's the one who'd get in the most trouble later."

"So what, are you just going to let him do whatever he wants?" said Kitou. "If we let this slide, he'll just try the same thing again. I don't care that he treats his own classmates as his personal servants, but Watanabe is a student from Ichinose's class."

What Kitou said was absolutely correct. But even so, that didn't mean that we should do something to his bag.

"You should leave the bag alone and confront Ryuuen directly," I told him.

"And what if I tell him, and he doesn't listen? Do you want to make Watanabe suffer for the entire trip?"

"Oh, no, it's not like I'm really suffering or any..."

"If Ryuuen tries to do something selfish to Watanabe again, I'll stop him," I said.

"You?" said Kitou incredulously.

"And if Ryuuen still doesn't listen, then I'll assume full responsibility and take over," I added.

"I can't say that fundamentally solves the problem here."

"Technically, it does. If the person entrusted with a task doesn't want to do it, it is therefore something forced, coercion. On the other hand, if I don't feel bothered when I'm entrusted with something, if I actually think it's in the best interest of the

group, then that's all there is to it. Then, the problem goes away. Don't you agree?"

Kitou thought that you should do everything that you're supposed to do yourself, by yourself. He might not have agreed with me, but even so, he should understand what I was saying.

"...Do whatever you want," said Kitou.

He glared at me for a while, but eventually he backed off and left.

"Sorry, Ayanokouji," said Watanabe. "I feel like this is all my fault."

"It's not really your fault at all, Watanabe. It's only natural that we'd work together to solve problems that come up in the group," I replied.

A look of relief washed over Watanabe's face. Just then, we were handed two keys by the ryokan staff. At almost the exact same time, Kushida and the three other girls received their keys and came over to us.

"Hey, so, listen," Kushida said. "I think that we should talk about what we're going to do as a group starting tomorrow. We're here on a trip in Hokkaido, after all; I'm sure that everyone has lots of places that they want to visit."

It was important to make plans ahead of time, but so far we'd had no opportunity to discuss what we'd be doing during our free time as a group, because the members of our group were, well, nothing more than group mates.

"So, I was thinking all of us girls might visit you boys in your room tonight to talk... What do you think?" asked Kushida.

"Y-yeah, that would be totally fine, right?" Watanabe had a happy twinkle in his eyes at hearing that the girls would be coming to hang out in our room.

Kitou, standing next to us, heard her suggestion as well, but didn't really do anything in response. He remained silent.

"...Um, well... A-are you okay with that too, Ayanokouji?" asked Watanabe.

"Sure, I think it'd be fine," I said.

I supposed that Kushida couldn't just ignore Watanabe, since he was looking so anxious about it. She clasped her hands together with a smile.

"Okay, it's settled," she said. "We'll see you later. I'll talk to Amikura-san and the other girls about it. I'll contact you when I pick a specific time, Ayanokouji-kun, Watanabe-kun."

From here on, the girls would likely be enjoying the inn to the fullest, soaking in the onsen, eating dinner, and so on.

"How about we head to our room, too?" suggested Watanabe.

"Sure," I replied.

From the looks of things, the boys would be housed in rooms in an area referred to as the east building. The girls, on the other hand, would be in the main building. Since both buildings were connected to the lobby, our respective areas weren't that far apart, and coming and going wouldn't be that difficult, but I supposed they wanted to keep the guys and girls clearly separated.

"Man, Kushida-chan is too good a girl, isn't she?" said Watanabe. "Cute, too."

I'd experienced the effects of Kushida's charm firsthand. It wasn't surprising that guys were attracted to her from just a surface impression. If a student like Watanabe were to discover Kushida's true nature, though, I had no idea what would happen.

"I have to say, though," he added, "I shudder to think what things would be like if Kushida-chan wasn't here. Jeez."

It was true that Kushida was doing an excellent job of guiding the group forward. If there was no one to take the initiative like that, meetings to decide on what to do during our free time would only end up being placed on the back burner. All I could say to that was I was sincerely thankful to Kushida for putting in the work so we could avoid that issue. But I didn't know if her work was going to solve all our problems.

Ryuuuen and Kitou were probably going to be a big problem, after all. Ever since we were put into group six and had to spend

time around each other, they had constantly been telegraphing their murderous rage toward one another. It was a constant touch-and-go situation, with both sides trying to probe each other and keep each other in check.

Watanabe and I proceeded down the hall, our slippers making light slapping noises as we walked, until we reached room 203. I inserted the key and opened the door to our room.

It was quite spacious inside. It was a Japanese-style room, roughly twelve tatami mats in size, and I saw there was a table with four chairs. In addition, there was a coffee table and two armchairs near the window. I'd seen this sort of sight many times on TV before—this really was a tried-and-true traditional Japanese inn.

Once I'd set my luggage down in the room, I immediately opened the refrigerator. Aside from the free water, it was stocked with a small assortment of soft drinks. However, the price per bottle was a bit higher than the market price, so I didn't see any reason to take one. There seemed to be vending machines out in the lobby as well, so, if necessary, I could just go buy something there instead.

Kitou came in too, and he silently sat down in the corner and closed his eyes. For some reason he was sitting cross-legged, in a seated Zen meditation position. I decided to leave him alone for the time being, and went ahead and opened up a thick folder labeled "Guide." It contained a map of the ryokan, the username and password needed to access the internet, and a description of everything else of interest, from bathing options for guests who weren't staying the night to the tourist attractions in the nearby area.

I might get the opportunity to use this guide in our discussion with Kushida and the other girls. After a quick glance around, I decided to take a look at the other facilities—like the restroom and such—last. I discovered that our rooms did not appear to have their own individual baths, and that we would need to use the main bath. That probably wouldn't be much of a problem. Personally, since we were here, I'd rather enjoy a good soak in the large bath over and over than bathe in a small tub.

"Now then..." I said to myself.

Dinner started at seven o'clock, and we still had plenty of time until then. I figured I should probably go to the main bath. I was sure there must already be a huge crowd of people closing in on it.

"I'm headed to the bath," I announced.

"Oh, pl-please wait, hold on just a minute. I'll go with you!" Watanabe shot up from his chair so quickly that he practically fell over.

"What about you, Kitou?" I asked.

"I'm fine," he replied.

"Okay, then I'll leave a key here with you," I said. "If I run into Ryuuen, I'll let him know."

If Ryuuen returned to the room and everyone was gone, he wouldn't be able to get in. That would be annoying, so I wanted to avoid it. After we stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind us, Watanabe muttered something in a quiet voice.

"Christ, dude. We're going to have to sleep with Kitou and Ryuuen? Are we even going to survive until tomorrow?"

"You're exaggerating," I said.

"Yeah, but seriously, we're staying together four nights. Four nights! You can't tell me you don't think something could go wrong in that time."

If the kind of thing he seemed to be imagining did happen, that would certainly be something terribly wrong. Anyway, regardless of what happened with Ryuuen and the other guys, sharing a room with other people still wasn't something I was at all used to. It had happened a few times by now, like at the mixed training camp last year and also with Kei day-to-day, but I wondered if, one day, I'd be able to handle sleeping next to anyone easily. Since sleeping by myself had been the norm for me ever since I was a young child, my bewilderment over this change in my environment still hadn't dissipated.

"You know, you're easy to talk to, Ayanokouji," said Watanabe.

"Really? ...I'm not sure, myself." I was happy to hear him say that, but I couldn't help feeling like I was only being compared to a certain twosome.

"Yeah, I think I can understand why even someone like Ichinose fell in love with yo—" Watanabe stopped suddenly.

"What?"

"Oh, um, nothing! ...Forget what I just said!" He noticed his obvious verbal gaffe and tried to correct it, but I'd already heard. Well, it wasn't like anything was going to change just from me hearing it, anyway...

"Judging from the look on your face, I'm guessing you already knew?" he asked.

When I didn't answer that question, Watanabe looked a little relieved.

"...I heard people talking about it," he said. "Girls talk about that sort of stuff. I think that most of the guys who like Ichinose still don't know about it. But anyway, you're going out with Karuizawa, from your class, right?"

I couldn't deny it, that was a fact. I nodded in response.

"Man, I'm sure the guys who like Ichinose must feel a little mixed up over that. Well, no, I guess a lot of them might be happy about that news."

"What about you, Watanabe?" I asked.

"Me? Th...that's a secret."

Judging from his calm demeanor, it didn't seem like he had any special feelings for Ichinose. He seemed to have them for another girl, although I didn't know who.

"This school trip is kind of a major event, though," he said. "Don't you think? I'm guessing that more than a couple of people will probably tell a girl they like how they feel about them."

"That so?"

It was true that school trips were a big deal. Even Sudou had decided he'd tell Horikita how he felt about her on this trip. That wasn't anything unusual; this was probably an important event for the students.

"As for me, well... If I had a little more guts, I'd think about it," said Watanabe. It seemed like he was imagining several things, but then he shook his head from side to side in apparent frustration. "Anyway, there's way too much I don't know about the creatures known as 'girls' right now. I'm thinkin' I'm gonna start practicing making myself more likable for the time being, so that the girls in our group will get a good impression of me. If I can become the kind of guy who leaves an impression, then I can build experiences to lead to the real thing, I think."

I'd been with Watanabe for less than half a day, but I certainly didn't have a bad impression of him at all. He was basically a good guy, without a doubt. He was the type of guy who easily got caught up in the flow and couldn't say no to anything, but he also had the ability to communicate well with both guys and girls. He was slightly above average in terms of both his academic and physical ability, with scores of C+ in OAA. In similar fashion, the rest of his scores were C or better.

In other words, he had no obvious shortcomings. I could see that it was possible something could work out for him, depending on who he was interested in, but...

There were many factors at play when it came to romance, and whether you'd succeed or fail when asking someone to go out with you wasn't determined simply by your physical appearance or abilities. It heavily depended on the relationship that both sides had built up over the time they'd known each other, so it likely wasn't something I could discern just from spending half a day with him.

3.5

8:37 P.M. Many students, after finishing their dinner, headed over to the large bathhouse, considered to be the true draw of the traditional Japanese inn. And Horikita Suzune was no exception, as this was one of the things she was looking forward to most. Horikita had finished eating more quickly than the other students around her, but she was surprised to find that there were already three students undressing in the changing room. Among them was a girl who didn't want to be seen naked and had decided to end her meal quickly so that she could get through the process fast.

Horikita, on the other hand, didn't feel any aversion or shame over being seen naked by people of the same sex. That was partly due to the fact that originally, when she was in elementary school and junior high, she didn't stand out very much, and she didn't have any friends, so no one really paid any attention to how she looked anyway. Even so, when she opened the sliding door out to the large bath, she spread out her face towel and casually covered the front of her body with it, for etiquette's sake.

As she stepped inside, she felt a rush of heat wash over her, and the bath, which was a bit larger than she had expected, spread out before her. There were two large indoor pools inside the room. There was an outdoor open-air bath as well—it was a large bath surrounded by rocks, which could be seen on the other side of the glass.

After lightly washing herself off with hot water, Horikita decided to head out immediately to the iwaburo, the large onsen surrounded by rocks. There, she saw two unexpected guests had already arrived before her. One of them was her classmate Kushida Kikyou.

"Oh, Horikita-san." Kushida immediately noticed that a new visitor had arrived and greeted her with a gentle wave.

Of course, Horikita knew that wasn't how Kushida really felt. The welcome was only because Rokkaku Momoe, a student from

Class A, was also present. Kushida would never dare share her true feelings in front of a student from another class. Horikita responded to her greeting with a brief glance, then got into the pool and headed for the edge, not going over to sit by Kushida. Horikita wanted to take a spot where no one would speak to her, and she wouldn't be bothered.

She let Kushida and Rokkaku's idle conversation wash over her, not talking to anyone, and continued to enjoy the hot spring for five minutes, then ten minutes. Then, before she knew it, Rokkaku was gone and only Kushida remained. Not even the faintest trace of the smile she had been wearing remained on her face.

"Why didn't you leave with Rokkaku-san?" Horikita asked her.
"Wasn't it fun spending time with her?"

"Huh? I don't really need a reason, do I?" said Kushida. "I love hot springs. Were you thinking that I wanted to talk to you?"

"I wasn't really thinking that, no."

"Really? Didn't you ask me because you were thinking about it?"

"Okay, you've made your point." Horikita let out a sigh of slight regret in response to Kushida's sudden show of aggressiveness. "You really do have a wide circle of friends, though. I've never even spoken with Rokkaku-san."

Horikita attempted to change the subject by bringing up the topic of Rokkaku, who had just left the open-air bath.

"She came crying to me, asking me to come with her. She was embarrassed, I guess. I don't blame her, though, she's so scrawny and flat-chested." Now that she knew there was no one to overhear, Kushida started spewing venom. She examined Horikita as though trying to evaluate her. "Horikita-san, you... Well, you look good, well-proportioned. Not really that impressive to me, though."

Kushida moved a little closer to Horikita.

"What? You want something from me?" Horikita asked.

"Nothing. It's just that it'd look off if we kept this unnatural distance between us, right? You and I are classmates, after all, Horikita-san. Normally, it'd be strange if I wasn't close to you, talking with you."

When Rokkaku was still there, it didn't look strange that Horikita and Kushida were apart from one another. However, if they were clearly leaving a wide space between them in the outdoor bath now that Rokkaku was gone, there was a possibility that any new visitors would get the feeling that something was up.

"All I understand is that your struggles must be incalculable," said Horikita.

"The best thing would be for you to leave and go somewhere else, like the indoor baths," said Kushida.

"I'll have to refuse your suggestion."

"Wow, you really are quite a stickler, Horikita-san. You won't even listen if I ask you to please drop out of school."

Hearing Kushida still talking about getting her to drop out in such a calm and composed manner, Horikita let out another sigh. Upon seeing that, Kushida smiled broadly.

"You really do have a kind smile," said Horikita.

"Obviously. You can see out here from inside, so I can't do anything careless."

As well as the surrounding voices, Kushida was also constantly considering people's gazes. To any uninformed student who happened to look at them from indoors, they would seem like nothing more than two classmates chatting amicably with one another. Not only did Kushida pay attention to the sense of distance, she was constantly alert to any prying eyes in her surroundings and made sure nothing was left to chance.

"If you can handle yourself that well, then perhaps you should have tried to get by in school without being found out by Ayanokouji-kun," replied Horikita.

"That was because I was so incredibly stressed out after starting school here. I didn't think that you'd be here, Horikita-san. You know?"

"I'm sure that must have been unexpected..."

The disappointment that followed the initial relief of thinking she had completely cut off everyone from her junior high school days must have been immeasurable.

"We have to live on campus, to build new relationships with people," Kushida said. "You can understand that I'd need to vent sometimes, right?"

And as a result, Kushida's tragedy began when Ayanokouji just so happened to spot her when she was in the middle of venting.

"You're free to continue hating me," said Horikita. "As long as you contribute to the class, I have no complaints. Your performance at the Cultural Festival was spectacular."

"Well, I could do at least that much without any difficulty. It's a weapon to protect myself, after a—"

Kushida abruptly stopped midsentence and looked over at the sliding door that led to the open-air bath. An instant later, the door rattled open noisily, and out came Ibuki with a face towel draped over her shoulder. Kushida was alarmed by the arrival of a new visitor, but she quickly relaxed when she recognized who it was. Ibuki already had a good understanding of Kushida's true nature, along with Horikita.

"Horikita!" Ibuki must have been searching for Horikita, because she shouted loudly when she saw her.

"...Now *you're* here?" huffed Horikita.

Ibuki, fully nude, strolled confidently closer to the bath and then jumped in, making a huge splash and spraying both Horikita and Kushida with hot water.

"That's a pretty huge violation of etiquette," said Horikita.

"Don't care," said Ibuki. "More importantly, let's you and me have a showdown!"

"A showdown, in a place like this? What, are you planning to ask me to play rock-paper-scissors with you?"

"Huh? Come on, it's obvious, there's only one thing we could do when we're in a pool as huge as this. We're gonna compete to see who can swim the fastest, going from one end to the other!"

"You could easily say that swimming is an even greater breach of etiquette than jumping in the bath," said Horikita.

"Come on, it's fine, isn't it? No one from the general public is here, and no one is watching."

"I think it's fine," Kushida said. "I'll be here as an impartial observer. So, why don't you go ahead?"

"Now you're getting in on this?" Horikita huffed. "Isn't it your job, at least ostensibly, to put a stop to these kinds of things?"

"Don't worry, I'll just say that you and Ibuki-san selfishly started going at it on your own, and that you paid no attention to me asking you to stop. Besides, if someone does see me, then as long as I look confused and panicked, it'll be fine."

"Kushida says she's fine with it too. So, that settles it—showdown time!" cheered Ibuki.

"No," said Horikita.

"Huh? I came all the way here thinking we could do it, though. This sucks." With that, Ibuki got out of the water.

"Did you really show up here just for that? You don't want to stay in the open-air bath?" asked Horikita.

"I don't have any intention of becoming friends with you. Besides, I don't care if it's inside or outside; a hot-spring bath is still the same thing either way." With that, since there was no chance of her desired showdown, Ibuki promptly exited the bath.

"Wow, what an idiot Ibuki-san is," said Kushida with an amused smile, after the sliding door slammed shut.

"She is freakishly obsessed with having contests with me," said Horikita. "You're somewhat similar to her."

Kushida had also repeatedly been looking for a fight with Horikita. When Horikita told Kushida that she and Ibuki were alike, she chuckled. "Don't lump me together with her."

Kushida's words and the look on her face said different things, but Horikita ignored that. Both of them expected that new visitors would be coming to the outdoor bath, so there wasn't any further need for conversation, but no students were showing up just yet, as it was still dinnertime.

"Anyway, I have to say, you really were fortunate, Horikita-san," said Kushida.

"Fortunate? What are you talking about?" asked Horikita.

"I mean how you were seated next to Ayanokouji-kun when you started school here. Thanks to that, you were able to get close to him and get a lot of help from the shadows through him, right?"

It wasn't as though Kushida knew in detail the truth of everything that had actually happened until now. However, she did understand that, at key points, Ayanokouji had been involved in some way.

"If Ayanokouji-kun weren't here, Horikita-san, you might even have gotten expelled because of me by now," said Kushida.

It wasn't your own ability that brought you this far.
If someone had told her that before, Horikita would've immediately argued against it. But now, she was able to take a more objective look at things, and think back on them calmly.

"I can't completely deny that," she admitted. "But it's not just my good fortune; it was a lucky break for you too. If it weren't for Ayanokouji-kun, you wouldn't be here right now, as the version of you with everything exposed and brought to light. You might have continued playing the part of the purely good girl, making the same mistakes over and over."

Of course, no one knew what the outcome of that might've been. It was entirely possible that Kushida could have made it through the three years of her academic career here while keeping up the charade. But whether she could continue to do so forever was another matter. The truth was that Kushida was in constant, never-ending pain, day after day. Now, she was able to disperse her stress using both her outer and inner selves.

"...Perhaps," she said.

That was the truth, and it was being presented to her by someone she didn't like at all. Normally, Kushida would have admitted to it only as lip service, but instead, she nodded, as she felt there were some things that she needed to admit to. That was something that she had gained because she had been pushed to the brink of death during the Unanimous Special Exam, and managed to bounce back and stay alive. For the first time in her life, she had experienced a change in her way of thinking and her values.

"When you think about it, I suppose that you were even luckier than I was," said Horikita.

"It honestly pisses me off when you make a good comeback like that, Horikita-san," said Kushida.

The two of them stopped speaking at that point. They were two people who normally wouldn't engage with one another, and neither of them could think of any particular reason to stay in the bath for a long time. However, for some reason, they continued to soak. Neither of them had a clear answer as to why this was, but to them, it felt like leaving first would equate to losing. It was because there was that feeling in the air that they stayed.

"...Please pardon the intrusion."

It was a few minutes after Ibuki had left that Kushida and Horikita's time alone together came to an end. Ichinose Honami had shown up to the open-air bath, entering somewhat shyly.

"You're all by yourself, Ichinose-san? That's rather unusual," remarked Kushida.

"Ah ha ha... Yeah, I guess so, a little," said Ichinose.

Kushida was well aware that Ichinose had been talking with a lot of people over dinner. From that, she understood that Ichinose must have wanted to come here on her own.

"I suppose everyone has times when they wish to be alone," said Horikita. "I'll get out of the way."

Horikita was starting to feel quite flushed, and decided that this was likely a good time to call it a night. She thought that she'd switch places with Ichinose and naturally pass the baton over to

Kushida, assuming that Kushida and Ichinose would likely engage in casual conversation, and that'd be that.

"Oh, no, that's okay! It's not like that at all! Please don't mind me!" flailed Ichinose, stopping Horikita as she was just about to get up.

Kushida turned to Horikita with a smile, as if to follow up. "Already going, Horikita-san? Ichinose-san said that it's okay, so why don't we all chat together?"

"What do you mean?" asked Horikita.

"I mean I feel like I still haven't had my fill of talking to you," Kushida said. "Is that not okay?"

Kushida said things that she didn't really mean, even though she made it seem like they reflected how she really felt. Ichinose looked a little worried too, as if wondering if she had interrupted something in coming here.

"Well, I decided that I'd had enough conversation, but...all right. I'll stay for a little while longer." Horikita sat down on top of a rock on the side of the pool to let the night breeze cool down her warmed-up body. It had started snowing outside, so the air outside the water was cold, but it actually felt quite pleasant.

"Hey, Ichinose-san, there's something I'd like to ask you. Would that be okay?" asked Kushida.

"Hm? What is it? You can ask me anything, sure," said Ichinose.

"So, Ichinose-san, are you going out with anybody?"

"Hm? W-wait, what?!" Ichinose panicked over the entirely unexpected question.

"It's just that, lately, a lot of guys in class have been asking me if you're available," Kushida said.

Kushida seemed unaware of what was going on as she asked that question, but in truth, that wasn't the case. In fact, Kushida knew that Ichinose was available now, and she knew that Ichinose had feelings for Ayanokouji. She had already finished gathering that information at an early stage. Kushida was better informed

than anyone else in Ichinose's class, but she wouldn't breathe a word about that.

"N-n-n-no, there's no one! I'm not seeing anyone!" answered Ichinose.

"I see," said Kushida. "Okay, so, is there anybody you like?"

The only reason that Kushida was asking these sorts of questions with an innocent look on her face was because she wanted to dissect Ayanokouji even further. She wanted to find out why Ichinose had taken a liking to him. She was also taking into consideration the possibility that this could eventually become a weapon she could use.

However, Ichinose didn't admit it. "N-no, there isn't. Really, no, I don't have anyone like that." She denied the truth and hid her face in the bathwater, trying to hide the blush that was coloring her face in her embarrassment and awkwardness.

Kushida had considered the possibility that, if Ichinose had admitted to it, she could've mentioned the matter of Karuizawa or gotten into deeper topics, but it didn't seem like it was going to be that easy. So, she decided to pass the baton over to Horikita briefly, since she had decided to stay.

"What about you, Horikita-san? Do you have any stories of romance?"

"No." Horikita responded in less than a second. She had almost no interest in romance.

"I see," said Kushida. "You seem like you'd be exceedingly popular, though, Horikita-san. And you seem to be very friendly with Sudou-kun."

"I don't understand it, myself. What about you, though? You seem to get along even with boys from other classes. I feel like Ichinose-san might be curious about that, too." Horikita, faced with an irritating question, turned it back around on Kushida. Her intention was to quickly remove herself from the conversation and let Kushida and Ichinose talk.

"Yes, you're right about that," Ichinose said. "I've been getting a lot of questions from boys about Kushida-san, too."

Though Kushida clicked her tongue in irritation at Horikita in her mind, on the outside, she directed a bashful smile at Ichinose. "Huh? Really? I don't really know all that much about things like romance either, though... But you know, I feel like it might be a waste to fall in love while you're still a student."

She decided to focus on sowing the seeds for the topic to move forward, if they were going to waste time talking about this now.

"A waste?" asked Ichinose.

"Yes. After all, I hear that student romances hardly ever go anywhere," Kushida explained. "Something like between ten and thirty percent? It's hard to take the plunge, when you consider that less than half work out... That's why I'm making a conscious effort not to fall in love right now."

Ichinose had an even wider circle of friends than Kushida herself; by telling her this, Kushida hoped she'd be able to preemptively discourage any guy planning to try and ask her out, even guys who were prepared to go down in flames if they asked. In the time since Kushida had started school here, she had already had more than ten students privately ask her out, from all grade levels.

"It makes me happy that people like me, but...at the same time, I'm afraid of getting hurt," Kushida said.

"I see... I think I can understand that..." said Ichinose.

Kushida thought there was almost nothing more pointless than romance when you were a student. While Ichinose and Kushida were engaged in conversation about love, Horikita stood back up.

"I think it's time I be going," she said.

"Oh? You're leaving already?" asked Kushida.

"I don't know anything about romance."

"I see. Well, I certainly won't press you. But is there perhaps another reason why you want to cut this conversation short?"

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Don't worry about it. I suppose you've reached your limit; you're probably too hot. I wanted to keep talking with you, though, Horikita-san."

"You're...serious?" asked Horikita.

"Of course." Kushida turned to Ichinose. "Ichinose-san, you feel the same way, right?"

"Yes. If you don't mind me being here, I'd like to keep talking with you, Horikita-san," she agreed.

In response to what Kushida said, which sounded like provocation, and her prompting, Horikita sat back down. "In that case...okay, let's."

Horikita, as leader of the class, could no longer choose the option of running away from Kushida's offer.

"Are you really sure you're all right?" Kushida asked. "It'd be awful if you got dizzy and collapsed."

"Thank you for your concern," said Horikita. "But I'm worried about you too, Kushida-san. Your face looks red."

"That might be because we're talking about love," said Kushida.

"It's just from that? I hope you're not forcing yourself too much."

Horikita's sharp look and Kushida's smiling gaze collided.

Ichinose cocked her head to the side, puzzled. She felt like something was off. "I kind of get the feeling you two are acting different from usual. Is something the matter?"

Kushida immediately and completely eliminated any remaining nastiness toward Horikita from her demeanor. "Oh no, not at all. Right, Horikita-san?"

"...Right."

Even though Ichinose was a comparatively trustworthy person, there was no need to give her any extraneous information. That was what Horikita had concluded, and so she played along with what Kushida said. The talk of romance between Kushida and Ichinose continued for a while, and eventually, their conversation

turned into idle chatter. Horikita listened attentively throughout, enjoying both the onsen and the snow that continued falling gently.

Afterward, some of Ichinose's friends who had come over after they had finished eating called Ichinose inside, and she left to join them. Then, as another group of girls poured into the open-air bath, both Horikita and Kushida kept their distance from one another, but continued their contest to see who could outlast the other. Their stalemate continued for another ten minutes or so. But then...

"Don't you think it's time that you two get out now? You're both bright red." When Ichinose saw that both Horikita and Kushida were nearing their limits, she popped her face outside.

"Hear that, Horikita-san?" said Kushida.

"I think...you're the one who should heed what Ichinose-san is saying, don't you?" said Horikita.

Both sides stubbornly tried to persist, but more students had started appearing at the outdoor bath now that they'd finished their meals. Since it would've been difficult for them to continue their competition like this, they both read the writing on the wall and stood up at the same time.

"It was a nice bath, wasn't it?" said Kushida.

"It really was," said Horikita. "Perhaps too much so, actually..."

"Did something happen between you two after all?" said Ichinose, worried, once again feeling like there was something strange going on, but the two of them left the bath, acting as though nothing had happened.

3.6

JUST BEFORE 10 P.M., there came two gentle knocks at our door. Watanabe, looking at the door, said that he'd answer it and hurriedly got up. Was he taking the initiative for our sake, or for his own?

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," said Kushida.

As Watanabe opened the door, four girls poured in, with Kushida in the lead.

"W-welcome. Wow, it sure is late, huh?" Watanabe seemed nervous and bashful. His movements suddenly became tense and delayed, and he hurriedly tried to make way for the girls.

"Sorry. I ended up spending a little too much time in the bath, so that's why we're late," said Kushida.

It was true that her face looked a little red. At the same time, though, I noticed that her hair looked glossy and smooth. We seldom had the opportunity to meet with girls at night right before bedtime, which was probably why this was such a valuable experience to Watanabe. With the four girls coming in, an indescribable fragrance instantly spread throughout the room. It wasn't like the stink of a gathering of boys; it was like a completely different environment.

"I wonder why it smells so good in here now...?" asked Watanabe.

"It certainly is a mystery," I replied.

The large bathhouse was stocked with bottles of shampoo and conditioner that were made with soy milk; perhaps they were wholesale items purchased for business purposes for customers. I had no complaints, but the lather wasn't particularly great, and the shampoo and conditioner felt like they were relatively cheap. Normally, I would assume that they'd have put the same products on the men's side as they did in the women's baths, but...the scent that wafted from the girls was clearly different from the soy milk-

based shampoo we used. Or perhaps the girls had brought their own items.

"Hey, try asking them," Watanabe said. "Ask how they smell so good."

"Sorry, but I don't think I can ask them that."

Even someone like me, who knew little of the world, knew that. I was sure that if I asked the girls something like that, they'd feel creeped out.

"It makes you a little nervous, doesn't it, when you think about being in a guy's room?" whispered Amikura to the other girls as she looked about the room, seeming a little uncomfortable.

Even though the rooms had the same layouts, they might have looked different from one another, strangely enough.

"Hey, after we're finished with our discussion, how about we all go to Honami-chan's group's room?" said Amikura. "They're having girl talk until just before lights out."

"Really? Sure, I'm okay with that," said Kushida.

Unlike Kushida, who readily agreed to the idea right away, Nishino declined the offer, seemingly disinterested. "I'll pass. I'm not really good friends with them."

Yamamura proceeded to jump on the bandwagon now that Nishino had declined; she lowered her head and mumbled something quietly. "...Me too, I'll pass..."

"Really?" said Amikura. "I thought everyone would be on board, but... Well, it's all right."

Hearing that the girls would be leaving soon, Watanabe had a somewhat disappointed look on his face. Lights out was at 11 p.m., though, which was somewhat late, so we still had some time until then. It was a school trip, after all, something that people had been looking forward to, and everyone wanted to really cut loose.

"So, this is what it feels like to have girls in your room..." muttered Watanabe quietly, drunk with ecstasy.

"More importantly, Watanabe, you should welcome the girls as soon as possible," I said. "This is your chance to increase your

likeability, right?"

Just inviting them into our room was something that even I, Ryuuuen, or Kitou could have done. To make a lasting impression, he'd need to go one step further.

"Huh? Support them? Like how?" asked Watanabe.

He was so overwhelmed by the girls being here that he couldn't seem to see the situation. The girls came to the guys' room, so this was like an away game for them; they probably didn't know where they should sit here.

"Um... Where should we sit?" asked Kushida.

Four futons had already been laid out in this Japanese-style room by the staff, spaced a little apart from one another, so you'd have to sit near the edge of the room if you were going to sit on the floor. Deciding whether to force them into a cramped space or take other measures would be a show of skill in this situation.

"Huh? Well, anywhere should be fine, I think," said Watanabe, not quite understanding the situation. "If you don't mind sitting on top of a futon, you can go ahead. Sound good?"

He proceeded to remove blankets from two futon sets and prepared a space. The girls looked a little surprised, but since there wasn't any other suitable place for them to sit, Kushida nodded in agreement. The four girls all sat down on the two futon sets near the door.

"Well then, lights out is fast approaching, so let's get started right away," said Kushida. "Speaking of, where's Ryuuuen-kun?"

"On the other side of the sliding door," I replied.

I remembered that when I'd opened the sliding door before, I saw the small table, the two armchairs, and the small refrigerator. Amikura seemed like she was too scared to go near the sliding door, so Nishino, being Ryuuuen's classmate, walked over and threw the door open. Ryuuuen seemed to be relaxing on one of the armchairs while playing on his phone.

"Did you not hear? We're meeting," said Kushida.

"Here works. I can hear you fine," said Ryuuuen.

"You might be right about that, but I'd still like everyone to come over and be present, since the purpose is to build solidarity as a group." Kushida called for Ryuuен to join us without even a hint of fear. Perhaps Ryuuен didn't like her acting like that, because he laughed and turned his phone off.

"You sure are eager, but do you really understand your position here?" he sneered.

"What is that supposed to mean?" asked Kushida.

"Exactly what it sounds like. If you're tellin' me you don't understand, then I can make you understand, ya know?"

The other students here couldn't understand the meaning lurking behind Ryuuен's words in his attempt to rein Kushida in. But Ryuuен was the only person outside our class here who knew about Kushida, so his words carried weight.

"What are you even talking about?" asked Nishino. She must have interpreted the exchange as nothing more than Ryuuен picking a fight, so she hounded him. "Don't go saying stuff that'll just annoy people, and get over here, now."

Nishino was neither scared nor timid; she was already grabbing hold of Ryuuен's arm and yanking him to his feet.

"Nishino," he grumbled. "You've certainly been mouthin' off a lot lately too, haven't you?"

"Uh, I've always been like this, though," she said. "I just never got involved more than I needed to before."

So, she was basically saying that since she was in a group right now, she had no other choice but to do something. I had expected they'd jump down one another's throats more, but Ryuuен simply got up, acting as though this were all a pain in the ass, and headed inside the Japanese-style room. Kitou shot him a glance; in an instant, the mood was tense. Even so, for the time being, eight people had now gathered in one room for discussion.

"Is this something we really need to do with all of us together in one place?" Kitou hadn't said one word since the girls had arrived, but now he spoke up. "We could just do this on our phones."

It was true that it would've been easy to notify everyone of what was going on that way, even by just putting everyone in a group chat in an app or something.

"From the sounds of it, the other groups have been deciding what they're doing via face-to-face discussions, like we're doing now."

"Wow, Kushida-chan, we can count on you to know what's up!" Watanabe nodded exaggeratedly, seemingly impressed with how well-informed Kushida was, before sitting down between Yamamura and me. Perhaps Yamamura was alarmed by the unexpected and sudden approach of a young man, since she took a half-step backward, almost standing, in an effort to get away from him.

"Ah, sorry, Yamamura. Didn't see you there," said Watanabe.

"It's okay... Don't worry about it."

Apart from that rather inconsequential exchange, though, there was still an incredibly strong feeling of tension in everyone's interactions with Ryuuken, even now.

"Other groups are other groups. We can do things our own way," said Kitou.

Ryuuken was most likely the one Kitou was worried about. It was clear to see that he was concerned that we wouldn't be able to have a proper discussion.

"I think it's important that we have a face-to-face with everyone, though," Kushida said. "I want to hear how everyone really feels."

Kushida, unwilling to back down, insisted that there were many things you wouldn't understand by communicating through an app. She likely didn't want to step on the Ryuuken landmine either, but she had her position to protect. If the outer Kushida decided that she couldn't back down here, then she'd probably just push things forward.

"Anyway, sorry to rush things, but regarding our free time starting tomorrow—" she began.

"Before that, though, you all forgot that there's one thing we need to settle first," interrupted Ryuuen. He looked around the Japanese-style room, futons laid out, and said, "I ain't got the slightest desire to sleep shoulder-to-shoulder with any of you assholes, but still, I can't say much since space is tight. So, I'm sleepin' here," he declared, directing his gaze to the futon placed at the far back of the room.

It was in an ideal position—if someone were to get up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom or something, you wouldn't be bothered there, and you wouldn't be in the middle of people. He was right, no one had settled the matter of where we'd be sleeping. *Well, wait, is this something we need to be deciding right now? It might be better if we wait until after the girls leave...*

Was Ryuuen simply unable to read social cues? Or was he doing this deliberately? Based on what I'd seen from him thus far, it felt like the latter, at least to me. But what did the others here think, I wondered? They seemed to be thinking that he was simply acting selfishly and making an irrelevant declaration.

He took one look at Watanabe and me for confirmation, more or less, and then bluntly followed up with, "No objections, right?" in a somewhat more aggressive tone.

"I'm... Well, I'm fine with anywhere." Watanabe complied with Ryuuen's demand, sounding like a frog being stared down by a snake.

I should go ahead and give an answer myself, I supposed. As that thought was running through my head, though, Ryuuen was already looking away from me.

"Hey, Kitou," he sneered. "If you got somethin' you wanna say, don't hold back. Go ahead and spill it, huh?"

He seemed to think that Kitou would be the only one who would argue with him.

"Unacceptable." Kitou's rebuttal was like the abstract representation of this made manifest.

"Oh?" Ryuuen cocked his head to the side. He had told Kitou not to hold anything back and to speak his piece, but he must not

have liked his refusal.

"I do not approve of such an unfair approach to decision-making in this matter," Kitou said. "Moreover, this isn't something we should even be discussing right now. Can't you understand that?"

"Don't care. And I don't remember givin' you the right to refuse, asshole."

"I am free to speak how I wish, whenever and wherever." Kitou wasn't backing down one inch. Rather, he appeared ready for battle.

"H-hey, come on, let's just calm down, Kitou. It's only where we're sleeping. How about you let him have it?" pleaded Watanabe, standing up and trying to get Kitou to stop.

"I refuse," Kitou declared.

"Um..." Watanabe buckled, bending back a bit in the face of Kitou's powerful glare. When it came to how much anger and intensity was conveyed in their facial expressions, Kitou surpassed Ryuuuen.

"I have no intention of letting this man's unreasonableness pass," said Kitou.

"W-wait a minute, boys. We're not even talking about that now. Later, you can..." Amikura nervously tried to remind them what we were meeting about, but Nishino tugged on her yukata sleeve and stopped her. She gave Amikura a shake of her head, silently warning her that it'd be best not to interrupt.

"I'll say this as many times as necessary. I have no intention of willingly surrendering to you," spat Kitou.

"In that case, you sayin' you wanna fight me over it?" said Ryuuuen. "Huh? That it?"

"You wish for violence? I'm fine with giving it to you, but you'll be laying flat for the rest of the trip."

Kushida had a worried look on her face, but I looked into her eyes and thought about what she must be thinking. I figured she

was likely feeling irritated, thinking that it was all so bothersome that it was practically killing her.

"Heh heh. All right, guess we're doin' this, then. The rest of you wanna get in on this, too?" asked Ryuuen.

"No thanks, I'll sit this out... Like I said before, I'm fine with anywhere," said Watanabe.

Personally, I would rather have been on one of the edges instead of sandwiched in the middle, but I didn't want to get sucked into trouble. Whether Ryuuen won or Kitou won, once one of them took that particular edge, they wouldn't have to sleep next to each other. It was far more likely that Watanabe or I would be between them as a buffer.

"I'll pass, too," I said. "You can decide this with a fight if you want. If you both want that one end, we'll just let you fight over it, and you can let Watanabe and I each take one of the remaining three spots. Okay?"

If we didn't assert our natural rights, then there'd be trouble later. It seemed like Ryuuen and Kitou were both saying that futon was their utmost preference, and so Watanabe and I were free to choose from the remaining spaces.

"Also, please don't decide this with violence," I added.

I had to say at least that part in a forceful tone, otherwise group six would look bad. I'd heard that the school would be ruthless in imposing restrictions on any groups that caused trouble. Maybe it was a bit of an exaggeration, but it would be a shame if we weren't able to leave the ryokan the whole duration of the trip, now that we were finally here.

"Well, I like settlin' things with my fists, since that's easy to understand, but I guess we can't do that, huh?" said Ryuuen.

At any rate, I was grateful that they seemed to at least have the prudence not to get violent.

"Thanks, Ayanokouji, for saying what I wanted to say," said Watanabe.

"No big deal; I didn't really say anything special."

"That's not true, though. At least to me, you did, anyway. You can take the other edge, if you want."

Was it just the students in Ichinose's class who all seemed to be fundamentally composed of goodness? I hadn't even asked him for the space, yet he just gave the edge to me. With that decided, there'd be either Ryuuен or Kitou on the far end, and Watanabe would be next to that person. The person in the third futon would be whoever lost this contest. And then I'd be sleeping on the end closest to the entrance to the room.

"Besides, I need to build up a little tolerance anyway," said Watanabe.

Apparently, one of the reasons why Watanabe had given up that spot was for a personal matter. Of course, I was sure that the idea of being sandwiched between Ryuuен and Kitou wasn't all that thrilling, though.

In the blink of an eye, Ryuuен was already clutching a pillow in his hands. "I guess people always think of this sort of thing whenever someone mentions a school trip, eh? It's gonna be a one-on-one fight. And I'm sure you don't even need to hear the rules, huh, Kitou?"

"Of course not," he replied.

"What?" I cocked my head to the side. "What are you going to use the pillow for?"

I didn't know what awaited us now that this change had been made.

"Come on, school trips, pillows?" Ryuuен said. "Put those two together and there's only one thing it could mean, right?"

Only one thing? I had no clue... However, all the other students aside from me appeared to understand, and Kushida quickly stood up.

"A-all right then, in that case, why don't I act as referee?" offered Kushida, seeming regretful at having been placed into such an absurd position. "It might be better if we can have someone judge this impartially."

"Wow, you're so disciplined, Kushida-chan, even at a time like this," marveled Watanabe.

I would've loved to have heard what Kushida honestly thought, but the other girls were close by, as well as Watanabe. Anyway, more importantly, I was deeply interested in seeing what they were going to be using the pillows for.

"I'll let you take the first one," said Ryuuen.

"You'd best not give it to me," Kitou replied. "You don't want to be defeated without taking a single shot, do you? Come at me with no regrets, Ryuuen."

Ryuuen smacked the pillow against the top of his hand, smirking, with a *pomf, pomf* sound.

"In that case, I ain't gonna hold back. I'm gonna kill ya, Kitou!" Ryuuen snarled.

With that, he swung wide, chucking the pillow like it were a ball. The pillow, which was stuffed with buckwheat chaff, flew at Kitou at high speed. Although there was a fair distance between the two of them, the pillow was thrown with such intensity that it wouldn't be surprising if whoever was hit by it got knocked off their feet and lost. And yet Kitou calmly and precisely caught the pillow.

"Now, I'm going to kill you!" Kitou threw the pillow back, and his own throw had no less intensity than Ryuuen's. Ryuuen then proceeded to catch it in magnificent fashion, and he immediately switched his stance to throw it again.

"Heh, not bad, Kitou! Looks like I might have a little fun! Hraah!"

Once again, the pillow was returned to Kitou.

"This is..." I muttered.

"A pillow fight," said Kushida. "You've never done this kind of thing before, Ayanokouji-kun? I had the impression that boys were always having pillow fights, though—you know, on trips in elementary school and junior high, or at summer camp and stuff."

This was the first I had ever heard of it. No one had engaged in anything like a pillow fight even during the mixed camp last year.

"Darkness Ball!"

"Go, my rampaging great serpent, devour him!"

Darkness and a great serpent, huh? The humble pillow was being transformed into all sorts of things.

"U-um, this is supposed to be...a pillow fight, right?" mumbled Amikura, watching the pillow fly back and forth, from right to left and back again.

A one-on-one fight to the death, where no one else would be permitted to intervene, not even in the event of an emergency...is what this wasn't. It was supposed to be a pillow fight to decide who would sleep where. The deadly "life-or-death battle" raged on for several minutes more, with no conclusion in sight. Neither opponent seemed to be at risk of exhausting their stamina; it looked like they could continue fighting for a long time. However, all the rest of us present aside from those two engaged in combat understood that we were now faced with a dilemma.

"Is that pillow going to be okay if they keep throwing it that hard? It's already looking so beat-up," murmured Kushida calmly, which drew everyone's attention to the pillow in question.

I was sure that no one needed this to be explained, but pillows weren't items meant for throwing. Now, if you were just gently tossing it, that'd be one thing, but there was no way that the pillow wouldn't get increasingly damaged after being hurled back and forth with no restraint, full force, in a succession of blazing-fast pitches.



"That reminds me, whose pillow is that, anyway?" asked Watanabe suddenly, checking the futons that were laid out on the floor.

Out of the four futons there, the pillow was missing from the one on the far edge, the one that Watanabe had let me have.

"...Guess it's mine," I said.

I didn't have the item that I should have had on my futon. At that very moment, in fact, Kitou seemed to be clutching it tightly in his hands, pouring yet more of his darkness power into it. I could tell quite well that the pillow was screaming in agony.

"I'm pretty sure you'd get nightmares if you slept with that pillow," muttered Watanabe.

Well, actually, I'd say that the fact there was no guarantee that the pillow would even keep its shape was terrifying in the first place. Whichever side won, I'd have liked my pillow to be returned to me safely.

"Hmph!"

Kitou had poured more intense killing intent into his throw this time than ever before. Perhaps it was because Kitou's thick fingers were digging into it so tightly, but the pillow exploded the moment it left his hand. The cloth ripped open, and the buckwheat chaff that had been stuffed inside was now scattered across the room. Everyone fell silent as we heard the pieces fall everywhere. The pillow that was supposed to have gently supported my head had now been reduced to a tragic state.

Oh, pillow, I wished so strongly for you to be returned safely to me, and yet you weren't, were you...? I would like to express my deepest condolences to the victim that was cruelly cut down on this battlefield.

"Ugh, boys. I can't help thinking they're such m... I mean, they're simply children, aren't they?" muttered Kushida, quietly enough so that only I could hear her.

The buckwheat chaff that had scattered across the room had also become as still as death. Neither Ryuuen nor Kitou seemed to be particularly bothered by that, though, and their fingers were

already reaching for the nearest pillow at hand. That was when Nishino spoke up, raising her voice.

"Hey, listen. We don't exactly have all the time in the world here, so can you guys finish whatever this is later? It's a hassle."

Ryuuuen ignored her warning and looked like he was going to continue, but Kitou was not. He sat down without a word, deciding to put this matter on hold for the time being. His previous feelings had cooled, and he sensed the frustration of those around him.

"So, this mean you lost, then, Kitou?" asked Ryuuuen.

"If she says that it's a bother, then I have no intention of being a bother anymore," said Kitou.

Considering the impression he usually gave me, he had pulled back so quickly that it was almost shocking. Well, knowing things had turned out this way, I wished they hadn't had the pillow fight in the first place. At the very least, I could have avoided having my pillow becoming a sacrifice, with its innards tragically strewn about.

"Okay, well then... First, let's get this cleaned up," said Kushida. "And then, after we're done, let's chat."

With all the guys, except for Ryuuuen, and all the girls helping out, we successfully managed to gather the debris from the pillow in short order. I'd have to get a new pillow from the ryokan staff later, I supposed. But I agonized over whether I should tell them the truth or lie.

The buckwheat chaff that had been scattered all over the room was collected and placed in a translucent plastic bag in the trash bin. Then, our discussion began. Kushida, as a matter of course, began the discussion, speaking for the group.

"So, about our free time, we just need to be back to the ryokan by seven p.m. for the final check-in for dinner, right?" said Kushida.

Amikura immediately got into the discussion. "Yeah. It really feels like we have the entire day free in that case, doesn't it?"

"We could take a train or a bus or something to get somewhere relatively quickly, but... What do you all think? Nishino-

san, is there anywhere you want to go?" Kushida asked.

"I wanna go skiing, I guess," Nishino replied. "We basically just practiced all day today, so I didn't get enough real skiing in. And we're here in Hokkaido, after all."

"I agree with Nishino," I added.

I felt it would be a waste if I'd only spent half a day skiing by the time this trip was over, now that I had gone through the trouble of learning how. Kitou silently expressed his agreement as well with a casual raise of his hand.

"Sounds like quite a few people want to ski, then," said Kushida. "Watanabe-kun, Yamamura-san, what about you?"

"I don't really have any objections, myself," said Watanabe. "I mean, we're going around the city on the third day, so that sounds fine to me, y'know?"

"I don't mind going anywhere," said Yamamura.

Even Yamamura, who still couldn't ski very well yet, didn't seem particularly reluctant about the idea. Was she just going along with everyone else around her, or did she simply want to get better at skiing? I couldn't really tell what her feelings were in that area.

"Mako-chan, what about you?" asked Kushida.

"Hmm. Well, I'm not that good at skiing, so I can't say that I'm really thrilled. But if everyone else wants to ski, I'm okay with it. We are a group, after all," said Amikura, demonstrating a willingness to concede completely.

Kushida didn't put forth her own opinion in the discussion, instead turning to Ryuuken, who was sitting in an armchair. "What about you, Ryuuken-kun?" she asked.

"Do whatever you want," he snapped.

Apparently, he wasn't advocating anything in particular, casually abandoning his right to speak. Once Ryuuken, the most troublesome member of the group, had issued that statement, a wave of relief washed over us. It was probably better to assume

that Ryuuken also felt he'd enjoy skiing, rather than just not having any interest in going anywhere.

Chapter 4: School Trip Day Two

IT WAS NOW THE MORNING of the second day of our school trip. After we finished eating breakfast and getting dressed, we killed time in our room relaxing, waiting until the bus bound for the ski resort was set to depart. Watanabe and I were innocently watching TV. On the other side of the television screen, celebrities were reading off summaries of the morning news and providing their own innocuous, tepid commentary. After a while, the vibe of the programming suddenly changed rather dramatically as they entered a segment of the program that was a special feature on kittens.

Meanwhile, Ryuuен was in the same room, sitting in the armchair as though it was his own personal seat, while Kitou was staring fixatedly at a magazine, reading one by one through a stack of them that were available to borrow for free from the ryokan. They all appeared to be fashion magazines.

"He looks so unsettling like that. It's hard to imagine that he's just reading... It feels like he's studying a manual on how to murder people," Watanabe whispered into my ear. He had spoken in a quiet murmur so as not to be overheard, but in an instant, Kitou shot him a penetrating glare. That must have terrified Watanabe, because he averted his gaze, hiding in my shadow.

"I mean, he's definitely done *that* to somebody, don't you think?" he squeaked, terrified.

I felt my shoulders being shaken, but I wanted to concentrate on this kitten segment on TV, if possible.

"Hey, Kitou. Things ain't clear for you either yet, right? With how yesterday's pillow fight turned out? Have a throwdown with me today." As though he were attempting to call forth a storm to raze this peaceful morning, Ryuuен approached Kitou and proposed they fight.

Needless to say, this was not a welcome development for me and Watanabe.

"Fool," said Kitou. "Do you intend to jump straight into the jaws of death yourself? If you wish to feel regret, then I shan't stop you."

"Heh heh. In that case, do yer worst," said Ryuuen.

"What kind of competition do you want?" asked Kitou.

"Well, ain't that obvious? We're gonna go skiin' soon, so that'll be it."

From the sounds of it, Ryuuen was proposing a simple time trial, to see who could finish faster. Kitou might not have been a beginner, but it was clear based on what I'd seen yesterday that Ryuuen was highly skilled, at the very least. There was no need for Kitou to willingly go along with a proposal that would essentially drag him onto Ryuuen's playing field. However, Kitou forcefully shut his magazine, the look on his face unchanging.

"You think you can beat me in skiing?" he said. "I will crush your hubris."

Apparently, he was going to accept the challenge, not showing any sign of running from it.

"Hey, you guys shouldn't fight, y'know? Hey, you two listening?" said Watanabe in a tiny voice.

"I'm pretty sure they didn't hear your words of warning," I remarked.

Watanabe had spoken so incredibly quietly that if a child heard him just now, they would probably have said something like, "Wow! An ant is talking!" I had been sitting next to him and had only just barely, ever-so-slightly managed to make out what he said.

"I'm just picturin' you lookin' pathetic, crawlin' down the slopes on all fours," sneered Ryuuen.

"Laughable," Kitou scoffed.

As Ryuuen and Kitou traded verbal jabs, I could tell that they were both heating up. Kitou stood, rolled up the magazine that he

had borrowed, and drew closer to Ryuuuen while holding the magazine out as if it were the blade of a sword.

"When you lose, you're going to be as quiet as a little kitten for the rest of this trip," said Kitou.

I wondered if Kitou had unknowingly been influenced by the segment on cats on the TV, but that's what he was demanding from Ryuuuen.

"Huh? Well, if ya ask me, I've been plenty quiet already," said Ryuuuen, batting away the magazine forcefully with a *slap*.

"Can't you just leave it at that for the time being, please? I'd like to watch this segment on cats," I said, urging the two of them to keep their distance from one another and not to fight.

"W-wow, you've sure got guts, Ayanokouji. They might turn around and make you their target, though, don'tcha think?" said Watanabe, worried.

"Nah, I don't think so. There's no benefit to either of them in going up against someone like me," I replied.

Besides, the general Ryuuuen-versus-Kitou schema was going to remain unchanged, unless someone made a big show of butting in.

"Anyway, now that you two have calmed down, I can keep watching this special on—"

Before I could even finish that sentence, the cats had already disappeared from the TV. I guessed that that these things called special features didn't last for very long, because it was over in just a few minutes.

"Sorry, that's too bad, Ayanokouji," Watanabe said. "You like cats?"

"Nah, not really," I replied.

"Wait, you don't?!"

I had just wanted to watch, more or less. I didn't hold any particular fondness for the animal known as the cat. I would likely have felt the same way if it had been a special feature on dogs or even hippopotamuses. The people on the program had been

talking about topics cheerfully, in a friendly fashion, for quite a while, but then there was a news flash.

"Now for some breaking news. Former Secretary-General Naoe, who had been undergoing medical treatment for some time, has passed away at a hospital in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Here is a comment from Prime Minister Kijima's office—"

There were flashes of lights going off, and at the same time, a very stern-faced man was speaking.

"Judge a man by living with him, and try a horse by riding him.' Those are words Naoe-sensei said to me shortly after we met."

Just when the Prime Minster began speaking about the deceased, the screen suddenly went black.

"Time to get on the bus," said Kitou, remote control in his hand, his finger on the off button.

"Awright, Ayanokouji, let's get this show on the road," said Ryuuuen.

I was a little concerned about their contest, but I figured I'd still try and enjoy skiing in my own way.

4.1

WHEN WE HEADED OUTSIDE, we found a slight problem waiting for us. Apparently, the bus had gotten stuck in traffic and would be arriving about ten minutes late. There were a lot of students waiting for the bus heading to the ski resort, but if you looked back, you'd see that people were flooding the entrance, trying to head back inside.

"It's cold, but I guess it's safer waiting outside," said Watanabe.

He let out a deep sigh, exhaling a cloud of white, as he looked gloomily up at the sky. It was unfortunate that we'd gotten outside a little earlier than the other students, but there was nothing we could do about that now. Even if we did try and head back to our room, we couldn't exactly relax with only five minutes to spare. We—that is, group six—decided to wait outside the building, just under the eaves.

"Hey, since we're waiting out here anyway, why don't we try making a snowman?" asked Amikura, suggesting to the rest of the group that we could spend the time efficiently.

"That sounds like fun," Kushida said. "Nishino-san, Yamamura-san, would you like to join in?"

"...Sure, I guess," replied Nishino.

I had expected her to refuse the offer, but surprisingly enough, she seemed okay with it.

"And what about you, Yamamura-san?" asked Kushida.

"No, thank you... I'll pass," said Yamamura. She'd turned down the offer like I thought she would, albeit somewhat modestly.

The other three girls moved to an out-of-the-way spot and started scooping up fallen snow. From the looks of things, they weren't planning to make a small snowman. They were hoping to make a fairly large one.

"Hey, Ryuu-en-kun, why don't you come over and make a snowman together with us?" Kushida called. "I think it'd be fun."

Kushida had to know that there was absolutely no way Ryuu-en would take her up on that offer, but she invited him anyway to show off the good-natured heart of her public-facing persona. Even the other students nearby were watching the situation with concern, perhaps because they couldn't imagine Ryuu-en working hard to build a snowman. What Kushida said just now was almost certainly payback for yesterday. It was a show of confidence, telling him that if he said something careless, she wouldn't back down, she'd fight.

"I figured if I tried to rein her in a bit, that'd make her sit there quietly, but I guess I had the wrong idea, huh?" Ryuu-en muttered quietly to himself.

It was certainly true that if this had happened before her classmates had learned the truth about her, Kushida might just have sat there and put up with whatever he said. Ryuu-en must have been able to feel that there was something strange about that, but there was no way I could unravel this mystery for him. I couldn't give out information the other classes didn't know, like what happened in our class during the Unanimous Special Exam.

Needless to say, there was no way Ryuu-en would accept Kushida's invitation. He didn't even react to the snowman, instead just looking far off into the distance. Meanwhile, though, a certain someone continued to gaze quietly at the snowman as it was being constructed. That certain someone was none other than Yamamura, who had been distancing herself from us bit by bit without being noticed.

"Phew..." Yamamura exhaled deeply into her cold hands while she observed Kushida and the others making the snowman.
"Phew..."

Kushida and the rest building the snowman were, naturally, wearing warm-looking gloves. Even after taking a glance around the surrounding area, I noticed that none of the students outside except for Yamamura were going around without gloves. Well, that made sense. In this wintry weather, no one would go bare-handed for a long period of time unless they had a special reason. I

remembered that Yamamura had been wearing gloves before, during yesterday's skiing lessons. Even if she could rent gloves for skiing once we got there, why wouldn't she bring gloves along to wear on the way?

If she simply forgot, it'd be fine to just go back and get them, so maybe there was some kind of reason for it. She looked dazed, staring out into space while exhaling deeply over and over. Although I was curious about Yamamura, more and more students started coming outside to wait for the bus. Then, I heard a familiar voice.

"It's like everything is covered in a blanket of snow."

The owner of that familiar-sounding voice was none other than Sakayanagi Arisu. She was in group four. If I recalled, Hondou and Onodera from Horikita's class should also be in that group... And almost as if they'd been summoned, those two showed up just as that thought crossed my mind.

Sakayanagi and the rest of her group all gathered without really interacting with any of the members of group six. Since Sakayanagi couldn't ski, she was probably going to do some sightseeing.

Not too long afterward, the bus bound for the city arrived, although the bus headed to the ski resort was still on its way. The teacher leading the students instructed them to board, and the students began to get onto the bus one by one. Cane in hand, Sakayanagi walked alone on the snow-covered path, which she wasn't accustomed to. As I watched her, I felt a little uncertain, like it was risky... And my prediction proved to be on the mark, because Sakayanagi slipped and fell, landing gently on her backside. Fortunately, the gentle cushion of snow protected her from the impact, and she didn't seem to be hurt.

"Are you okay...?!" Tokitou from Class C, who was also part of group four, had been walking a little behind Sakayanagi when she fell, and he rushed over to her. He seemed to hesitate for a moment over what to do, but then he offered her his hand.

"Thank you very much, Tokitou-kun," Sakayanagi said, a little bashfully, as she took hold of his hand.



It would've been easy for him to just forcefully yank the diminutive Sakayanagi to her feet, but Tokitou helped her up slowly and carefully. Despite his stern face, it turned out he could be surprisingly delicate and considerate.

"You gotta be careful," he told her. "Your legs don't work great, after all..."

"I'm sorry," she said. "However, fortunately enough, the snow is nice and soft, so I wasn't hurt."

"Is that really the issue here...?" he muttered.

As the leader of her class, Sakayanagi normally enacted strategies without mercy. But the people in her group who were from other classes were likely getting a vastly different impression of her. Sakayanagi, still holding her cane, got back onto her feet and politely thanked him once more.

"I sincerely appreciate your help," she said.

"No big deal... Um, I mean, I'm glad that it wasn't anything serious." Perhaps Tokitou was feeling embarrassed, because he couldn't seem to look directly at Sakayanagi, and averted his eyes.

"The impression I had of you was that you were a rather scarier person, Tokitou-kun," Sakayanagi remarked.

"Huh? Me? ...Well, I dunno about that, I guess."

Sakayanagi stopped walking to talk to him. The exchange they were having now almost looked like a display meant to show off the change in their relationship.

"I mean that normally, when I pass by you in the hall, you tend to have a rather frightening look on your face," she said.

"Wh-why would you notice that?" he sputtered.

Sakayanagi answered without a moment's pause, a smile on her face. "Because we're in the same grade. I know quite a lot, even about you, Tokitou-kun."

If we were in a normal high school, and they were a normal boy and girl, then a scene like this would likely lead to a misunderstanding. However, behind that smile of Sakayanagi's, there was always the possibility of some ingenious scheme in play.

Depending on the situation, even the fall she had taken might have been calculated. Though the only students present here who would think like that were probably myself and...

Someone like Ryuuen, who was staring at them, although apparently with disinterest. Sakayanagi and Tokitou walked side by side over to the bus passenger door, and Tokitou let Sakayanagi get on first—probably so he could support her in case of an emergency, like if she were to fall backward. Whether or not there was some ulterior motive at play here, it was clear that people who didn't normally have any contact were gradually beginning to close the distance between one another.

Just then, the bus bound for the ski resort, which had been delayed, finally arrived, taking the place of the bus that left for the city.

4.2

WHEN WE DISEMBARKED from the bus that took us directly to the ski resort, the eight of us decided not to go into the resort right away, but to explore the nearby area first. Although we hadn't planned on it, Amikura had noticed that there were several souvenir shops and such in the area around the bus, and that was how the idea got started. It wasn't like the ski slopes would be gone after a twenty- or thirty-minute detour.

"Ooh, Hokkaido mornings sure are freezing, aren't they?" said Kushida, rubbing her gloves together and shivering. "It was nice and warm inside the bus, so you can really feel the huge change in temperature."

"Yeah. I can't believe it's this cold when it's still November," said Amikura. "And there's snow on the ground and everything; it's so weird."

When the rest of the group had stopped moving, Ryuuuen called over to them. "If you wanna take a look around, just go do it. I bet everythin's closed, though."

It was still just after 9:15 a.m. The ski slopes opened at 9:30, but most of the shops in the area appeared to still be closed. It looked like Ryuuuen's only plan for today was to enjoy skiing, and he was going to just stick around and wait for us.

Among the scant handful of stores that were open at this hour was a somewhat unusual apparel store. For some reason, Kitou walked over and stared intently at the clothing in the shop. There was a lineup of rather flashy and unusual clothes on display, for sure. I wondered if he'd found something he liked. Just as I was thinking about that, though, he put back the clothes he had picked out and started looking for something else.

"Man, Kitou's got some huge feet, huh? Those are like yeti footprints." Watanabe compared the size of his own shoes to the footprints Kitou had left on his way to the apparel store, deeply impressed.

Kitou was tall, for sure. But even taking that into account, his footprints definitely did seem quite large.

"Come on, everybody, let's all walk around together," suggested Amikura, the person who had originally proposed the idea, and she started walking on ahead as though there was no time to spare.

Kushida quickly went along with Amikura's invitation, but Yamamura apparently declined, remaining where she was. It looked like Watanabe and Nishino had both decided that they'd each go walking around on their own.

"Yamamura-san? You're not coming?" asked Amikura.

"...Oh, I'll stay here... Please don't mind me. Go on ahead."

There were only three people left here: myself, Ryuuuen, and Yamamura. I did honestly want to go check things out with Amikura and Kushida, but since they hadn't called out to ask me to come along, I guessed that meant I'd missed my chance. *What should I do now?* I wondered. I could walk around and check stuff out on my own, like Watanabe and Nishino, but...

Since Yamamura had declined the invitation, she was going to wait here until our group mates returned. If I left, she'd be all alone with Ryuuuen. That would've been fine if those two were just okay being around each other, but they had practically never even met before. I couldn't envision a scenario where they'd try to get to know each other through conversation, so I felt like leaving her with him would be a terrible idea. Therefore, even though it was frustrating, I decided that the correct answer would be to stay here, unless Yamamura or Ryuuuen decided to go ahead and do something on their own.

"Oh..."

Yamamura trembled as she watched Amikura and the others walk off, their backs appearing smaller and smaller as they disappeared into the distance. The cause of Yamamura's shivering was her hands, which she was hiding inside her coat. I was almost completely certain that she had come here without a pair of gloves. *In that case, should I lend her mine?* I wondered. If she

refused and told me she didn't need them, though, that would make things a little awkward.

Kitou and the rest of our group were already gone, so it was just the three of us now, Yamamura, Ryuuен, and I, and all was quiet. Yamamura seemed like she was putting up with the cold as much as she possibly could, but she couldn't completely hide it.

While I continued to hesitate over saying something, though, Ryuuен spoke up in a harsh tone. "Hey, Yamamura. Take your hands outta your pockets."

"Huh...?!"

Apparently, he had also noticed how cold Yamamura seemed, and how unnatural she looked with both hands thrust into her coat. I thought she'd show her cold hands, but she averted her gaze, and then...

"No." Her voice was very small, but her response was a flat refusal.

"Huh?"

"I won't. It's cold." Yamamura gave the reason, but she didn't mention whether or not she had gloves. You could feel the cold even if you were wearing gloves out in Hokkaido, so it would be warmer to keep your hands inside your coat.

I assumed the conversation would end right there, but Ryuuен trudged over the snow-covered path to Yamamura, grabbed her right arm, and forcefully pulled her hand out of her pocket.

"Ah—!"

After he had confirmed firsthand that she wasn't wearing any gloves, Ryuuен let go of her arm, and Yamamura hurriedly stuffed her hands back inside her coat, as though she were trying to escape from him.

"Well, yeah, course it's cold," he scoffed. "Where are your gloves?"

Ryuuен had proved that Yamamura was going out without gloves thanks to his power play, but she didn't answer him. She

turned her back to him, as if telling him, "*Please leave me alone.*"

"You're not even good at handlin' yourself on the slopes in the best of circumstances, and now you want to mess yourself up by letting your hands go numb?"

It was a valid point. Yamamura was still a beginner. If her hands went numb because of the cold, she wouldn't be able to improve her skiing. On the contrary, it would only increase the risk of her taking a fall.

"If you get seriously hurt and cause a scene, that means my ski trip's gettin' canceled. You gonna take responsibility for that?" To my ear, Ryuuen's emphasis on his own skiing sounded like a mixture of typical Ryuuen selfishness and awkward kindness on his part.

"No, I..." Yamamura seemed unable to respond, like it was an issue that wasn't simply a matter of feeling.

"So, where are your gloves?" he repeated.

"...I forgot them," she replied.

"Pft, I can't believe someone could be this stupid," huffed Ryuuen.

It was true that not many people would forget to bring gloves in this cold weather. Ryuuen, snickering, looked down at his own gloves. *He couldn't possibly be planning to lend her his own gloves, could—*

"Hey, Ayanokouji. Lend her your gloves," he snapped.

"...Me?"

He hadn't shown that much development in the kindness department after all, instead throwing everything onto me.

"Even though I'm a beginner at skiing too?" I asked.

"Ain't gonna be a problem if *you* get hurt," Ryuuen replied.

I had no idea what kind of logic he was using there, but... Well, the store that sold gloves in the area didn't appear to be open yet, unfortunately. In that case, I supposed I had no other choice but to let Yamamura borrow my gloves. There might be specialized gloves available in the ski resort, but even so, I was

sure getting just ten to fifteen minutes' worth of extra warmth now would make a difference.

"I-it's all right. I'm fine," said Yamamura, distancing herself from us, and already exhaling into her hands.

"You really should stop protesting and take them," I told her. "The cold causes vasoconstriction—your blood vessels are constricting. Your body is shaking because of a reaction in your muscles, which are trying to raise your body temperature. It might be dangerous for you to go skiing in your condition. Wouldn't it be most frustrating for you if things turned out exactly like Ryuuuen said they would?"

"Well..." she trailed off.

I took my gloves off and practically shoved them into her arms.

"But...what about you, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

"I'll be fine," I said. "More importantly, don't do anything rash, so you won't injure yourself when you go skiing."

It wasn't like I had a special tolerance for the cold or anything, but like Ryuuuen had implied earlier, if you handled yourself well, then there shouldn't be any problems.

"...I'm sorry..." Yamamura, though sounding very obliged and sorry for the trouble, put my large gloves on, her hands trembling slightly. Then, she thrust her hands back inside her coat pockets. They'd likely still be cold for a while, but they'd start feeling better after a few minutes.

"Go and buy a new pair of gloves in your size later," I added.

"I will. Um, please allow me to compensate you for the gloves, Ayanokouji-kun, when we arrive at the ski resort," said Yamamura.

"Compensate?" I asked.

"I'm wearing them now, so...I'll feel bad when I return them to you. I'll dirty them."

"I'm sure they won't get that dirty," I said. "Don't worry about falling and messing them up or anything; you can just return

them however they are, that's fine."

"That's not what I'm saying. Me wearing them has made them dirty, so..."

Was she a clean freak or something? Was that how she thought? Wait, but no, Yamamura had still accepted the gloves without fighting it, albeit with some reservations. I didn't quite understand her way of thinking here.

"I'd like for you to let me compensate you," she insisted.

I couldn't imagine that she would just openly choose some cheap pair and give me those when it came time to reimburse me for the gloves. That would force her into a great expense for something that didn't require reimbursement.

"It'd just be a waste of Private Points," I said. "There's no need for something like that."

"Won't you feel disgusted?"

I really didn't understand what she was saying. Why would I feel disgusted by Yamamura having worn my gloves? I was sure I'd feel the same way no matter who wore them.

"It's all right. I'd feel more uncomfortable with making a big fuss over this and having you pay me back for it." I stated my feelings somewhat firmly, expressing my bewilderment.

"Th-then please allow me to at least express my thanks in another way."

I didn't think that thanks were necessary, but maybe something had to be done for Yamamura to feel better about this. If she was going to be this insistent about it, then maybe I should provide her with an option that was acceptable to her.

"Could I ask you one question to let you express your thanks?" I asked.

"...Yes?"

"Was there any reason why you weren't wearing your gloves this morning while we were waiting for the bus?"

"I just forgot."

I understood that it wasn't like she was going around without gloves on purpose.

"But you had plenty of time to go back and get them," I pointed out. "Or did that slip your mind too?"

I was curious about that point as well, so I thought I'd take this one step further and ask her about it.

"...I had that kind of feeling, I guess..." she answered.

"Feeling?"

"Like a feeling that it'd be difficult to get back."

It was true that there'd been a huge crowd of students jamming the lobby, but it was difficult to say whether it would've really seemed all that difficult to get through them. Well, no, that was just my perspective; I needed to consider that how I felt about it would be different from the way Yamamura felt. Although we had only talked for a few minutes, I was able to see a little bit about the student known as Yamamura. It also made me more interested in her.

"Who do you usually hang out with, Yamamura?" I asked.

What kinds of students did a person like her have as friends? Did she make friends like herself, who were the quiet type? Or was she a part of a popular student's social circle, like how Kushida was welcoming of anyone? Or was she the type of person who pulled away from others altogether?

Yamamura, however, didn't answer my question immediately. Her facial expression didn't change very much, but her eyes narrowed slightly, and she looked away, like she was feeling a little uncomfortable.

"No one in particular," she replied. "I generally spend all my time alone."

"Alone?" I repeated. "I didn't get the impression that people in Class A would just neglect someone and leave them all by themselves."

"It's because I don't have much presence... They don't even notice that I'm by myself. It's an everyday thing, so I'm not

particularly bothered."

It was true that some people just didn't have much presence. If I had to classify myself, I would have to say that I was that same type of person, too. Comparing Yamamura and me, though, chances were high that we had completely different dispositions. Now that I thought about it, if Kushida had noticed Yamamura was so cold, there was no way she could have ignored it. But Yamamura's almost shadowlike presence seemed to have dulled the sensitivity of even someone like Kushida, who was always concerned with other people's reactions.

Well, truthfully, since she was so lacking in presence, I didn't think anyone would have even noticed if she had gone back inside to get her gloves before. *Her lack of presence, hm?* If I analyzed that objectively, I could also see some of her true nature.

"Yamamura, do you like yourself?" I asked.

"Oh, of course not. That's absolutely unthinkable." She answered honestly, perhaps out of weakness at having had to borrow gloves from me.

So, the thing she wanted to hide most was herself, and that was one of the reasons why she shied away so much. If you didn't want to show yourself, if you didn't want to be noticed, then inevitably, you would tailor your behavior to avoid drawing attention to yourself. Even in discussions, she would hide behind someone, so as not to let others acknowledge her. It was like wearing black clothes in the middle of the night; of course you wouldn't stand out.

She also didn't move around unnecessarily, so it was rare for a movement she'd made to catch someone's eye. As a result, her presence had become as scant as possible. Furthermore, based on what I'd seen, Yamamura seemed to be twice as wary of others as most people. In other words, she was afraid of other people, and refrained from asserting herself as much as possible.

I was beginning to see that this combination of factors had resulted in the creation of the student known as Yamamura, who was lacking in presence and difficult to stay aware of.

The problem, though, was that even if I could understand the cause, there was nothing I could do to immediately solve the problem. If someone like me, who didn't normally interact with Yamamura, said something about it, all I'd achieve would be making her even more wary than she already was. It would be easier to say something if there was someone she was close to, whom she could trust.

Ultimately, my conversation with Yamamura ended there, and we both fell silent.

About ten minutes later, just before the slopes opened, everyone had returned.

"So, how are we going to divide ourselves?" Kushida said. "We don't necessarily all have to ski together as one big group, right?"

Even though it was mandatory that we acted as a group, that didn't necessarily mean that we had to do every single little thing together as one. With a group comprised of experienced skiers and beginners, it would be difficult or even regrettable if we were to make everyone conform one way or the other when we went skiing. What was important was balance; whether the people around us could judge it as reasonable when they saw it. We would probably need to consider splitting up the group into teams, starting with the least skilled of the eight of us.

"Yamamura and I are set for the beginner course, so what should we do? The two of us could ski together," suggested Watanabe.

There was a gentle course for beginners at the bottom of the ski slopes, so it was a given that that the group would let Yamamura and Watanabe go there. Yamamura immediately agreed to Watanabe's offer.

"I think it would be a good idea if someone who knows how to ski well tags along with you and Yamamura-san, though," Kushida said. "If you don't mind, I could—"

"Oh, it's all right, Kushida-san," Nishino cut in. "I'm a beginner, so I'll do it."

"Oh? Are you sure?" asked Kushida.

"Yeah, it's okay, you can go ahead and ski without worrying about it. I know how to ski, but the advanced course is a little scary for me."

Perhaps Amikura had planned on doing the same thing from the start, because she chimed in right after Nishino. "I'm not confident enough to tackle the advanced course myself either...so I think I'll join you, too."

And so, as it turned out, we split into two groups of four, and agreed to ski on separate courses.

"Well, if you do want to go skiing on the intermediate or advanced courses, feel free to let me know anytime," Kushida said, just in case Nishino or Amikura were purposefully holding themselves back to go on the beginner course. "I'll be happy to help."

"Also, lunch is at noon," Watanabe added. "So, let's all meet back up at the food court at that time."

We moved as a group toward the entrance to the slopes. I thought I heard an unfamiliar sound, almost like the sound of a horse galloping, and just then a horse indeed galloped by us, dashing quickly through the snow. While I was wondering what was going on, I realized that Kouenji was the one riding the horse. The students from the other classes appeared genuinely shocked, and even Kitou seemed somewhat taken aback. From the perspective of students who hadn't been around Kouenji for long, this was an understandable reaction.

"Excuse me, sir—! That's not the course—!"

In the wake of Kouenji's hoofbeats, several panicked staff members were shouting from a distance, attempting to give chase.

"What the hell...?" Nishino gaped.

"That's incredible..." murmured Yamamura.

The two of them simply stared at Kouenji, stunned, as he got smaller and smaller, becoming a tiny speck in the distance.

"Funnily enough, even though I've never seen anything like that before, I don't feel that surprised," mused Kushida, quietly enough so that only I could hear it.

"I guess that's because, as his classmates, we've gotten used to seeing Kouenji's bizarre behavior..."

Strangely, I felt like it wasn't that odd for things like that to happen now, knowing Kouenji. If I were to put it bluntly, I was used to it.

4.3

WE BRIEFLY SPLIT UP so that we could get changed. Once we had finished getting ready, we gathered at the meeting place. Kushida, Ryuuen, Kitou, and I went over to the front of the lift. Since two people could ride per lift carriage, we decided that it would be me with Ryuuen, and Kushida with Kitou. We'd determined that that combination would make it the most difficult for anyone to fight. Just to be on the safe side, I let Kushida and Kitou go first and then let a few other pairs on after them. That way, Kitou and Ryuuen couldn't glare at each other during the ride.

"Can't you try and get along with Kitou a little better?" I asked Ryuuen.

"That's an impossible ask, my guy," he replied, looking out at the snow-covered mountains. "Now if it was Kitou who was askin', that'd be a different story."

"So, there's not much hope there, huh?" I sighed. "In that case, I guess there's nothing we can do about it. But really, this might be a good chance, you know. Kitou seems to hold some degree of trust from Sakayanagi, from the looks of things. I would've thought that someone like you would see this as an opportunity to get Kitou in your pocket. Depending on how things play out, you might even be able to make him into an ally."

Ryuuen, sitting beside me on the lift, seemed to think that this school trip was mainly about gathering information, and he certainly wasn't wrong on that point. In fact, I could tell that Sakayanagi was doing something similar.

"Kitou might not even fully look like a human bein' on the outside, but the guy's definitely got a lot of loyalty," Ryuuen replied. "Anyway, don't you think Sakayanagi was already on alert from the moment that Kitou got put in the same group as me? If I started tryin' to negotiate without thinkin', I'd just be shootin' myself in the dick."

"That's rather realistic."

Ryuuен had little contact with Kitou up until this point, and he still didn't know very much about him. However, judging from how thoroughly he seemed to dislike Ryuuен, I had a good sense of his willingness to protect Class A together with Sakayanagi. I hadn't heard about any problematic behavior from him, either. If Ryuuен carelessly attempted to negotiate with him and bring him over to his side, it would be like asking for information to be leaked.

"Besides, the only talent I needed from Class A was Katsuragi," Ryuuен added. "Kitou and Hashimoto are good enough as her little dogs, but they ain't good enough to be my pawns. It ain't worth the risk of tryin' to nab 'em."

So, that was the reason Ryuuен didn't act friendly toward Kitou, and instead continued to antagonize him. While Ryuuен did appreciate what Kitou and the other Class A students were capable of, he seemed to see Katsuragi as the only one who stood out.

Just then, the lift carriage arrived at its destination, and we got off at the advanced course. Kitou, who was waiting there already, called Ryuuен over to the starting point with nothing but a glance.

First, we'd take our time and enjoy the... Oh, who was I kidding? We weren't going to follow such a laid-back plan of action.

"Hey, give us the signal," barked Ryuuен to Kushida, ordering her to count them down.

"Be careful as you go down the slopes, you two," she said.

Kushida raised her hand and began the starting countdown. Ryuuен and Kitou placed themselves a few meters apart from one another and got in position, ready to start skiing. I wondered who the winner of this competition would be.

"...Start!" shouted Kushida.

The instant that she lowered her hand, the two of them took off at almost the exact same time, getting off to a good start.

"Let's follow after them," I said.

"Huh?" said Kushida. "Will you be okay with that, though? Actually, I'm not sure that I can catch them myself..."

"In that case, let's just go after them slowly."

And with that, Kushida and I started heading down the slope, just a few seconds after Ryuuuen and Kitou. The two of them were in a dead heat as they rocketed down the course, with one taking the lead and then the other, back and forth. They flew down the slope at incredible speed, drawing beautiful arcs to the right and left. My own technique, which was still incomplete as of yesterday, was now beginning to improve thanks to the examples I had in front of me right now. Here, on the longer advanced course, I could deepen my knowledge and study more carefully.

The battle between Ryuuuen and Kitou was almost completely even. I'd expected that one of them would pull ahead right away, but they were pretty much neck and neck. As far as I could tell, there didn't seem to be much difference between them in technique, and their competitive spirits were about equal in intensity. Even after they passed the halfway mark, there was still no sign of either one seizing a decisive victory. As the racers finally reached the endgame of their competition, the two gradually got closer and closer together, no longer keeping a wide space between them.

Things were about to take a turn for the worse. The two skiers were now so close that they were at risk of colliding into each other due to their positions overlapping. That wasn't an accident, for either of them. This was a dangerous sign; either of them would try to win even if it meant tackling their opponent and trying to make them tumble down the slope. Copying both of their moves, I accelerated while absorbing almost all their techniques.

"Die, Kitou!"

"To hell with you, Ryuuuen!"

I thought I sensed some voices, after a delay. Just a second before I heard their voices, though, I forced myself into the small gap between Ryuuuen and Kitou. The sudden intrusion of a third party caused the two of them to hurriedly swerve to the left and right. Although both were glaring at me, I had succeeded in

forcing them to keep their distance from each other. After I finished skiing down the advanced course, Ryuuuen and Kitou came to a stop slightly afterward. They immediately turned around and walked up to me.

Kitou approached me with such intensity that it felt like he was going to grab me. "Why did you get in the way?" he demanded angrily.

"Because I judged that it was dangerous," I replied. "You two were getting overzealous and trying to win through methods other than skiing."

"No matter what form it takes, a competition is still a competition," said Kitou. "Ryuuuen understands that, too."

"Whether your opponent understands that or not is irrelevant. You couldn't call what you were doing a skiing competition."

Kitou muttered some words of dissatisfaction, glaring at Ryuuuen, before skiing away. He seemed to feel that the mood wasn't right to ask for one more round. Around that same time, Kushida also came down the slope, arriving where I had stopped.

"Wow, the three of you are just way too fast," she said. "Or, rather, Ayanokouji-kun, what you did was totally out of the ordinary...!"

Ryuuuen, a disgruntled look on his face, trudged through the snow and pressed up to me. "Hey, are you really a beginner, asshole? Or were you just pretendin'?"

"Pretending?" I repeated. "No, yesterday was my first time going skiing."

Ryuuuen must not have believed me, because he spat on the ground and then headed toward the lift, alone. Well, at least we'd have some peace of mind for the time being. Probably.

"It's kind of understandable that he's angry, I think," said Kushida. "Your skiing was incredible. You were kind of like the protagonist straight out of a manga, who has the sort of talent to do everything perfectly without even trying. I know Ryuuuen already asked, but was this really only your second time skiing?"

Unfortunately, I was no such manga protagonist. Over the course of my life thus far, I had accumulated countless experiences in my body. Even though skiing specifically was new to me, sports in general were connected by broad strokes. I just linked those points together and skied using the information that I had gained, both verbally and visually.

"You can't believe it's only my second time?" I asked.

"No, it's not like that. I do believe you. But I might not have, if I hadn't seen the way you moved to grab Amasawa that one time."

So, she was saying that she believed because back then, even if it had only been for an instant, I'd shown her a fight between White Room students. Did the doubts and apprehension she'd had then in turn make my improvement at skiing seem more believable?

"You're amazing." She complimented me once again, but I didn't feel ready to accept it honestly.

"Nah, not really."

"This again, huh?"

She must have thought I was just being humble, but I couldn't help it. Anyway, the fact was that Ryuuen and Kushida were advanced skiers, and so, in this field, they were true role models for me. They likely hadn't accumulated as many experiences as I had, either. Looking at it that way, they had more of a knack for this than I did.

"How about we head over to the lift, too?" I suggested.
"There's no more trouble here, and I want to enjoy skiing."

"Sure, let's," Kushida agreed. "Honestly, though, this might be a challenging time for the people who can't ski."

You could say that for any activity, generally. It would be nice if everyone could have fun, even if they were bad at it, but that wasn't how things worked. Whether video games or sports or whatever, people who aren't good at an activity oftentimes don't enjoy it.

4.4

AT NOON, all of us in group six gathered at the food court attached to the ski resort. We each ordered what we wanted, and then went to our seats. I was given a pager marked 32 and was told that it would ring once my order was ready; that was my signal to come get it.

"How did things go for you and the others, Watanabe-kun?" asked Kushida. "Did you improve your skiing?"

Having spent all day on the advanced course, she'd had no chance to see how things went for those four on the beginner course, so she was asking about the fruits of their labors.

"I think I can ski okay now, I'd say," Watanabe replied. "Not as good as Nishino or Amikura yet, though."

It was a humble reply, but I could see some self-confidence poking through, even if only a little. Yamamura, on the other hand, whose name was not mentioned, wore a dark expression and seemed lacking in spirit... So, the same as usual.

Watanabe leaned over to whisper just to me. "As for Yamamura, well... She's not there yet."

She hadn't improved, then. The person in question was giving off strong "don't talk to me" vibes, so I decided against saying anything to her. My pager started beeping, so I went and got my food. My piping hot curry soup with rice was placed on a tray, and I brought it to the table. Then, once the eight of us all had our meals, we started eating our lunch.

Ryuuuen, who had ordered a smaller meal, just a hamburger, was the first to finish eating. He thrust the wrapper and tray at Watanabe. Watanabe forced a smile and then loaded Ryuuuen's empty trap on top of his own.

"Lemme talk to you in private for a minute, Ayanokouji," Ryuuuen said.

"Um... But I'm still in the middle of eating." I had about a third of my curry soup with rice left. By the time I was finished with whatever Ryuuen wanted, my food would have gone cold.

"Hurry it up," snapped Ryuuen.

Watanabe gave me a pitying look, bidding me farewell without a word. As for Kitou, he... Well, he hadn't been looking at me in the first place.

"I'll be stepping away from my seat for a minute," I announced.

"Okay. We'll keep eating and wait for you to get back," said Kushida.

I left Kushida to handle things there, and I walked through the food court with Ryuuen. We finally stopped somewhere around the edge of the food court, and he took out his cell phone. He unlocked his phone with a touch of his finger, and he stared at the screen for a while.

"I knew it," he said. "Just like I thought, that bitch Sakayanagi is usin' her minions as spies."

It looked like he'd gotten a report from a classmate that had confirmed his suspicions.

"Just like you, huh?" I replied. I wasn't asking Ryuuen straight out, but I figured that he had been giving his people the same sort of instructions.

"Well, yeah. This school trip ain't for makin' friends. What's important here is me rippin' the arms and legs off first, so I can crush the head. And it sounds like Sakayanagi knows that too."

Neither Sakayanagi nor Ryuuen could fight a class battle all on their own. So, how did you beat your opponents in a team competition where your class acted together as a unit? Improving your allies' abilities was important, but it was also important to reduce your opponents' strength.

Sakayanagi had particularly bad legs, so her normal range of motion was extremely limited. She generally compensated for that through Kamuro and Hashimoto. If Ryuuen was able to get a hold of their weaknesses, and held something over Kamuro and

Hashimoto that would make them submit to him, Sakayanagi lost her valuable legs. Her information-gathering abilities would be dramatically reduced.

"Okay, so let's hear the reason you deliberately called me over like this," I said. "It wasn't just to give me an update on this reconnaissance contest you and Sakayanagi have going on, was it?"

"Starting now, I'm gonna be issuing orders to the rest of my class to start preppin' for all-out war against Sakayanagi," he said. "Whether we're doing a written test or whatever for the end-of-year exam, I'm gonna crush her by any means necessary."

"You said something similar back on the bus. About how the fight's already begun."

"Yeah. But before I make my move, there's somethin' I gotta double-check with you first."

Just as Ryuuuen said that, my phone vibrated. I told him to hold on a minute, and then I looked down at my phone. I had gotten a short message from Kushida.

"Yamamura-san is heading your way."

Was she heading over here to see how I was doing because she was worried about me, since I had been called out by Ryuuuen? In all likelihood, Yamamura was acting on orders from Sakayanagi. It was possible that she would eavesdrop on my conversation with Ryuuuen once she was nearby, but I decided to keep that information from Ryuuuen. After all, that was yet another part of the battle between Sakayanagi and Ryuuuen. If I did anything to help Ryuuuen here, that would be to Sakayanagi's disadvantage.

It seemed as if Ryuuuen had gotten another message from someone himself, though, because he looked down at his phone. Then he put it back in his pocket, his expression unchanging, and began speaking once more.

"I'm sure you remember what I said a year ago, about me getting eight hundred million points," he said.

"I still don't think that's feasible, even now," I replied.

"Yeah. I'm sure the rest of my class would react pretty much the same way, if they found out."

"What are you trying to say?"

Ibuki was probably the only person in his class who knew about Ryuu'en's strategy to accumulate eight hundred million points. And Ibuki had probably only learned about it by chance, and didn't actually know the specifics.

"We're talking about a shitload of money here. It's way more than I could hope to get if I was doin' it in absolute secret. I've only got about a year left at this school, and it's gettin' a little late for me to make a move."

It was certainly true that the cooperation of his classmates would be essential if he was serious about raising the viability of that strategy. Just like Ichinose had gradually pooled Private Points from her classmates bit by bit, with their trust, Ryuu'en also needed to work with his classmates if he was going to reach that target.

"When you say that you want to double-check something, are you asking me if I'll help you with getting to eight hundred million points?" I asked.

"You realize I've been showin' your class a whole lotta kindness, in my own way, right? For a while now, too, like with the Sports Festival and the Cultural Festival. And I'm even takin' Sakayanagi on in the final exam. I got that all taken care of for you. You ain't dissatisfied with that, are ya?"

Indeed, since we had that discussion with Ryuu'en last year, Horikita's class had been able to move about so freely that they had almost forgotten that Ryuu'en was even here. If Ryuu'en had remained as belligerent as he had been in our first year, things would not have gone as smoothly.

"And you sure seem to be gettin' along good with Kushida, huh?" Ryuu'en added. "Even though you were so enthusiastic about gettin' her expelled."

"Sorry," I said simply. "Sometimes you have to change your policies."

Perhaps Ryuuuen really liked what I'd said, or maybe it just resonated with him, because he laughed and clapped several times.

"If I wanted to, I could destroy Kushida, no problem," he said. "You know that, right?"

Ryuuuen was one of the few students outside of our class who knew the truth about Kushida. He could have done something anytime, but he didn't, which was likely the result of that promise.

"So, you're asking me to fulfill that promise," I said. "And you're going as far as using threats. Aren't you being pushy?"

"I don't give a damn if I'm bein' pushy. So, are you gonna do it? Or not?"

We had only made a verbal agreement back then, but Ryuuuen was making it clear that he'd show me no mercy if I violated it.

"Before I give you my answer on that, let me ask you, what happens after you defeat Sakayanagi?" I inquired.

"Isn't it obvious? After I defeat Class A in the finals, it'll be a one-on-one battle with my class against yours. The way I see it, it's all part of the story I got laid out, leading up to where I beat you."

So, that's what he was thinking, huh? Looking at everything so far, though, I didn't really have any doubts.

"This sounds a little too convenient," I said. "You stepped off the stage once before—you were supposed to have taken on the role of laying the groundwork for Kaneda and Hiyori. But now, you're back at center stage. The point is, if you wanted me to fulfill my promise to you, you were supposed to back off. If we get to a situation where we become Class A and you become Class B, Ryuuuen, then I'd be inevitably handing the win over to you if I helped you. Wouldn't I?"

Only then could we create a situation where we could talk about working together toward the eight hundred million points.

"You don't like it?" said Ryuuuen.

"Obviously not. If your class and Horikita's class seriously do clash, and as a result you win and move up to Class A, then we'll be the only ones to look like fools. Or are you saying that you promise to bring the students from Horikita's class into Class A if your eight hundred million points plan works?"

Ryuuuen's smile vanished and he shot me a sharp side-eyed look. "Absolutely not. The extra Private Points belong to me and my people, obviously."

Those points were currency that could live on even after graduation as money, so he had no intention of using them for saving students he had no business with.

"So, if you lose, we bail you out, and if you win, you abandon us... Hm," I said. "Yeah, that's a proposition I don't need to bother considering. Therefore, I can't cooperate with you on the plan to save up eight hundred million. However, you are free to attack whatever class you want from this point onward; I have no right to stop you."

"Heh. Guess you ain't such a naïve moron after all, eh, Ayanokouji?"

"It's because this issue doesn't affect me alone."

"Suppose I can't argue with ya on that, then. Just have to pretend that conversation never happened and drop it."

He had backed off much more easily than I expected. He seemed to have already known that I'd turn him down.

"Even though our negotiations have broken down, do you still plan on saving up the eight hundred million points?" I asked.

"I'm not plannin' to change my strategy at this point in the game," he replied. "My main goal is to save up the eight hundred million. After that, I'll defeat both you and Sakayanagi. And if I don't spend any of it and get to Class A, I can graduate with tons of cash. Ain't that right?"

His plan, which could only be described as a pipe dream even in the best of circumstances, had now been replaced by another ideal scenario. All the same, Ryuuuen boldly proclaimed

that from here on out, he was going to try and accumulate eight hundred million points.

"I've been throwin' money around so far, pullin' Katsuragi out of his class and into mine, and usin' those first-years, but now's the time I start collectin'. I'm switchin' things up to a strict Private Point system."

If he was that eager to collect Private Points, there was going to be some risk involved. Ryuu'en's irregular, incoherent thoughts and behavior here were casting a strange shadow over my own thoughts.

"Don't give me that look, like you're so surprised that I let you get away without fulfillin' your promise to me, without even pushin' for a compromise."

"Well, yeah, of course I'm surprised. I'm not seeing the true nature of this conversation," I replied.

"It's simple. It's just that you breakin' our contract was a foregone conclusion. I can't crush you if I'm still partially connected to you. But if you break things off like this, well, that's a different story. Now I can thoroughly wreck you."

So, in other words, he was choosing a resurrected obsession with victory against me over aligning our mutual interests. He'd said something similar on the bus before; once again, he was declaring war. Even so, I wasn't completely convinced. There was some kind of agenda in this story, though I likely wasn't going to get an answer even if I pressed him on it here and now.

"It's fine to look ahead to the future," I told him, "but you'll have to beat Sakayanagi first before thinking about a rematch with me."

"Ha. I know that chick is clever, but that's all she is," Ryuu'en scoffed. Clearly, he had absolute confidence in the final exam's battle.

Ryuu'en, you were defeated, and then you were resurrected. I'll also admit that your talents have surpassed my expectations.

It was true that the success story of Ryuu'en Kakeru remained steadily on track.

However...

Whether or not he could overcome the barriers at the very end was another matter. I had wondered if this discrepancy, his failure to recognize obstacles as obstacles, might eventually have an effect in the arena of battle. Of course, those omens and signs would change again, depending on how Sakayanagi perceived Ryuuuen.

"You head on back first, Ayanokouji," ordered Ryuuuen, and with that, he walked toward the restrooms.

Hiyori, who had been watching us from a seat somewhat far away, noticed me and waved. Apparently her group had also come to ski. I gently raised my hand in response, and then returned to my group's table. Yamamura had already returned as well, and she was silently fiddling on her phone with a blank, nonchalant look on her face.

"Where's Ryuuuen?" asked Watanabe.

"Seems like he'll be coming back after stopping by the bathroom," I replied.

"...Are you okay?" Watanabe worriedly looked me over, examining my body carefully.

"He didn't smack you or anything, did he?"

"Don't worry. We just talked a little, is all," I assured him.

"I sure hope that was all..." said Watanabe.

Yamamura had finished her meal after slowly picking at it here and there; she and Nishino both grabbed their trays.

"I'll...go put my tray away," announced Yamamura.

She and Nishino had ordered food from the same place, so they were apparently heading back there together.

Kitou gave me a penetrating look. "Ayanokouji, if Ryuuuen has something over you, don't hesitate to talk to me about it."

Perhaps he felt like Watanabe's way of addressing the matter was too lax. I kind of wished he could have said that before Ryuuuen had called me away, though, if at all possible. When

Ryuuuen returned shortly after, Kitou turned his gaze away from me to look at him.

"You've run away from me and decided to intimidate people from other classes now?" he said.

"What?" said Ryuuuen. "Heh heh, don't worry, Kitou. I'm gonna bring you Class A bastards down, just you wait. Sakayanagi ain't nothin' more than a steppin' stone for me. I'll show you."

"You can never defeat Class A," huffed Kitou.

"Heh. I wonder about that."

Ryuuuen appeared calm—or perhaps it was better to say that he was putting on a show to appear calm and confident. He might have sincerely believed he was going to win, but there was no actual evidence to back that up. Of course, it was possible he had some information that I didn't, but in a simple comparison of their abilities, Sakayanagi was a cut above Ryuuuen.

"It doesn't have to be the final exam," Kitou said. "Come at us anytime."

"Kitou, you son of a bitch, you ain't got that kinda authority," snorted Ryuuuen. "All you got goin' for you is that you're a loyal dog. You'll be causin' trouble for your master if you make careless remarks like that, y'know?"

At being called a dog, Kitou placed his large palms on the table and stood up. "I alone am more than enough to defeat you."

"Oh? So, what, you're sayin' you wanna go for round three?"

Their pillow fight had resulted in my pillow getting damaged. And thanks to me interfering on the slopes before, they hadn't been able to settle things by skiing.

"Come on, you two, get along," Kushida cut in. "There are already rumors floating around that our group is pretty dangerous."

Even some members of the general public in the vicinity had begun watching the standoff between Ryuuuen and Kitou with curiosity. If they continued to be so showy, I supposed it was only a matter of time before the teachers heard about it.

"Come to think of it, aren't Nishino-san and Yamamura-san taking a while?" said Kushida.

"Now that you mention it, yeah," I replied.

All they were doing was returning their trays; it shouldn't have taken them more than a minute. But there was no sign of them. Kushida looked around for them.

"Oh, there they are," she said. "But it looks like they're talking with some boys I don't know."

Kushida pointed toward Nishino and Yamamura across the crowded food court. They were surrounded by five guys who, judging from their age, appeared to be students. And they had a threatening air about them.

"Hey now, what's this?" Ryuuuen said. "Looks like Nishino is in trouble. Let's go help her."

"It'd be better not to do anything when there's a large crowd of people around," I told him. "If you recklessly start a fight, there'll be trouble."

In spite of my warning, Ryuuuen and Kitou had already gotten up from their seats. Those two, who would never listen to anything resembling caution in the first place, headed over to where Nishino and Yamamura were standing. They didn't even bother to communicate their intent to each other.

"Kushida, you and the others wait here." I instructed her, Amikura, and Watanabe to stay put.

As I caught up to Ryuuuen and Kitou, who had rushed off to Nishino and Yamamura with strong, fast footfalls, I could overhear the conversation at the scene.

"You're not gonna apologize for bumpin' into my shoulder?" said one of the guys. "You got ramen broth all over my clothes."

Apparently, it wasn't Nishino who had started the trouble here. Instead, it began with Yamamura, who had bumped into these guys.

"Aren't *you* guys the ones at fault here, for not even noticing Yamamura-san standing there while you were walking?" replied

Nishino.

The guys just laughed unkindly in response, mockingly touching their shoulders as if Yamamura had hurt them.

"Nah, I mean, she's practically a ghost," another guy said, "so of course we couldn't see her. Right?"

"...I am really...sorry." said Yamamura, in a tiny voice.

Most likely, she hadn't apologized just once or twice. But the guys carried on, acting as though they hadn't heard her.

"Hey, we're here on a school trip from Gifu," one of them said. "Let's hang out. We'll forgive you if you hang out with us."

Nishino was standing in front of Yamamura to protect her, blocking their way. But then one of the guys forcefully grabbed hold of her arm.

"Huh? You've got to be joking," she said. "Who'd wanna hang out with people like you?"

She shook her arm free from her attacker's grasp, swinging wide, and ended up lightly slapping one guy's cheek.

"That hurt."

The guys had been smirking and chuckling crudely throughout this whole conversation so far, but now, the looks on their faces had suddenly changed. Immediately afterward, one of the five flew forward with great force.

"Wh-what the hell, dude?!" exclaimed one of the others.

"You took the words right outta my mouth, moron," said Ryuuuen. "What business do you got with my people?"

It was none other than Ryuuuen who had driven his foot straight into that guy's back in spectacular fashion. He quickly grabbed hold of another one by the collar.

"Don't squawk in front of women like some stupid little bird," he said.



"Wh—? We'll kill you!" one of them shouted.

"Go ahead and try," Ryuuен sneered. "Hey, if you want, I'll let you get one shot in. How about it? You want a souvenir from your school trip, don'tcha?"

Then, Ryuuен presented his own left cheek, tapping it lightly with his finger—*tap tap*—as though he were offering it up.

"Heh! In that case, don't mind if I do!" shouted the guy he'd provoked. "I'll sure as shit take a swing at you!"

He drew his arm back, swinging wide.

"Oh, that's—"

Don't think that Ryuuен will actually let you punch him, I thought to myself. But I couldn't give him that advice in time. Ryuuен watched his opponent's grand, but ultimately futile, wind up—then grabbed hold of him by the shoulders and drove his knee straight into his stomach with furious intensity. The student from the other school doubled over, rolling on the ground in agony.

"Heh. Looks like some slightly interestin' stuff can happen even on boring school trips like this," Ryuuен said.

He'd started to find enjoyment in an inevitable situation. To think, I'd encountered people from another school for the first time in my life, and it ended up turning into a disturbing display of violence.

One of the guys balled his hands into fists, taking swings with his left and right. There was no way that this was going to be a one-on-one fight. It looked like they were hoping to win by outnumbering their opponent. But just then, Kitou slowly stepped in. The guys from the other school were clearly panicked and flustered by Kitou's face and intimidating presence, which made it hard to imagine he was a high schooler.

"It looks like...he's going to help us," said Nishino quietly. She'd walked over to me, still holding onto Yamamura's shoulders, protecting her.

"Kitou is Yamamura's classmate," I replied. "It's only natural that he wouldn't be able to just stand by quietly if he saw she was

in trouble."

Fortunately, both sides seemed to understand that further fighting inside the food court wasn't a good idea, so Ryuuen and the others all walked outside, single file.

"Should we call an adult?" asked Nishino.

"Nah. Now that they've gotten to this point, there's no stopping it. It's best to just get them out of the public eye and go at it."

From what I saw, the other side had superior numbers, but none of them looked like that much of a threat. If Ryuuen and Kitou teamed up and fought together, it shouldn't take them much time to clean up.

About ten minutes later, Ryuuen and Kitou had returned. And they brought their defeated opponents with them. Then, they made them get down on their knees in front of Yamamura and Nishino and beg their forgiveness.

From the looks of things, they had thoroughly beaten their opponents until they broke their rebellious spirits... Well, if you looked at it that way, then it was a problem, but maybe it was necessary, for Yamamura and Nishino's sake. The students from the other school were made to promise to never show themselves to Yamamura and Nishino again, and then they scattered.

"It's definitely not a boring group," said Kushida, in a whisper. Hearing her impression, I could only agree.

4.5

AFTER SKIING FOR AS LONG as time permitted, we returned to the ryokan just before seven o'clock in the evening. I hadn't had my fill of skiing yet, but perhaps it was better to leave things there, with some reluctance to part from the activity. Our second day was nearing its end, and time continued to march steadily on through the evening. Sudou had invited me out during dinner, so we headed over to the baths together afterward and, after washing up, were enjoying a soak in the hot spring.

"Whoo! Man, this hits the spot!" exclaimed Sudou.

The hot bath might've been especially effective for Sudou, who worked up a sweat just about every day at basketball. Using both hands, I repeatedly scooped up the hot water and splashed my face, feeling my fatigue melt away. After we'd spent some time just lazing about in the pool, Hashimoto from Class A arrived and got in next to me.

"'Sup?" he said.

I responded with a gentle wave of my hand, and Sudou did the same.

Hashimoto looked thoroughly exhausted, rolling his shoulders and letting out a deep sigh.

"Man... I am completely, totally beat after today."

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"If only it were 'something,'" he replied. "It's more like I'm rackin' my brains over what to do about one specific problem in my group."

I hadn't said anything out loud, but I had been very curious about Hashimoto's group from the start.

"Because Kouenji's in your group, you mean?" I said.

"Exactly. You know how it's like, in our free time, we're supposed to be together as a group? Well, if this was a sane person we were talking about, we'd be having discussions as a

group, right? But we're basically being forced to go along with him to every place he wants to go."

Kouenji obviously wasn't the type of person to obediently follow along with what other people wanted, and it sounded like that hadn't changed even when he was together with a group comprised of students from all the classes.

"It looked like your group was at a ranch today, so you could experience horseback riding," I said. "I'm guessing that's what Kouenji wanted, then."

"Wait. How do you know that? Oh, hang on... Yeah, you saw *that* happen, so I guess it's not surprising that you know." Looking like he was at his wits' end, Hashimoto submerged half of his face in the water.

"I just saw him gallop past," I said. "Did he actually come back after that, like he was supposed to?"

Hashimoto stayed submerged for about ten seconds; then he shrugged his shoulders and surfaced.

"After about an hour or so, yeah," he said. "The rest of us didn't have the mental and emotional capacity to handle horseback riding, so we just stood around, waiting."

Hearing about how Hashimoto's group had spent their free time, it sounded like they had suffered through hellish experiences one after another since this trip had started. Sudou brought his hands together in prayer, offering his condolences.

"So, I was trying to put together plans to have lunch at this famous place that I happened to see on TV, at least," Hashimoto said, "but Kouenji seriously had the nerve to just say, 'I'm going skiing' and take off. That selfish jerk just up and left before we could even argue. Now I'm so completely exhausted that I don't even have the energy to have fun anymore. And that is how our second day has come to an end."

If the group had ignored Kouenji and gone ahead to have lunch at that famous restaurant, or anything else, then they would've been in violation of the rules. What an incredibly tragic story.

"You guys are his classmates," said Hashimoto. "I was wondering if you might know some way of dealing with him."

We had already passed the halfway point of this trip; there were only two days left. At the very least, I was sure that his group would want to choose something they'd all like to do during their free time on the fourth day.

"He's just uncontrollable, dude. There ain't nothin' you can do," said Sudou, offering his honest thoughts. It sounded cold, but after having spent a long time with Kouenji, Sudou had given up on him.

"What about you, Ayanokouji?" asked Hashimoto.

"It's not realistic to try and convince Kouenji," I agreed. "Honestly, I don't think there's anything you can do."

"...What a cruel reality," said Hashimoto.

"But there might be one way, in an emergency," I added.

"What is it? Tell me!" Thrilled by the prospect of having some hope, no matter how small, Hashimoto begged me for a way he could free himself from his situation. There was one way he could guarantee that he'd get some free time, provided he could tolerate the disadvantages that came with it.

After I finished telling him, Hashimoto nodded, seemingly convinced. "Well, I guess that's probably the only thing left I could do."

"You should discuss what to do with the rest of your group," I said.

"I'll do that. I'm seriously considering it."

Hashimoto, lost in thought, disappeared into the water once more.

4.6

AFTER TAKING OUR TIME and enjoying ourselves in the bath for about an hour or so, Sudou and I put on our yukatas. We each took a bottle of the free mineral water from the cooler and chugged while holding our hands on our hips. I felt the water cool my flushed body as it went down my throat.

"Okay... I'm...ready for this, Ayanokouji," said Sudou.

"So, it's finally time, eh?"

Perhaps it was because we had spent so much time in the bath, but Sudou's face was a little red. Or perhaps it was because he was nervous from imagining what was going to happen next. The time had come for him to formally tell Horikita how he felt about her.

He drank down about half of his remaining water in one gulp. "Urپ! Okay! Let's go!"

He slapped both of his cheeks with a *smack* to get himself fired up, as though he were heading off to a basketball game after this.

"So, what are you planning to do, specifically?" I asked.

It was just after nine thirty at night now. Horikita probably wasn't asleep yet, but I was sure that many students were relaxing with their friends in their rooms. I couldn't imagine her having fun and making noise with others, but it wouldn't have been unusual for her to just be watching over others warmly.

"Yeah, first things first, I guess... I'll try givin' her a call." Phone in hand, Sudou brushed past the curtain and exited the men's bath. Immediately after exiting, he made the call.

The phone didn't ring that many times before Horikita picked up, causing Sudou to panic a bit.

"...H-h-hey, it's me. Where are you right now?" he asked, sounding flustered. "Oh, in the lobby? Okay, can you wait there for a sec? I'm, uh, heading there right now."

Sudou hung up, breathing hard. He looked at me as he walked away. "So, y'know how there's a part of the lobby in the ryokan where they sell small souvenirs and stuff? She says she's there."

"Don't just tell her how you feel right away the second you see her there, okay?" I suggested. "People would probably be watching in the lobby. And that'd make Horikita feel awkward, too."

"Y-yeah, I know that, dude." Telling someone how you felt about them was a major event, one that required not only consideration for the person expressing their feelings, but for the recipient, too. "But I dunno where should I do it..."

"Nobody should be going through the corridor leading into the rear garden at this hour," I told him. "That could be a good place, right?"

If you went from the rear garden up the stairs to the higher level, there was a little wooden deck with a pleasant view. However, since you couldn't head out into the rear garden after 9 p.m., there shouldn't be people around.

"Man, I knew I could count on you, Ayanokouji. You're a good pal to have." Sudou flashed a smile and gave me a big thumbs-up. It was a rigid, nervous smile, though. "Nice."

Still anxious, Sudou rushed over to the lobby. Once we arrived, I noticed that Horikita was already waiting nearby, checking out the souvenirs. I moved some distance away and found a blind spot to stand in. There was one employee in the lobby, as well as several students, some of whom were browsing the souvenirs and some sitting in the chairs, chatting happily. Seeing that, I felt affirmed in my prediction that this wouldn't be a suitable place for a romantic confession.

Somehow, albeit through the added use of gestures, Sudou successfully managed to call Horikita to come to the corridor leading to the rear garden. The two of them walked over side by side. Normally, it probably would've been better if I stopped following them at this point, but getting told off by Sudou would be annoying. I masked the sound of my footsteps as much as

possible as I followed them in order to bear witness to his heroic spectacle.

Just as I'd expected, there didn't seem to be any people in this corridor anymore, and both Sudou and Horikita stopped in the middle of the empty hallway.

Horikita turned back toward Sudou with a curious look.
"What's up?"

I wondered if she had just been in the bath up until a little while ago, like Sudou and I had. Her hair had a glamorous shine to it, even in the dim lighting.

"Okay, here is good." Normally, Sudou's confident attitude was his main selling point, but now he spoke quietly, perhaps because he was too nervous to speak up in front of the person he liked. There was only the subdued, gentle background music that played over the speakers and the quiet chatter of people at night in the ryokan, so he most likely wanted to avoid carelessly shouting in a loud voice, even in a place without anyone around. That was the right amount of consideration.

"I, uh... Um..."

Seeing Sudou act so hesitantly, Horikita cocked her head to the side, puzzled. Right now, though, she didn't seem particularly irritated, or press Sudou to get on with it. I supposed that also demonstrated the trusting relationship that the two of them had built. Back when they had first met, Horikita would have rushed Sudou along, telling him to spit it out already, no questions asked.

Just then, my phone vibrated. Even though I had put it on silent mode, in this quiet stillness, it was still possible that someone might hear it. Therefore, I immediately powered my phone off without even looking at the screen. And it...didn't seem like they noticed me. I was safe, for the time being.

"Hey, Suzune." I had expected Sudou would launch straight into his romantic confession, but instead, practically squeezing the words out, he asked, "I, um... I've changed, right? I was just curious about...how different I am now from when we first met."

"Are you still worried about what people think of you?" asked Horikita.

"Well, there's that too, yeah."

I figured he must be trying to stall until he could build up the courage to tell Horikita how he felt about her. At the same time, though, it seemed like Sudou himself remained aware of what he was doing.

"Well, let's see," Horikita said. "Taking an objective view, you've changed greatly, more than anyone. And not in a bad way; in a good way. I've been by your side for a long time, watching you, so no one can guarantee that more than I."

Those were Horikita's honest feelings. Well, no, it probably wasn't just Horikita who felt that; I was sure most people living on campus shared that same opinion.

"Th-that so?" asked Sudou.

"But don't be conceited. If I were to speak frankly, you started off in a negative position, compared to the people around you. Don't think that just because I'm telling you that you've moved to a positive one since then, that makes you better than other people."

The negative effects Sudou's behavior and attitude had originally had on the people around him could bias them when they saw how he was now, making them more impressed by how he'd changed. However, just as Horikita had said, those negatives that Sudou had accumulated over time hadn't necessarily just disappeared, either.

"Yeah. I mean, that sounds totally right to me." Those harsh words had Sudou feeling dejected, but he nodded, accepting them completely. "God, it's so embarrassin'. All the stupid stuff I've done, I mean."

Tardiness, missing class, coming in last place on written tests, using all kinds of foul language and insults, carelessly getting physically violent—no matter how much Sudou reflected on those things, the past wouldn't change, and he was ashamed of the path he had trod before.

Horikita nodded, and then smiled warmly, eyes creasing. "You really do have a humble heart, don't you?" She herself might not have realized this, but she had also changed quite a lot. Her change wasn't nearly as great as Sudou's, though. "You don't carelessly hurt others or cause trouble anymore. It's okay."

Apparently, Horikita had misinterpreted the situation, thinking that Sudou was uncertain about his past and how much he'd grown, and that he had come to her seeking advice. Sudou seemed to realize that Horikita had misunderstood as well, because he shook his head from side to side, flustered.

"Th-that ain't what I wanted to talk to you about, Suzune."

"It's not?"

"I...I, uh... Well..." He must have remembered what he had declared to me earlier, because he suddenly thrust out his right hand. But his words didn't follow; his outstretched, open hand remained in front of him, and that was it.

"What? What are—" Horikita, unable to comprehend what was going on, tried to question the meaning behind Sudou offering his right hand, but just then...

"I like you! Please go out with me!"

Sudou had freed himself from the feelings of embarrassment that kept the words stuck in the back of his throat. He shouted too loudly, but... Well, I supposed we'd just overlook that part. In any case, even if someone did overhear, I could stand watch and protect him.

"Wha—" Horikita, who hadn't had even the slightest expectation that someone would express their romantic feelings to her, froze on the spot, completely taken aback.

"If you do want to go out with me, I'd like you to take my right hand!"

"Wait, hold on... Are you seri...?" Horikita immediately swallowed her words. She could sense Sudou's passion and enthusiasm, and she could tell his feelings were genuine; she knew that it would've been rude to ask him something like, "*This is some kind of joke, right?*"

She stared at Sudou's right hand, closing her mouth. I had expected her to reply to him immediately, but she just silently stared at his hand.

After the confession he'd made, I was sure that the longer this silence continued, the faster Sudou's heart rate would climb. This moment right now was by no means a pleasant one; it was probably painful. But even someone like Horikita should be given as much time to think as she needed. When telling someone you had romantic feelings for them, it didn't come down to the emotions of just one person or the other.

Horikita must have eventually sorted out how she felt, because she slowly started to speak, choosing her words very carefully. "Never once in my life did I think that someone would tell me they had a romantic interest in me," she said.

Now that Horikita had heard and acknowledged Sudou's passionate feelings, how would she respond? Would she return those feelings? Or would she reject him? Or would she choose to put it off until later? As the silence dragged on, Sudou's right arm gradually started trembling. It wasn't due to his arm getting numb; it was because of nervousness and fear. And the frustration of not getting a response, whether Horikita would reciprocate or not. Sudou, believing that Horikita would take his outstretched hand, kept his head down.

"Sudou-kun. Thank you for liking someone like me." Horikita offered her gratitude. However, she wasn't showing any signs of taking Sudou's outstretched hand. "But I'm sorry. I...cannot reciprocate your feelings."

That was the conclusion that Horikita's thoughts had led her to.

"I-I see... Um, if it's okay, could you...maybe tell me the reason why?" asked Sudou hesitantly, his right hand frozen in the air. He still couldn't lift his face.

"The reason... Okay. It's not as though I'm particularly dissatisfied with you, Sudou-kun. It's—"

Horikita stopped for a moment.

"To be honest, I must confess that I've never fallen in love with another person in my life so far," she said. "Even now, I still haven't had that feeling, and I have no idea what it's like. I think that even if I went out with you, Sudou-kun, now that you've told me your feelings, there could be a possibility that I'd fall in love with you in time. But...I think that I'm probably waiting for that moment that I fall in love with someone naturally, by instinct, rather than trying to trigger romantic feelings to happen that way."

She was expressing her thoughts to Sudou, but it seemed like she was also confirming them for herself.

That was the reason she had turned him down. She wanted to keep waiting for her first love. I was sure that was a hidden feeling that Horikita wouldn't let strangers hear about.

"I see... Thank you," said Sudou. "For telling me."

Perhaps it was because Horikita had told him so much, expressed her stance so clearly, but he didn't persist.

"You've really shown me your courage and your feelings very strongly," said Horikita. With that, she hurriedly grabbed hold of Sudou's right hand, which was right on the verge of going limp. "I've heard your feelings. Thank you for liking me."

Sudou's trembling right hand said it all.

Thinking that it was about time to go, I decided to head back. I figured that I'd hang out and look around the souvenir shop while I waited for Sudou to collect himself and return.



4.7

IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I'd visited the shop. Various Hokkaido souvenirs were lined up on the shelves.

"That reminds me," I thought aloud. "Nanase said something about chocolate-covered fries, I think."

I tried doing some searching, but they must not have been carried at this ryokan, because I couldn't find any. I guessed I'd need to look for them either during our visit to the various tourist destinations tomorrow, or during our final day of free time. In the meantime, I figured I'd check on my phone and see if there was a store nearby that carried them.

"Whoops..." I muttered.

When I turned on my cell phone, thinking I'd check the local stores, I saw that I had many messages and missed calls. They were all from Kei, of course.

"Where are you?"

"I didn't get to see you at all yesterday or today."

"Are you busy?"

"I wanna see you."

"I wanna see youuuuuuuuu."

And so on. When I opened the app, the messages, which had been sent seconds apart from each other, were marked as read. Then, immediately afterward, my phone rang.

"Grr—!"

I wondered if a cat's snarl would be an appropriate metaphor to describe what that sounded like.

"Are you mad?" I asked.

"I'm not mad, but—!"

I see. The only thing I was certain of was that she did in fact seem extremely angry.

"Can't we be together for even just a little bit?!"

"Sorry," I said. "We're on a school trip, and there are lots of things I have to do."

"I know that, but still!"

"I've already gotten information about group eleven from Kushida, so I know for certain that you've been handling yourself well, Kei. That's why I wasn't worried about you at all."

"Hmmmm? You certainly sound like you're having fun with Kushida-san! She is cute, you know! You cheater!"

"We're in the same group, so of course we're going to talk. Besides, you already know what kind of person Kushida is, don't you?"

"That doesn't matter. She's got big boobs, too! ...Kiyotaka... you're... Ahh!"

"I get it, I get it. I can take some time now, so let's meet up somewhere."

"Really?! Well then, I'll come visit you!"

It was an extremely calculated act on her part, and once I offered to meet, her voice immediately turned cheerful.

"Actually, it's probably better that we don't meet in my room, don't you think?" I said. "Ryuu'en's in my room, too."

"Oh... I see."

"Where are you right now?"

"In my room, but the three other girls are probably still in the bath. I was with them until just a little bit ago. But I wanted to talk to you, so I left before they did, Kiyotaka-kun."

Kei used to be very self-conscious about her scars, but apparently, she had managed to completely move past that.

"I have the key to my room, so I'm going to stop by there first and drop it off," I told her. "I'll contact you afterward, so wait for me."

"Okay!"

I had been waiting for Sudou at the souvenir shop for a little under five minutes now. Since there was still no sign of him coming back this way, I got curious, and decided to check the corridor leading to the rear garden. When I got there, I saw Sudou standing there alone, in the same spot where he'd stood when he told Horikita how he felt about her. There was no sign of Horikita, though, so I figured that she had already headed back.

"Sudou?" I felt bad, since Kei was waiting for me, but I drew closer to Sudou and called out his name.

"Ah, damn it!" he shouted. From what I could tell from the sound of his voice, he probably had a look of frustration on his face. "I knew it was hopeless, but...!"

I could tell that there was vexation in Sudou's face when he turned around to look at me, but he had a bright smile. "I'm sorry," he said to me. "I just couldn't forget the feeling of Suzune's hand, and I was spacin' out."

"So, that's what happened."

"You saw, right? It was a spectacular failure."

"Even so, it was an honorable defeat that you should be proud of."

What I saw was a truly manly expression of romantic love, from start to finish.

"Y'know, before, I thought, like, 'Even if she rejects me, I'm not gonna give up. I'll become an even better me next year and try again,'" he said. "Stuff like that. But I ain't gonna do that. It's pointless. At the very least, I realized that I just can't reach her."

Sudou seemed to have sensed something that I, who had been watching from a distance, could not.

"It ain't a question of, like, if I'm givin' up or not. I still love her, those feelin's haven't changed, but it's just, I dunno, I feel like she's this beautiful flower I long for that's out of my reach." Sudou couldn't seem to sum up how he felt very well; after saying that, he laughed a bit.

"What are you going to do about Onodera?" I asked.

"Man, how should I know? Even you don't know how she really feels. You don't really gotta me ask me that, right?"

"That's true."

"Well, I guess it is what it is. Stuff will happen as it should," he said. "Onodera's good people, and we got the same kinda interests. Now that I'm not gonna be droolin' over Suzune all the time, I feel like I can hang out with Onodera fairly, y'know?"

Whether or not that developed into love was a secondary concern.

"I'm just tellin' you this now," Sudou added, "but I'm gonna keep workin' hard on my studies from here on out. I was doing it for someone else before, but starting now, I'm givin' it my best for myself. My goal is to get to around Hirata's level."

"That'd be another pretty huge jump," I remarked.

If Sudou did manage to get over that wall, then he'd eventually reach the top level in our grade, alongside the likes of Horikita and Keisei. It seemed like he wasn't going to stay discouraged after being rejected, but instead, he was able to look to higher goals.

4.8

I HURRIEDLY RETURNED to my room, where I saw that Horikita was standing in front of my door.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Waiting for you," she replied.

"For me?"

I had a bad feeling about this, so I tried playing dumb, but Horikita's expression stiffened.

"You are a mean one, Ayanokouji-kun. You were watching, weren't you?" she asked.

"Watching what?"

"You were in the souvenir shop earlier, weren't you? If it was anyone else, it might have been just a coincidence that you were nearby, but with you, I can't imagine that's it."

What a high-handed way of thinking. She's right, but still. If I need to take similar measures against Horikita in the future, I'll have to take care not to be seen.

"You're thinking about how you'll have to be careful not to be discovered next time," said Horikita. "Aren't you?"

"...Impressive." I clapped my hands out of earnest admiration, praising her perceptiveness. "Sudou asked me to. He said he wanted me to watch him tell you how he felt."

"Even so, don't you think that shows a lack of consideration for the girl involved, i.e., me?"

"I suppose I can see that," I replied.

"I see Sudou-kun still has a way to go," she sighed. "He loses points for asking you to watch him." Though she sounded exasperated, she didn't seem that angry.

"So? Did you come all the way here just to complain that I was a spectator?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied, clearly and without hesitation. Then she added, "I'm half-joking. Actually, there is something I wanted to talk to you about. But it looks like you're in a hurry to get inside."

"Well, not exactly, but...if possible, could we talk tomorrow?"

"Why's that?"

"A certain someone came to me before you did and is very demanding," I explained. "I haven't seen her at all in two days, and she has taken great offense."

"I see. Karuizawa-san." Horikita pondered for a moment. I wondered if she was thinking of telling me to put off seeing Kei until later, if this was an important matter. But she said, "All right, tomorrow night, then. I'll forgive you if you can promise to meet me then."

"All right. I promise." I had no other choice at this point.

After leaving the key with Kitou, who was already in the room, I went to meet Kei. Though we were already recognized as an official couple by many, we couldn't just go out and about anywhere we pleased, like Ike and Shinohara. We decided to meet up in the area that had multiple reservable private baths.

As soon as we met up, Kei scolded me harshly, but she immediately switched to sweet mode. After I embraced her and got her into a better mood, we spent some time relaxing together for a while.

Chapter 5: School Trip Day Three

THE BUS HAD DEPARTED the ryokan at nine o'clock that morning. Just under fifty minutes later, it stopped near Sapporo Station, and thus we arrived at our destination, marking the beginning of our day. The Sapporo Clock Tower was nearby, and this area was lined with various other spots that were perfect for sightseeing.

We were supposed to go around in our individual groups yet again, but there was one difference from how things were yesterday: a little test implemented by the school.

Within a time limit, before 5 p.m., we were to visit a total of six spots, in any order, out of a predetermined list of fifteen destinations. For a group to have their visit recognized as official, they had to take a commemorative photograph with the entire group present at a designated photography location at each spot. We had to repeat that process six times. So, groups that allowed their members to split up in an effort to get more points, as well as groups comprised of students who didn't bring along their phones and selfishly did their own thing, wouldn't be able to complete the task.

You would only fail this test if you visited fewer than six spots before the time limit was up. In that case, you would be deprived of your free time on the fourth day of the trip, and you'd attend a study hall which was going to be held at the ryokan until 4 p.m. on that day. Each spot was also assigned a point value. Groups that achieved a total of twenty points or more would be rewarded, with each individual member winning 30,000 Private Points. However, since scores didn't have an impact on whether we actually passed the test, it was up to the groups to decide whether or not to shoot for the reward.

If the photo wasn't clear, and you couldn't identify the people in the shot, it wouldn't be counted. Whether students wanted to go for the reward was another matter, but if students wanted to

enjoy their free time tomorrow to the fullest, they needed to take this test seriously and cooperate with one another to visit the destinations. There were no restrictions on things like the number of times we could use public transportation, but we were prohibited from using taxis. It was also necessary for us to keep a record of how we got to each spot.

I was sure that the students would have been happier to have received free time on our third day, but personally, I didn't think walking around Hokkaido under the conditions set by the school was so bad. If the students were simply given free time to do whatever they wanted, the school trip would've likely ended with only limited sightseeing and skiing. I was genuinely looking forward to exploring Hokkaido within the restrictions the school had set.

Once we got off the bus, we were handed a pamphlet. This pamphlet, which was a unique one designed by our school, described the spots that we were to visit. Sapporo Clock Tower, Sapporo TV Tower, and the Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art were each worth one point. Nakajima Park and Hokkaido Jingu were worth two points. Sapporo Maruyama Zoo, the Hokkaido Museum, and the Sapporo Central Wholesale Market Curb Market were worth three points each. Moerenuma Park and Shiroi Koibito Park were both worth four points. Mount Moiwa was worth five points. Sunpiazza Aquarium was worth six points. Jozankei Onsen was worth seven points. And finally, Lake Shikotsu and Lake Utonai were both worth eight points.

It was necessary to remember that just getting to a spot wasn't enough. For instance, in the case of Sapporo Maruyama Zoo, we needed to enter the zoo and take a photograph with the polar bears, or take a picture with the polar bear pavilion in the background, to mark the location as complete.

"This is kind of a surprise," Kushida said to me after we got off the bus. "Well, I suppose it is fitting for this school, but..."

For some reason, though, she was gazing far off into the distance.

"I'm over here," I said.

"Oh, sorry. I had no idea." There was no way that should've been possible, and she wasn't even looking at me when she said that, either. Perhaps she herself was keenly aware of how unnatural it all was, because now she turned her head and smiled at me.

"It'd really hurt to lose an entire day to studying if we don't do this properly," she said. "I guess the reason they let us have a whole day of free time yesterday without any restrictions probably has something to do with the sightseeing tour today."

"You might be right about that."

Now, the question was, what choices would our group—group six—make? The fact that we'd be going around sightseeing itself had been explained to us before we left for the school trip, but it was only on the bus on the way over that we had been told about how this was set up a little like an exam, with free time at stake and Private Points as a reward. Meaning, in other words, that we still hadn't had the opportunity to establish what our group's policy would be.

It was conceivable that groups who aimed for the Private Point reward might not finish the test in time, so risks were unavoidable. While some groups seemed to stay put and discuss, most started walking, and in the same direction.

"It looks like a lot of groups are heading to Sapporo Clock Tower first, since it's just a stone's throw from here," observed Kushida.

We could consider focusing on places with high point values, like Lake Shikotsu and Lake Utonai, but that would be a high-risk strategy.

"And because it's more efficient to discuss while walking, too," I added.

Just like Kushida had said, the safest bet would be to go from Sapporo Station to the clock tower, and then, after taking a picture at the designated spot, heading over to the TV tower via Odori Park. You could hit two spots in a short amount of time, and without spending any money. However, it was unclear at the

moment whether that would be the ideal scenario if you were shooting for twenty or more points.

By now, all eight people from group six had finished getting off the bus.

"I did a quick search on the map app just now," Amikura said, "and even if we were able to use a taxi, it seems like it'd take several hours for us to hit six locations with high point values."

I was sure that Amikura hadn't taken things like the time needed to reach the designated photo spot for each of the locations into account in her calculations, either. Even if we were to make full use of public transportation, it would likely be impossible for us to hit only high-scoring locations within the time limit.

"Anybody here familiar with Hokkaido?" Watanabe posed his question to the entirety of group six, but he didn't get any favorable responses.

I, like the other students, had no knowledge of things like how to get around Hokkaido or the most efficient means to do so, which meant we'd have to do some research to find out the answer to those questions.

"Hrmm. Even if I try and make a route with the map app, I don't really know where to go, so the order gets all jumbled up." It seemed like Amikura was struggling with the map app, trying to enter the appropriate locations. Since the spots were scattered in all directions, to the east, west, south, and north of our current location, you would need to start by having an understanding of the relationship of the positions. On top of that, there was no guarantee that public transportation would necessarily be available at each spot, nor that the school hadn't been mean-spirited, including some very difficult-to-reach spots in the list of places marked in our pamphlets.

"Well, even if we *can* get Private Points, it's just thirty thousand," Watanabe said. "Since we're here and have the chance to do some sightseeing, why don't we just forget about the reward and enjoy ourselves?"

Watanabe's suggestion was one correct answer. If we focused only on scoring twenty points within the time limit, our

enjoyment of our sightseeing tour would be cut in half. We wouldn't have the time to take it easy, relax, and enjoy what each location had to offer.

"Basically, I guess I'm firmly in the camp of 'Let's not push ourselves too hard on this,'" added Watanabe.

"I agree. I think it'd be better if we just go to places we each actually want to go to. Like, I want to go to the zoo and stuff," said Amikura.

We students spent our day-to-day lives on campus, so we didn't normally get the opportunity to visit zoos, aquariums, and the like. It was only natural not to want to waste the opportunity, since we were here.

"Let's hear everyone's opinions on where they'd like to go and work from there." Amikura suggested.

Six of us, me included, quickly agreed with the idea of giving up the points and instead focusing on leisurely hitting the minimum number of spots. However, this was a matter that needed to be discussed by everyone in the group to reach a decision. Kitou and Ryuuen were the only two remaining who hadn't yet said if they agreed or disagreed with the idea.

"Kitou, what do you think?" Watanabe turned to check with Kitou, who had been completely silent this whole time.

"No objections," said Kitou.

After getting a favorable response upon asking Kitou, a wave of relief seemed to wash over Watanabe and the others—for the time being, anyway. That made seven. And the final person, Ryuuen... His answer...still had not come.

"Um... Hey, uh..." Watanabe seemed to be struggling to ask, so I decided to speak up and get Ryuuen's answer.

"Me and everyone else here share the same opinion," I said. "Can we take your silence to mean you also agree with us?"

However, Ryuuen had declared to me that he was going to save up eight hundred million points, so his answer was obvious.

"We're going for the points," he said.

It was a simple response. Ryuuuen was going to stand against the seven of us, in other words. Of course, we as individuals were each free to think about how we were going to visit these locations. Some groups were likely going to prioritize certain locations for the Private Points. However, additional discussion was going to be needed if opinions were split like this. Watanabe was even more frightened than before, so I followed up on my previous question and asked Ryuuuen another.

"Can I ask the reason why?"

"Ain't it obvious? Private Points. I can't think of 'em as 'just' 30,000 points," said Ryuuuen.

With two people from each class in the group, each class could get 60,000 Private Points. It might've sounded like nothing but dust if you compared that to eight hundred million, but the truth was it was still one steady step forward.

"There ain't no reason not to grab the points that are right in front of your face," Ryuuuen snarled. "So, just shut up and follow me."

Although there was a risk of not visiting enough sightseeing locations in time, or not getting enough points due to mismanagement, fundamentally speaking, there weren't any downsides to the idea of going for the reward; there were only positives. If you followed the rules and successfully hit enough locations, you would receive Private Points from the school. And it was also true that doing something that meant not getting points you could have earned would, in itself, be a loss.

However, there was no way that Kitou was just going to stay silent and ignore Ryuuuen's heavy-handed behavior overruling the opinion of the seven of us.

"You're telling all of us to follow you, to satisfy you?" asked Kitou.

"Yeah. Got a problem with that?" said Ryuuuen.

"Your way of doing things ignores democracy," Kitou said. "I think this is an issue that should be decided by majority vote."

"Like I care," Ryuuен snorted. "When the hell did this group become a democracy or whatever?"

"I'm not convinced that you could be this fixated on such a paltry sum in the first place. In fact, there's no way I can believe that."

"In that case, what do *you* think it is, huh?" asked Ryuuен.

I had lost count of how many times this sort of thing had happened by now. As Ryuuен and Kitou clashed, no one else could interject.

"I can only think that you don't like how the group came to an agreement, so you said something just to stir things up," said Kitou.

"I see," Ryuuен said. "That might be true, yeah. I mean, seein' that disgruntled look on your face ain't bad."

If we let these two continue to talk on their own, we'd soon be heading into dangerous territory.

"We need some Private Points to even use public transportation anyway," Kitou pointed out. "If you subtract those from your winnings, you won't be left with thirty thousand Private Points per person in the end. Even so, you still want to do it?"

We didn't know the precise cost at this point, but we would need to spend some money on transit.

"Even so, yeah. Hypothetically, even if the reward's closer to twenty thou, I ain't planning on givin' it up."

I realized now that we were the only group still near the bus.

"And while we're debatin' like this, your precious time's bein' wasted. You know that, don't ya, Kitou?"

Ryuuен was exerting pressure, essentially telling Kitou and the rest, "Get on with it already, and find me a good route to do this." Of course, there was no way that Kitou was going to just quietly stand back and listen to Ryuuен's incendiary comments, which were akin to pouring oil on a fire.

"I refuse to let you have your way," Kitou snapped. "If you're planning to stubbornly persist in going after the Private Points and

ignore everyone else's opinion on the matter, then I have no intention of helping you go to the locations. Meaning, in other words, that not only will you *not* be getting any Private Points, your free time tomorrow will inevitably be taken away from you."

From the sounds of it, Kitou intended to oppose him completely, assuring Ryuuen that he had no intention of accepting his wishes. Thus, he'd protested strongly.

"Heh heh. You're gonna be the one in the minority here, Kitou. Everyone else'll have no choice but to follow me anyway, once the clock starts ticking," said Ryuuen.

Did this mean we were about to start a battle of wills between these two, which wasn't going to do anyone any good anyway? The easiest way of getting the unyielding Ryuuen to act would be to steer the group toward collecting Private Points. For six of the people here, getting 30,000 points wouldn't be a bad deal, and it wasn't as though the idea of going for the points only came with disadvantages. Besides, if everyone was guaranteed to get their free time tomorrow, they could make up for the lack of sightseeing today. If six people in our group, excluding Kitou, leaned toward going with Ryuuen, then that would be the majority opinion.

"Even if you force everyone to go along with your plan, I will not," stated Kitou.

If that happened, then it would make Kitou into the bad guy, standing one against seven.

"So, you're sayin' that if you threaten me with ruinin' this whole group by yourself, that might be enough to get me to give up on the money?" asked Ryuuen.

"I certainly hope so." Kitou showed no signs of faltering, as though he were saying that he was accustomed to playing the part of the villain.

Even Watanabe, who had been shivering in fear up until this point, had no other choice but to interject. "H-hey, calm down, Kitou. If it's gonna mean wasting our free time, then I'm sure even you'd...!"

"In that case, talk Ryuuен out of it," said Kitou.

"Uh..." Watanabe looked like he was at his wits' end, unsure of what to do here. "I-I've got it! Nishino! You're his classmate—why don't you tell Ryuuен off?"

"Yeah, telling him off would be simple enough, but there's no way that'll get him to change his mind," Nishino sighed. "I'm not going to do anything pointless."

I had supposed that Nishino, having been around Ryuuен for a long time now, could tell what the outcome would be if she tried something like that. Now that it had come to this, there was a feeling in the air that we should all just give in already, since there was nothing we could do anyway. Just then, Kushida tugged my arm, pulling me aside.

"...Hey, do you have a second...? What do you think we should do?" she whispered.

"I'd thought that going along with Ryuuен would be acceptable, but it looks like Kitou's not budging an inch," I said. "But if we stand with Kitou, Ryuuен won't back down either. They're really a selfish pair, the both of them."

Both of their worst sides were showing—or rather, the two of them were each bringing out the worst in each other.

"It's not like we don't have a solution at all, though," I added.

"Really?" asked Kushida.

"It's just that I wouldn't recommend it, if at all possible."

"Can you at least tell me what it is?"

"What Ryuuен wants are Private Points, so to him, sightseeing is unnecessary. On the other hand, the seven of us want to go to places we want to visit and enjoy the sights. Kitou is included among us seven, naturally, since his opinion is similar to ours."

"Yes. We do have a conflict of interests, then."

"In that case, the seven of us can just use our own money to solve things. Kitou will likely oppose that, though, so realistically, probably just six of us. If us six each scrape together five thousand

Private Points individually and offer those to Ryuuuen, he won't have any complaints then, will he?"

"Ah, I see, so there's that solution..."

But this was Ryuuuen we were talking about, so he might not be satisfied with us just paying him 30,000 points ourselves. I continued whispering to Kushida, explaining the risks to her. If our group received the reward, that would mean each class would effectively gain 60,000 Private Points. Which meant that he would, at the very least, demand to collect the 30,000 points that Nishino would get, as someone from the same class as him.

If Nishino refused to give up her points, though, Ryuuuen would continue to demand them from everyone else, so that he would get the equivalent of her share. If that happened, it meant that the five of us would be losing 60,000 Private Points collectively, or 12,000 points per person from all five together. There would likely be resistance to the idea of paying that much just to enjoy sightseeing.

"Yeah," said Kushida, "that's certainly not cheap..."

Originally this was supposed to be a sightseeing tour where we'd only be gaining something, but now, it looked like it would be nothing but a loss. I was starting to doubt whether we'd actually be able to enjoy sightseeing at all anymore. We would only be setting ourselves up as a bad example as a group if the majority were to give in to a loud, forceful minority.

"And, in the worst-case scenario, we'd have to consider the risk of him asking for even more beyond that," I added.

"Huh?" said Kushida. "That's so incredibly ridicul... Actually, yeah, knowing him, he would..."

"That's what I mean."

"I understand what you're trying to say, Ayanokouji-kun. That's why you don't recommend it."

"It's best that we get everyone to come together without any cheap trickery," I replied.

"It's not that easy for us to just have a peaceful discussion, though. Or rather, it's impossible, isn't it?" said Kushida.

Indeed, it was difficult to imagine either Ryuuuen or Kitou backing down that easily, and it was inevitable that we'd be forced to do nothing.

"I've got it," Kushida said. "How about we tell them that it's basically a test of patience at this point? We'd have to push ourselves pretty hard to collect twenty or more points, right? If we spend another thirty minutes or an hour here, it'll be even more difficult to justify."

So, a strategy to get them to use up the extra time that Ryuuuen would need to score points at the locations? Still, even that choice was fraught with issues.

"Even if Ryuuuen decides that he won't have enough time to go for the points, there's no guarantee that he'll just quietly, obediently go along with visiting the locations and enjoy sightseeing with us afterward," I replied. "In the end, everything will come crashing down. Tomorrow's free time will be taken away from us."

"Ah... Yeah, I see. I suppose that's the obvious conclusion, yes," she conceded.

There were many options that we couldn't choose here. We had no choice but to be prepared for some degree of risk and somehow try to get everyone to come together.

"I don't want to throw away this precious day, either," I said. "We have no choice but to bear some pain if we're going to get things moving."

"...What are you going to do?" Kushida asked.

I had come to a conclusion...but before getting to that, I'd noticed something else important. Even though we were standing here together to avoid being overheard by the others, I had been close to Kushida alone for far too long. The fact that Kushida and I had clearly been engaging in a secret conversation, just the two of us, was becoming even more blatantly apparent.

"Hey, you, uh...you're going out with Karuizawa, right?" Watanabe was glaring a bit. Even Amikura had a not-so-pleased look on her face.

"We were having a strategy meeting," I explained. "Right, Kushida?"

"Of course," agreed Kushida. "Ayanokouji-kun and I had just come to an agreement. Right?"

With that, Kushida quickly put a great deal of distance between us. It was an exaggerated action, like a blatant show of wanting to get away from someone she despised, and it certainly didn't feel very pleasant to me. But it seemed to convince Watanabe and Amikura, so I supposed it was the correct thing to do.

After gathering my bearings, I walked on over to Kitou, who had been glaring this whole time, and Ryuuen, who had been looking down at his phone without a care in the world. Then, I turned my back to them and faced the five others.

"I'd like to confirm something with everyone in our group, with the exception of Ryuuen and Kitou," I announced. "I want to double-check what our opinions are at this point in time. Do we prioritize sightseeing, or do we prioritize Private Points? If anyone here has changed their mind and now wants the latter option, please raise your hand. You don't need to worry about everyone else right now, just indicate what your personal intention is."

Watanabe and the rest looked at each other, but no one seemed to be raising their hands. I could tell from their demeanor that none of them were keeping their hands down just because they felt like they had to. In other words, no one agreed with the idea of prioritizing the spots that had high point values.

"So what?" Ryuuen scoffed. "No matter what you say, Ayanokouji, I ain't changin' my mind here."

I know you don't care, even if you don't have any allies to support you, I thought to myself.

I briefly looked back at Ryuuen. "Sorry, but I want to talk to the other five people now," I told him.

I immediately looked away from him, continuing my conversation with the five others in the group. "Now that we're in this situation, I've come to the conclusion that there's no way the

eight of us can come together on this, and discussing it would be a waste of time."

"So, what are you saying we do, then? Go with Ryuuuen?" Speaking as one of the people who wanted to go sightseeing, even Nishino made no attempt to hide her discontent.

"No, I'm not saying that. Individual opinions should be respected to the greatest extent possible, but as a member of this group, his voice is only one-eighth. So, that's how it must be. Kitou, who opposes Ryuuuen, is also just one-eighth. Even if we're not factoring my opinion into the mix here, the five of you make up five-eighths; therefore, you are the majority."

"Yeah, we know that," said Nishino. "But aren't we still in trouble if we can't talk it out and come to an agreement? Whether we're talking one-eighth, or five-eighths, or whatever, we all have to make the same choice, and we all have to move forward."

"You're right," I said. "It's just that it is, without a doubt, the five of you who have the right to decide what to do in this situation. If you can't agree with Ryuuuen's methods or his way of thinking, you don't have to obey him. In other words, you can make him abandon the choice to go for the Private Points. We can all throw out the idea of going to spots for points right now and just go sightseeing on our own, at our leisure," I announced.

"...So, you're saying that we throw away our free time tomorrow?" asked Nishino.

"That's correct. Besides, even if we do what Ryuuuen wants now, there's no guarantee that we'll be able to go to the places we want to go as a group during our free time tomorrow anyway. If someone says that they won't leave the ryokan, then at that point, our group won't be able to go out anywhere. On the other hand, our freedom today is guaranteed."

"But just until five o'clock, right?" said Nishino.

"Not so," I said. "We only have to be done with our sightseeing by five if we're planning on having free time tomorrow. Technically, we have the right to do as we please until nine o'clock, our curfew, when we have to be back at the ryokan. Moreover, we can do whatever we like individually, too. We could even go around

and each go and hang out with other groups that our friends are in. The school can't even criticize us over it if we do that."

We would be giving up our fourth day in exchange for making the third day one of complete freedom, which was something no one else could do. That was the absolute right only given to these five.

"I just want you to keep in mind that it's not Ryuuen or Kitou who decides what we're going to do," I added.

"...Yes, you're right," said Kushida. She looked into the eyes of our group mates and was certain that they all shared the same opinion, without the need for any extraneous conversation.

"Ryuuen-kun, we are not going to go for the Private Points after all," she said. "Today, we want to talk about where we want to go, and we want to have an enjoyable day. If you can't agree to that, then we'll probably just split up here and go our separate ways. As for what happens after that, well, it will go exactly as Ayanokouji-kun said. Maybe we can all get along during the study hall tomorrow, in that case."

Nishino smiled at hearing those words, and then Amikura, Watanabe, and even Yamamura nodded, prepared for whatever might come. Almost as if in response, the corners of Kitou's lips curved up ever so slightly into a smile.

"A good proposal. Count me in," he said.

Up until this point, Kitou had just been rebelling against Ryuuen out of defiance toward him, but now he sided with the five other students, as an ally. Now that everyone had come to this conclusion, the ball was officially in Ryuuen's court for the first time. Would he agree with Kushida and the others and give up on the Private Points? Or would he resist, causing the group to disband? In any case, he wouldn't get the Private Points he wanted. On the contrary, he'd even get stuck with study hall tomorrow as an added bonus.

"You went and did somethin' unnecessary there, Ayanokouji," said Ryuuen. He had verbally expressed his dissatisfaction, but he didn't look like he was actually unhappy with this. To everyone around him, it just looked like he was simply putting up a tough

front. "Yeah, I don't wanna study after comin' all this way for a trip. I'll play along."

I had considered that there might be some degree of resistance, but Ryuuen backed down. If he could still have gotten Private Points even if we were acting separately, then he would've split off without hesitation, but he avoided trouble when he knew there was nothing to gain from it.

So decided, we—group six—followed the school's instructions and went on a proper sightseeing trip, visiting different spots around the city and stopping by the zoo, which we had wanted to go to. In the end, we collected fewer than twenty points, but it was a meaningful trip, and one that left us all satisfied.

5.1

DAY THREE, DINNER. We'd had Japanese-style cuisine for breakfast and dinner for the previous two days, traditional meals that were brought out in courses, but starting this evening and until breakfast the day after tomorrow, when we'd be returning to the school, the menu changed, instead featuring an all-you-can-eat buffet. This was, of course, the first time I had ever experienced an all-you-can-eat meal in my life. As for the meals, just like how things went yesterday, we could freely eat anywhere we wanted, taking any available seat, without having to worry about being all together as a group.

Many students were already crowded together, trays in hand, walking around. Kei was hanging out with a bunch of girls today, and they were so loud that I could hear their laughter from across the dining hall at times. Since I was allowed to be on my own without worry right now, I decided to watch the students around me, to learn the rules of how this all worked. The process seemed to be that you'd take one of the trays from the stack and move along a predetermined route where you'd freely choose whatever assortment of dishes you wished, placing any combination of things on your tray.

First, I would take a salad bowl, and put in lettuce, tomato, onion, pickles, and so on. There were five types of dressing available that you could choose from, so I decided to go with the onion dressing.

"...Interesting," I muttered.

Unlike meals that were already predetermined, making your own specific choices on what you had heightened the sense of individuality. Without realizing it, I ended up reaching for foods based on striking up a nutritional balance. On the other hand, the other students around me really varied in what they were taking, with some students loading up their trays based on what others in their group had, and some students loading up on lots of different kinds of foods in small quantities. As I followed the line down,

continuing on to the side dishes, more students began to queue up behind me, one after another.

I had thought that, since it was still somewhat early in the dinner hour, there might not be that many students here quite yet, but it was the opposite. Apparently, there were more students who wanted to get in around the time that the buffet opened.

Although the buffet was mainly stocked with Japanese food, there were things like steak, shumai, corn soup, and so on.

Just as I was trying to find a seat after I had gotten everything I wanted from the buffet, I was approached by Ishizaki, who appeared empty-handed.

"Yo, Ayanokouji. Hey, you plannin' on eatin' alone or somethin'?"

"That's what I was planning, yes."

"Mmkay, then come eat with me," he said. "I told Nishino to come over too just a minute ago, since she was on her own. It's lonely eatin' by yourself, ain't it?"

"No, it's... Well, I suppose you're right."

I didn't have any particular reason to turn him down, so I figured it'd probably be better to just take Ishizaki up on his act of kindness. As I followed Ishizaki to our seats, Nishino spotted us and waved us over. Albert was there, too, and I had the feeling he was looking at me through his sunglasses. I sat down next to a tray loaded up with a mountain of food, which seemed to belong to Ishizaki.

"Anyway, there's still somethin' I gotta go get real quick," Ishizaki said. "You guys go ahead and start eatin'."

So, that must have been the reason why he was empty-handed when he called out to me, then. He was on his way to get something. Ishizaki, humming, went back to the buffet.

"You got brought over thanks to Ishizaki's meddling too, huh?" I remarked.

"I refused, but he was insistent," said Nishino.

"I guess he's the type of person who can't leave his friends alone," I said.

"I guess," Nishino said. "He was kind of down in the dumps and broody when we started school, though, and a lot touchier."

It was true that, these days, I envisioned him as this cheerful guy, but I supposed he might not have been the same when he started school. I had hardly ever interacted with him, though, so if I was being honest, he hadn't really left a major impression on me.

"He seemed to hate Ryuuen at the start, too, so maybe he had a rebellious attitude," said Nishino.

I'd never seen Ishizaki like that, because he'd suppressed it now, but I guessed that was how he'd originally been. If you wanted to talk about someone who gave me the impression that they'd sort of remained the same all this time, though, that would have to be Albert, who was eating in silence. He held his chopsticks dexterously in his big hands.

"All right, my dudes!" Ishizaki announced. "I brought crab! Tons and tons of crab!"

Now that he'd returned, Ishizaki set down his tray with a heaping plate on it, and on that plate was an overflowing mountain of crab. Some crab legs fell off onto the tray due to the sheer momentum as he slammed the plate down.

"...That's an incredible amount," I remarked.

"Dude, someone says 'Hokkaido,' you think, 'crab,' am I right?" he said. "I've been dyin' to get some crab, so I scooped 'em up in a hurry."

"You really are totally crude, aren't you?" said Nishino.



It was certainly true that, among the various dishes offered on the buffet menu, many students flocked to the crab. I didn't want to get mixed up in the crowd, so I gave up on trying to get any during my first pass.

"Whaddya mean, crude? It's a smorgasbord, dude! That means we can take all we want!" Ishizaki's personal opinion seemed to be that, if you didn't take it, you'd lose it.

"First of all, the word 'smorgasbord' is the lamest thing ever, so could you stop?" said Nishino.

"Huh? Well what else am I s'posed to call it?" asked Ishizaki.

"You say 'buffet,'" Nishino said. "It's a buffet."

"Boo-fay?" he repeated. "Nah, come on, now *that* sounds lame, don'tcha think? Seriously, what's that even s'posed to mean?"

There did seem to be differences in the terminology, and, well, if one was to be precise, it seemed like there were differences in the rules between how a smorgasbord and a buffet worked, but it looked like Nishino was more bothered by the heaping plate of crab than that.

"...Well, anyway, who cares about the details?" Ishizaki said. "I've totally been lookin' forward to the smorgasbord."

"...Have you considered other people? Crab is one of the main dishes, y'know," said Nishino.

"Say what? If I worried about that, then other people'd snatch it all up. Besides, it's all-you-can-eat, so I'm sure they got plenty."

Well, I had to admit there was at least some degree of truth to that. Ishizaki, having just come back from the buffet line, pointed over to where a chef was hurriedly replenishing the supply of boiled crab. Even in the worst-case scenario, if Ishizaki were to say he was going to eat it all, we had no right to stop him.

"Ugh, you're impossible." Nishino averted her eyes from Ishizaki, scooping up some chawanmushi and bringing the spoon to her mouth.

As for Albert, eating in silence next to us... It looked like his chosen lineup included boiled eggplant with bonito-flavored soy sauce, spinach with sesame sauce, various pieces of sashimi, miso soup, rice, and so on. Any way you looked at it, he'd chosen an assortment of definitively Japanese-style foods.

"You like Japanese food, huh?" I remarked.

In response, Albert gently set his chopsticks down for a moment, placing them side by side, and silently gave me a thumbs-up. Then, he immediately went back to enjoying his dinner. He had far, far better table manners than Ishizaki, who was gobbling everything down in big gulps.

"Hey, Ayanokouji," Ishizaki said. "You're in a group together with Ryuu-en-san, right? Stuff goin' good?"

"I'm not really doing anything special," I said. "The other people in the group are supportive, so thanks to them, I think we're hanging in there."

"You're talking like you don't know about that fight at the ski resort." Nishino had been one of the people involved in the affair. She sounded nonplussed as she reminded me about what happened.

"Yeah, I heard there was a fight with some dudes from another school or sumthin'?" said Ishizaki. "Damn, man, I wish I coulda been there too!"

"It would've been way, way worse if you were," Nishino huffed. "Why are so men so hotheaded?"

Despite what she said, Nishino had looked pretty brave to me back there. She talked back to those guys without fear while shielding Yamamura from their harassment.

"You're a pretty hotheaded chick yourself, though." Ishizaki guffawed loudly with his cheeks stuffed with crab.

"Gawd, shut up," said Nishino. "Also, stop spraying food everywhere when you eat; it's disgusting."

"You ain't makin' trouble for Ryuu-en-san either, are ya?" Ishizaki said to her. "Make sure ya listen to his orders good, 'kay?"

"You're free to put your blind faith in him, you do you or whatever, but why do I have to follow that guy?"

Though Nishino was taking an argumentative tone with Ishizaki, she was engaging in conversation with him properly, each of them taking turns. I supposed they were classmates who knew one another really well, then. I could only go on what I'd seen of Nishino while we'd been in a group together, but though she didn't talk very much, she didn't seem to make trouble for others, and she did seem to have a kind side, as she cared for Yamamura in her own way.

"You know, Nishino, I've been wondering about this for a long time," I said, "but are you not scared of Ryuuen?"

"Well, yeah, I guess I do get the feeling that things could get crazy whenever he gets serious, sure," she replied. "But my idiot older brother used to be a delinquent too, so I guess I might have a little more experience with that kind of thing."

So, she had someone like Ryuuen in her family, then? If that was true, then it made sense that she was able to talk back to those guys so confidently during that fight.

"It's so obvious that if you don't do what you're supposed to do properly when you're in school, you'll have a tough time," Nishino went on. "But my older brother was such a massive idiot during high school, he got all carried away and ended up getting kicked out, and then he had a hard time finding a job. He had a really tough time."

Nishino let out several heavy sighs when she recounted what happened, as though she didn't want to remember.

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"Well, he got picked up by a local construction company, basically, and he's been working himself practically to death at the site every day. For a really low monthly salary."

It was precisely because she could see the impending reality that loomed ahead, then, that she could only sigh when she thought about Ryuuen and Ishizaki's futures. Selfishly doing whatever you wanted now would mean suffering for it later. That

should be common sense throughout all of society, whether or not you were a delinquent. Putting aside the entertainment and creative industries, where talent was key, and the sports industry, where physical ability was most important, the higher your level of education, the better. The harder you worked in your studies, and the more knowledge you accumulated, the more likely you were to start from an easier position later in the working world.

"Y'know, despite how ya look, you're pretty smart, huh?" Ishizaki said.

"You really didn't need to say the 'despite how I look' part," snapped Nishino. "And besides, anybody would look smart from your point of view."

"Wah ha ha! Yeah, you might be right about that!"

Yes, I supposed that from Ishizaki's perspective, almost everyone here could be considered an honor student.

When I had finished my meal and was about to leave, I happened to spot a particular young man: Katsuragi. I saw that he was eating alone at a table in the corner, silently scooping food into his mouth. I was curious about how he was doing, so I thought I'd observe him for a little while, but then I saw something strange. When Oda, from Ryuuen's class, spotted Katsuragi and tried to go over and talk to him, Matoba from Class A candidly strolled up to talk to Oda, stopping him in his tracks. Then, after something Matoba said to him, Oda headed toward a different student while still keeping an eye on Katsuragi.

It was almost as though Matoba had done that deliberately, to keep Oda from making contact with Katsuragi. It wasn't just once, either; this happened two or three times in a row. Matoba was a member of group two, along with Katsuragi. It wouldn't have been surprising if Matoba had been sitting down at a table together with Katsuragi, but it was actually the opposite. It seemed that there were some people in Class A who did rather spiteful things. I would've been fine just leaving things be, but I decided to try making contact with Katsuragi at least once. Just then, Matoba, sensing that I was going to approach him, came up to me.

"We're in the middle of a little group event with Katsuragi right now," he said. "Would you leave him alone for the time being, please?"

I see. If Matoba said that it was a problem for group two, which they were both a part of, then even Katsuragi's classmates would have no other choice but to back down. That was why Oda understood right away and left. So, was this the collective will of Class A at work, or was this an action taken by Matoba alone? And was there an agenda to defeat Ryuu'en's class behind this, or not? In any case, from a third party's perspective, what Matoba was doing could only been seen as an act of malicious bullying.

Then, while Matoba was still on alert, a new visitor appeared. Matoba turned to stop this person, just as he had stopped me earlier, but it appeared that this visitor wasn't what he had expected.

"Uh..." Matoba gulped loudly and turned away, as though he hadn't had any intention of interfering in the first place.

"Yo, Katsuragi. You're eatin' your food with a pretty depressing look on yer face there, huh?"

It was no wonder Matoba couldn't say anything, because the visitor was none other than Ryuu'en. Matoba quietly clicked his tongue at the unexpected appearance of such a big player and immediately scuttled away. Without so much as even a glance at Matoba's back as he left, Ryuu'en took a seat in front of Katsuragi.

"I'm eating," Katsuragi said. "What do you want?"

"I just thought I'd get a closer look at your miserable face," said Ryuu'en.

"I don't understand what that's supposed to mean."

"Heh heh. This is what it means to betray your class. Too late to regret it now, Katsuragi."

"I don't have any regrets. I might not have a clue how to deal with a leader who can't be contained, but I am prepared to go down fighting with my current class."

Perhaps Katsuragi had phrased it that way to hide his embarrassment, but even though he used a somewhat roundabout

way of expressing it, I could tell that he was firmly aware of his position as a member of Ryuuen's class.

"That so?" Then, with a *thud*, Ryuuen plopped down on the chair that he pulled out and slid an empty glass over to me. "Get me some water, Ayanokouji."

"...Me?" I asked.

"Ain't no need for me to be afraid of you in the slightest when we're out in public like this," he said. "Makes it easy."

"Yeesh, I already figured you'd be a slave-driver when I found out we were in a group together, but... Good grief."

"Don't worry. I'll go." Katsuragi, unable to let something like that slide, offered to help, but I politely refused.

"I'm thirsty anyway, so it's perfect timing," I told him.

Besides, I had been able to catch a glimpse of Ryuuen expressing his concern for Katsuragi in his own way, as he was unable to sit around and watch Katsuragi eat his meal all alone. So, I figured I'd play along for the time being.

5.2

RYUUEN AND I stayed with Katsuragi until he finished his meal, and then we left the dining area. I spotted Kushida sitting perfectly still on a chair near the entrance, waiting for someone. She stood up when she saw Ryuuken, Katsuragi, and me, and approached without hesitation.

"Ryuuken-kun, could I talk to you for a moment?" she asked.

Apparently, she had been waiting patiently for Ryuuken to come out. Considering how quickly we had eaten, it was difficult to imagine that Kushida, a girl, had finished her meal before us. It was probably safe to assume that she had something she wanted to talk to Ryuuken about, so she had prepared in advance for it. Katsuragi must have figured out what was going on, because he quickly went on back to his room alone.

"Huh? Whaddya want?" asked Ryuuken.

"Not here, it's... Is it okay if we go somewhere else?" Kushida was in her usual public-self mode because of all the people around, but she seemed to be acting a little strange.

"Sorry, but I ain't interested in you."

"Ah ha ha, no, no, it's nothing like that. Or rather, you don't need to worry about that. I mean, I would rather die than go out with you, Ryuuken-kun." Though Kushida was being mindful of her surroundings, she directed her murderous intent square at Ryuuken, sparks flying.

"Well, sure, whatever, if you wanna talk, I'll listen," Ryuuken said. "We can get rid of the third wheel over there, though, right?"

By third wheel, he meant me, of course. Kushida put her palms together in an apology to me, and so I figured that I should get out of here. The two of them walked side by side over to an area where there weren't any people around. It seemed like if I just left them as they were, things would start heading in a not-so-great direction. Completely concealing my presence, I decided to follow them. I exercised the utmost caution, though, of course. It

turned out I was right to be cautious, because Ryuuuen seemed like he was worried there was something behind him, looking over his shoulder while they walked.

"So?" he said. "What did you wanna tell me so bad that you'd get me all alone to talk?"

"I wanted to talk about our relationship, Ryuuuen-kun," Kushida told him. "Even when we're acting as a group, you sometimes say things that aren't necessary. I'd like you to stop doing that."

From what I knew, Ryuuuen had threatened to expose Kushida twice now, practically lighting the fuse himself to blow everything up. It was obvious that Kushida wouldn't take very kindly to that.

"What do you want with me?" she demanded.

"What do I want?" Ryuuuen repeated. "I ain't planning to do nothin' to you right now."

"...Meaning that you're going to do something to me someday?" I could hear a slight lack of composure in Kushida's voice.

"You sold your soul to the devil to get Suzune expelled, remember?" said Ryuuuen. "Naturally, that came with risks. You can't just pretend it never happened after all this time, y'know?"

"Yes, you're right. I think so, too."

"Still, I gotta say, you sure have changed a lot, Kikyou. I'm sure the old you wouldn't have even thought about tryin' to press me like this right now, even if I provoked you. Wouldn't ya agree?"

Ryuuuen shouldn't have known anything about what happened during the Unanimous Special Exam—but he did have a sharp nose, so I supposed he must have sensed that something was strange.

"Maybe, just maybe, somebody came along who accepts your true nature?" he said.

"You can heap whatever suspicions you want on me, but they're misguided," said Kushida.

"Heh heh. In any case, you're one of the all-too-important keys to my class strategy. When the time comes for me to deal with Suzune's class, I'm gonna use this weapon without mercy."

Ryuuuen had intentionally avoided mentioning anything about Kushida all this time. From the sounds of it, he was keeping that in his pocket as one of the measures he could take to effectively cause damage in more important situations in the future. That was an obstacle for Kushida, who, after recovering, had decided to serve the class, albeit for her own sake. It wasn't something that she could remove easily, and she would continue to be made to suffer.

"What're ya gonna do?" he taunted her. "You gonna get down on your hands and knees and beg me not to tell anyone? Or perhaps you're gonna try and get rid of me, get me expelled? Either way, it'll be difficult for you."

"I..."

I couldn't let Kushida choose either of those options. Even if, hypothetically speaking, there were a third choice, I couldn't let that happen either.

I stopped hiding, deciding to show myself to the two of them. "Sorry, Ryuuuen, but you're going to have to back down on the matter of Kushida," I declared.

"Tch. You followed us after all, huh?" sneered Ryuuuen.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun?!" Kushida exclaimed.

"You being on your guard was something I had already taken into account," I explained.

"Well, whatever," said Ryuuuen. "So? Whaddya mean, I gotta back down on the Kikyou thing?"

"It means exactly what it sounds like. I know you probably intend to tell everyone about Kushida, but I'd like you to stop."

Ryuuuen laughed in amusement at my warning, clapping. "Ha ha ha! What, you tellin' me that you're involved in this too? And on top of that, you're sayin' that she's not the cancer of her class like she used to be anymore, huh?" Having received an answer that removed any of his doubts, he smiled happily.

"That's right," I agreed. "Right now, Kushida is taking a new step forward as Horikita's classmate. I have no intention of letting you interfere and ruin that."

"Sorry, but this sounds like it just got even more fascinatin'. Let's put our interests aside for a minute and have some fun here, huh?"

"No one will believe anything you say, Ryuuen-kun." Kushida, unable to take it any longer, tried standing up to Ryuuen, but he wasn't going to stop at just those words.

"Hm. I have to wonder about that, though," he said. "You never know till you try, after all."

What we needed now wasn't some half-hearted attempt at getting him to stop what he was doing with words, but rather, a complete shutdown of his actions.

"If you do decide that you're going to expose her, no one can stop you," I admitted. Kushida couldn't hide her anxiety and humiliation at my words, but I lightly tapped her on the shoulder and told her not to worry. "But if you do that, you won't be able to achieve your goal of fighting against Sakayanagi in the final exam."

"What? How can you know that for sure?"

"Because I'll deal with the situation in a way that you wouldn't want."

In an instant, Ryuuen's smile was replaced with a look of suspicion. It was just like the look he'd had when he had abducted Kei in the past, when he hadn't known what fear was—or actually, perhaps even more suspicious than then.

"Hah," he scoffed. "What's this? Now, that's a look you haven't shown me in quite a long time, eh?"

I moved in closer to Ryuuen, inserting myself between him and Kushida.

"Come on. Even if I *do* choose to stay silent right here and now...there ain't no guarantee that I won't expose her later, right?" he said.

Ryuuuen looked like he had fight in him, but eventually, he backed down, throwing his hands up. "I'll let it go," he conceded. "I didn't even feel like attackin' your class with the whole Kikyou thing in the first place anyway. Well, actually, I guess I should I say that I don't feel like it *anymore*."

"What do you mean?" asked Kushida.

"If it ain't somethin' I can get Ayanokouji with, then it ain't a weapon I can use."

"Huh...?"

"I dunno if you know this, Kikyou, but yesterday, this guy over here told me somethin'. He said that he doesn't want to expel you anymore. So, even if I attacked your class usin' your story, it wouldn't affect *you* anymore, would it, Ayanokouji?"

"That's right," I replied. "I've already thought of countermeasures."

"It don't make any sense to use a strategy that won't work and only have it comin' back to bite me in the ass. Right? I've learned the hard way that I ain't gonna defeat ya with half-assed plans."

It wasn't at all that Ryuuuen was giving in and turning servile, of course; I was sure that he was going to come back and challenge Horikita's class with some elaborate scheme that even I hadn't considered.

"I'm headin' back to my room now," he said. "Bye, Kushida. Enjoy the rest of your time here at this school as much as ya can."

Ryuuuen headed back to the room, his attitude seemingly saying, *Don't try and stop me again*. He'd even gone from calling her Kikyou to calling her Kushida. Was that the flip side of what happened when Ryuuuen completely lost interest in someone?

Only Kushida and I remained, standing there in silence.

"Why...did you come to my rescue?" said Kushida. "There's no benefit in it for you, Ayanokouji-kun."

"There is a benefit for me, though," I argued. "It's that you are an indispensable asset to the class. I don't think that Ryuuuen

would have actually gone through with exposing you, even if I hadn't come, but I wasn't sure what you were going to do. You were probably wondering if there was anything you could do to get him to keep his mouth shut, right?"

"...Well, yes, I..."

"Ryuu-en isn't an opponent that you can compete with. You would've found yourself in trouble if you rushed into a battle that you didn't start and got yourself blown up. That's why I decided to say something."

"So, you're saying that you could do something, then, Ayanokouji-kun? Well, yes... The truth is that it seems like you did."

"At the very least, I think that at this point in time, Ryuu-en isn't a big enough deal for me to see him as a formidable opponent."

"H-huh? What is that supposed to..."

"Anyway, you don't need to cross that dangerous bridge anymore. Just take care of yourself for now."

"When you say something like that, it really makes me uncomfortable. You need my help with the class that badly?"

"There's that too, yes."

"That 'too'?" she asked.

"I feel like I can work together well with you, Kushida, now that we speak frankly with each other," I explained.

Being able to see her hidden side had also made it easier for me to infer what she was thinking.

"Just stop," she protested. "There's no way that anyone could seriously think something like that after finding out what I'm really like." She herself was painfully aware that she had a personality that wasn't well-liked.

"That's not true," I replied. "To be honest, I like you."

"What is... I don't know how serious you're being about this. I can't trust you, Ayanokouji-kun." Normally Kushida would've thought it sounded like a joke and laughed at me, but right now, her expression was stiff.

"It's the truth. There are some people out there in the world who are more comfortable with the real you."

"That's—" Kushida looked at me like she was about to say something, her mouth open. But she stopped moving. Then, she suddenly started walking toward the wall.

"...What?" I asked.

Suddenly, she thrust out both arms in front of her, hands open wide, pushing the wall as hard as she could with both palms. "I'm okay, I'm okay..." she mumbled to herself, her movements coming to a complete stop.

I watched her, wondering what was going on. After Kushida caught her breath, she turned back around to look at me.

"I just got a little dizzy! But I'm okay-A! I mean, A! Okay!" she sputtered. Despite her attempts to tell me I didn't need to worry about her, her voice shot up in volume in a very strange way.

"...Are you really okay?" I asked.

Kushida showed me the face she usually wore out in public, though she really didn't appear to be okay to me.

"Yes. I'm fine!" she replied.

"O-okay."

In Kushida's case, it was honestly very difficult to read her emotions.

"I kind of feel like I've been saved by you, Ayanokouji-kun... Thanks," she said.

"I feel like you've been thanking me more these days, Kushida," I remarked.

"Yeah, you might be right about that... Anyway, I won't be getting involved with Ryuuuen-kun anymore from now on."

"That's good."

"Okay, I'm going to head back to my room. See you tomorrow."

"Yeah, tomorrow."

Kushida walked down the hallway. From the look on her face, she seemed like she made a complete recovery. However, she stumbled while on her way down the hall, and she took a massive spill, causing one of her wooden sandals to go flying in spectacular fashion.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Fine! Perfectly! Fine!" She gestured to me not to come over with a wave of her hand, then staggered back to her feet and put her wooden sandal back on.

5.3

SINCE I HAD A MEETING with Horikita, I waited in the hallway to the guest rooms with my back against the wall.

"Sorry for being a little late." Though Horikita apologized as soon as she appeared, she hadn't actually been especially late, so there wasn't really an issue. "Getting straight down to business, let's—"

"Do you really plan on having a long conversation out here?" I asked, interrupting her.

We were near the guest accommodations, so students were constantly coming and going from their rooms. This was one of the least appropriate places to talk about things you didn't want to be overheard.

"No, this definitely isn't a good place to talk," Horikita agreed. "Let's see, somewhere appropriate. Let's head over to the vending machines to get a drink. We can talk while we walk, so that's perfect, no?"

I figured that was fine, and didn't really have any objections, so I agreed. You were more or less guaranteed to attract attention when you stood around and talked. But if you chatted while walking, you didn't have to worry about it.

"They sell fruit milk in the vending machines out in front of the large bathhouse," I suggested. "It's delicious."

I had been told that it was the thing to drink after taking a dip in the bath, and after trying it for myself, I really felt like it was true.

"Thank you for your childish commentary," said Horikita. "But that's not something you drink in the middle of the night, is it?"

Was time an issue? Well, actually, I supposed that maybe fruit milk just wasn't that special from a girl's point of a view.

"Even so, the vending machines at the main bath are some distance away, so sure, let's walk over that way," she said.

She began to walk slowly, showing me that she was prioritizing talking for the time being.

"About what happened at the Cultural Festival," she began. "I've been wanting to talk to you about that, but I haven't had the opportunity to. It's been bothering me for a long time now, and I couldn't find a suitable time to bring it up until today."

"You must have been extremely exhausted back then," I said. "You let me see your sleeping face, completely unprotected."

"...Do you want to get kicked?" said Horikita. She got into a stance that demonstrated that she was more than willing to do it, and I immediately raised the white flag and surrendered.

"Forgive me," I said.

"Ugh, talk about negligence on my part," she sighed. "A blunder. To think, I let a boy see me sleeping. You have sullied me."

"Are you really that bothered by it?" I asked.

"It is something to be bothered about... But it doesn't matter right now. I want to ask you about something that happened that day." Horikita tried to brush her embarrassment aside with a wave of her hand, and her expression turned serious. "That incident that took place in the student council office that day. You had something to do with it, didn't you?"

What happened at the Cultural Festival that day in the student council office... There was only one thing she could be referring to.

"Did you get Yagami-kun expelled?" she asked.

"Why do you think I had something to do with it?" I wasn't exactly dodging the question, but I was interested in hearing the reason she had concluded that.

"I don't know whether you knew this or not, but it's possible that Yagami-kun was trying to get you expelled," she said. "In fact, the things he said and did in the student council office support that idea."

It sounded like Horikita had come by several pieces of information in her own way, without my knowledge. It made sense that, in the process of putting those pieces down and trying to fit them together, she had figured some things out.

"I didn't know about Yagami, no," I replied, "but it doesn't sound like it should come as that much of a surprise. You already knew firsthand that Housen tried to get me expelled, after all."

"For the twenty million Private Point reward, yes," said Horikita.

"So, Yagami was participating in that test too, and keeping an eye out for an opportunity. Right?"

"I considered that, too. But there are too many things that seem unnatural. More than anything else, I didn't get the impression that he was trying to get to you in order to obtain money."

From the sounds of it, as someone who was present at the scene, Horikita understood the situation in more detail.

"There are lots of questions that I've been curious about the answers to," she added. "But those aren't what I want to know most."

"Then, what do you want to know?" I asked.

"Your true identity. I can't possibly imagine that you're a normal student, like everyone else."

"Well, that's a rather troubling question. If I'm not normal, then what kind of student am I?"

"...I don't know. It's not about whether you're exceptionally talented. It's just, I can't even begin to imagine what sort of person you are. It's impossible for me to decipher."

So, she wanted to know the answer to the question of who the person called Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was, hm?

"There's really nothing all that special to say about me," I told her. "Honestly, I just don't have anything to even talk about."

"Well, if I were to ask you questions, would you give me answers?" she said. "Where you're from, what elementary school

you graduated from, your junior high school. Have you participated in any competitions or anything like that in the past? Did you study on your own? Did you go to cram school, or did you have a private tutor?"

I bet that people didn't even ask you such detailed questions when you went to a formal marriage interview.

"I understand what you're trying to get at here, but I don't feel like responding to so many tedious questions," I replied.

Horikita pursed her lips in a blatant show of dissatisfaction.

"Which is why I'm going to disclose some information," I added.

"...What kind of information?" she asked.

"For example... Ah, okay, I've got it. Things like how I was involved in what happened with Yagami, just as you guessed."

"You're not joking, are you? So, was it because Yagami-kun was trying to get you expelled?"

"Technically, I didn't know Yagami was the one who was trying to get me expelled," I explained. "It would be more accurate to say that I'd set a trap for the student who was after me, and Yagami happened to be the one who fell for it. President Nagumo, Ryuuuen, and the others being there in the student council room—I had orchestrated all of that. My goal was to fence Yagami in, so that he wouldn't be able to weasel his way out of it with any half-cocked excuses."

Up until this point, there would have been no point in me telling Horikita all of this. However, by giving her this data, I could indirectly show her what kind of person I was. I did so to create the possibility that she could make use of this information, when the time eventually came for us to face one another.

"There's no connection between President Nagumo and Ryuuuen," I added. "I talked to them separately, that was all."

"So, that feeling I had back then, that something was off... I think I understand what that was coming from," said Horikita.

"By the way," I said, "we're almost at our destination."

We had arrived at the rest area on the second floor of the large bathhouse where the vending machines were located. There were two female teachers monopolizing the massage chairs there, sitting back in the chairs with looks of total contentment and relaxation on their faces; they didn't seem to notice us.



Horikita and I briefly exchanged looks. We could have just ignored them, but Horikita chose to call out to them instead.

"You certainly seem very relaxed," she said.

"Huh? Oh. Why, if it isn't Horikita-san." Hoshinomiya-sensei responded with a light wave, fluttering her hand at the wrist.

"The students are just about to go to bed, but the teachers are still on duty?" asked Horikita.

"Yes, unfortunately," Hoshinomiya-sensei replied. "It's like we only had half a day off today. Right, Sae-chan?"

"Yes, it certainly is like that." Leaning into the rattling massage chair, Chabashira-sensei looked comfortable, her eyes shut.

"Does the chair feel that good?" I asked.

I was interested in trying it out for myself, but I was wary of being seen by the students who were incessantly coming and going in and out of the bathhouse.

"Massage chairs really become indispensable as you get on in years," Chabashira-sensei said. "There are a lot of hardships that you young people wouldn't understand."

From the sounds of it, with the decline of their physical bodies, they needed equipment for support.

"Especially in your case, Sae-chan, since your shoulders get awfully stiff," added Hoshinomiya-sensei.

"You didn't need to chime in with that unnecessary addendum," said Chabashira-sensei.

It was only for a brief instant, but the teachers exchanged sharp, angry looks, sparks flying.

"Anyway, Horikita-san, it really seems like you've become a true, proper leader," Hoshinomiya-sensei said. "Are you feeling comfortable in Class B now? I just wanted to ask, speaking as the teacher of the former Class B."

"Not particularly, no," Horikita replied. "What I'm aiming for is Class A. Where I'm at now is nothing more than a checkpoint."

"That goes without saying, yes," replied Hoshinomiya-sensei.

Disregarding their conversation, I reached for the remote control that connected to Chabashira-sensei's massage chair. It seemed like there were five levels of intensity, and right now, it was set on level three. Obviously, the stronger the intensity, the more effective it would be. For some reason, I found myself feeling curious about how powerful the fifth level would be, so I decided to test it out.

"Mm! Eeek! Mmmph?!" Chabashira-sensei practically leapt out of the seat in surprise, and the machine started to let out loud rattling sounds. I had thought it would only be about a 40 percent increase in functionality, but it might've been more than that.

"A-Ayanokouji, wh-what are you, mm, doing?! T-turn it back!" she shouted.

She reached for the remote, clearly flustered, and forcefully tugged on the cord it was connected to, causing it to fall out of my hands.

"U-ughh! Eek! Ah... H-hurry, get it!"

"In that case, please don't yank it out of my hands," I said. I picked up the remote control and turned it back down from level five to level three.

"Huff, huff...h-huff... What the hell did you think you were doing...?!"

"Well... I was just curious, I suppose. I figured that the stronger the intensity, the better."

"Of course not!" she snapped. "The right level of intensity depends on the person!"

She looked really angry now, her face bright red, more demonic than I had ever seen her before. Apparently, that had been much more stimulating than I had expected it would be.

"What are you doing?" asked Horikita, exasperated. Apparently, my loud exchange with Chabashira-sensei had attracted her notice. "Sorry for interrupting your break," she said to the teachers. "Let's go, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Are you two going into the baths?" Hoshinomiya-sensei asked. "You can't go in together, you know."

Horikita ignored the nonsense the teacher was talking and motioned that she was going to keep walking.

"Wait, Horikita-san." Hoshinomiya had been joking around just moments ago, but all of a sudden she had a serious look on her face.

"I certainly do think that your class is growing at a remarkable rate, Horikita-san," she said. "And you're right, Class B is a checkpoint that you need to reach in getting to Class A. That much is obvious, but still, I also think what you've done is wonderful, and very admirable, too."

It sounded like she was praising Horikita, but her words were loaded with meaning.

"Chie, don't say anything unnecessary," snapped Chabashira-sensei.

"Come on, what's the harm?" Hoshinomiya-sensei said. "I'm just trying to tell her what I think, is all."

"I don't know what you're trying to say, but it's not like we can freely say whatever we think," said Chabashira-sensei.

"Please tell me." Horikita cut in, urging her to speak. She must have been curious about what Hoshinomiya-sensei was going to say next.

"All right, in that case, I'll continue," said Hoshinomiya-sensei. "So, yes, speaking as a homeroom instructor in charge of a class, I do have a lot of thoughts. The teachers too, from Class A to Class D, are also competing against one another like you are. If I were to use an analogy here, you could say that it's like we teachers are playing the card game daifugou against each other."

"Playing...daifugou?" echoed Horikita.

"Do you know the rules?" Hoshinomiya-sensei asked her.

"Yes, kind of."

"In that sense, we use the cards we're dealt to fight and decide who comes in first through fourth place, and in this school,

we spread that fight over three years," Hoshinomiya-sensei explained. "In daifugou, you use cards numbered one through thirteen... Putting aside regional differences in rules or special rulesets for the time being, essentially, cards with higher numbers are stronger, and cards with lower numbers are weaker, right? So, if a student who only has a value of three clashes against a student with a value of six, the student with six will win, of course. Mashima-kun's Class A, for example, would tend to have a certain range of cards. He'd be dealt more tens and elevens. On the other hand, going further down, like to Class D, you'll see more lower-value cards, like threes and fours. Well, that's the way it has historically been at this school, anyway."

Hoshinomiya-sensei reached for the remote control for her massage chair and raised the intensity one level to level three. I was reminded again of just how intense level five was.

"Of course, students are changing every day," she continued. "I think that there are cases where kids who were threes or fours grow into twelves or thirtens, or in rare instances, become the most powerful number, twos. So, class fluctuations do happen, and sometimes, Class D can become Class B. Of course, that is extremely rare, though."

That meant that what Horikita's class had accomplished was unprecedented.

"But what's important is that everyone is fighting on equal footing," said Hoshinomiya-sensei. "Namely, that every class is always fighting within the same boundaries, with numbers one through thirteen. We can't have any unfairness or misalignments in a particular class, can we?"

"No, you're right," said Horikita.

"But don't you think that one card that shouldn't have been added to the deck was mixed into your class, Horikita-san?"

"A card that...shouldn't have been added?"

Hoshinomiya-sensei was smiling, but she was directing her gaze toward me. "That's right. It's unfair. Sae-chan's class is the only one that has the Joker."

Horikita also noticed Hoshinomiya-sensei looking at me, as though her gaze was naming me aloud.

"Chie. Cut it out already," snapped Chabashira-sensei.

"Hey, I'm entitled to grumble a bit," Hoshinomiya-sensei complained. "Even if we fight smart, fight desperately hard, a single Joker can turn the whole situation upside down. Actually, wait. It's much, much worse than just playing daifugō. In cards, after you play the Joker once, it goes away. In this case, you can keep playing it repeatedly. There's no way we can win."

What she had just said, as a homeroom teacher, could have been interpreted as her declaring that her own class had already lost.

"Putting aside whether what you've said is right or wrong, what would you do if a student from Class D heard what you just said?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

An admission of defeat. If students from Ichinose's class heard it, they'd inevitably be shocked.

"...Yes, you're right. Sorry about that. The massage chair's probably just making the alcohol hit me harder." So saying, Hoshinomiya-sensei switched the power off. "You got the Joker because of luck, Sae-chan, Horikita-san. If you use that to get into Class A, well, that's just plain unfair, isn't it?"

It would be obvious to anyone that it was meant as a snide remark.

"That's enough, Chie." Chabashira-sensei had raised her voice, coming awfully close to sounding threatening. I'd never heard that tone of voice from her before. Hoshinomiya-sensei must have sobered in an instant, because she hurriedly jumped out of the chair.

"Welp, I'm heading back to my room! Farewell!" she exclaimed. Clearly slightly peeved, she waved to us and walked down the hall with long, exaggerated strides.

"I'm sorry about all that." Chabashira-sensei got up from her own massage chair and spoke on her colleague's behalf. "I know

she already said as much herself, but it was likely just the alcohol talking."

"I don't mind. I just disregarded it as nonsensical drunken ramblings," said Horikita flatly.

In response to Horikita's sudden, biting comment, Chabashira-sensei was a little shaken, and coughed. "You're pretty harsh," she said.

"It seemed like you were a little concerned about what she was saying before, sensei," said Horikita.

"It's not as though I don't have any thoughts on the matter, to be honest," Chabashira-sensei admitted. "Things are vastly different now than they were with the class I oversaw three years ago."

It was certainly true that there were powerful cards in Horikita's class.

"I don't know whether Ayanokouji-kun is a Joker or not," Horikita said, "but I won't deny that he is a powerful classmate. However, I'm not going to hold anything back because of that." She didn't even so much as look at me as she offered her thoughts to Chabashira-sensei. "I will fight with everything I have, using the cards that have been dealt to me in your class, Chabashira-sensei. Because I am aiming for Class A."

"Yes. Of course, that's the goal," said Chabashira-sensei.

However, I was sure that Chabashira-sensei herself likely thought that Horikita wasn't sufficiently prepared for it. Class A, led by Sakayanagi, also had a lot of great cards. Even if you won one game, there was no telling what would happen in the next ten or twenty.

"Well... I'm going to go after Chie," Chabashira-sensei said. "If I leave her alone, I'm afraid she might drink herself silly until morning."

With that, Chabashira-sensei set out after Hoshinomiya-sensei. It sounded like she couldn't abandon a friend and former classmate.

I turned to Horikita. "Well, guess that's it for today, Horikita."

"There's still a mountain of questions I want to ask you, though, Joker-san," she replied.

"Since we've come all this way, I want to hop in the bath again," I said. "Besides, there are more people here now."

I was starting to catch glimpses of students who wanted to enjoy a bath before going to bed, as they trickled in.

"So, can I assume this means that you'll talk to me later?" asked Horikita.

I nodded in response, and then went through the curtain leading to the men's bath.

5.4

ELEVEN P.M. was drawing near, and it was about time for lights out. Kitou stood up without a word, heading out into the hall carrying several magazines that he had borrowed.

"He's been reading in the room almost this whole time, huh?" I mused.

He must've liked reading. Unlike me or Hiyori, though, Kitou didn't look to be the type to read books from the library. When he returned a few minutes later, he had a new magazine in his hand, maybe so that he could read it as soon as he woke up in the morning. The magazines that Kitou read strongly reflected his personal tastes, and most of them were what you'd call fashion magazines.

"Would you let me read that for a sec?" I asked him.

I was expecting him to tell me to get one myself, but Kitou silently placed the magazine on the table. I supposed I could take that to mean it was okay for me to read it if I wanted. I decided to give the magazine a brief read, for the just over ten minutes we had until lights out.

It featured things like trendy clothing and accessories. To be honest, I couldn't really understand the meaning of the pictures in the magazine, or the articles, either. However, I could tell that Kitou had a strong emotional attachment to these magazines. Kitou's outfits, which to me seemed like eccentric fashions, were filled with his own sense of style and his feelings. It would have been interesting if Ryuuen, who often quarreled with Kitou, said that his interest in fashion was stupid; however, Ryuuen hadn't made any such heckling remarks.

Soon, it was time for lights out, so we shut them off and lay down in bed.

I quietly stared up at the ceiling for a while, my vision gradually adjusting to the darkness. It didn't seem like everyone

was asleep yet, and I wondered what they were thinking about. Just as I did, Watanabe spoke up.

"You know, we're going to be third-years in just half a year," he said. "Even while we're competing to get into Class A, we've still got to think about our future, like if we're going to college, going into the workforce, all that stuff. I still can't imagine what I'm gonna be after graduating high school. And there's nothing in particular that I really want to do. What about you, Ayanokouji?"

"Higher education...I suppose," I answered. I figured I'd say the goal that sounded the safest. "Though I haven't decided on what specific university."

"What about you, Kitou?" asked Watanabe. He probably wasn't confident that he'd be able to get an answer from Kitou, but he asked outright anyway, not afraid.

"...I'm going to be a fashion designer," said Kitou.

"Huh?!" Watanabe was doubly surprised, as not only did he not think he would get an answer, he was also shocked by the answer he got.

"I'm sure you're surprised," Kitou said. "I can understand that. I don't think anyone would expect it, judging from my appearance."

"W-well, no, it's... It kinda hurts to admit it, but I suppose not, no..."

However, it was easy to understand once you considered Kitou's personal fashion sense and the contents of the magazines he often read.

"Heh heh. I think if you said that you were gonna become a killer for hire, Watanabe'd find that easier to swallow," said Ryuuuen.

I was worried that Ryuuuen butting in with that comment might make Kitou angry, but I didn't see him move.

"D-don't worry about it, Kitou. I mean, Ryuuuen's always sayin' stuff like that." Watanabe tried to smooth things over, but Kitou really didn't seem like he cared.

"I'm used to it," he said. "Most people are surprised when I tell them about my dreams. They find them hard to swallow. Even if I'm heading straight ahead on that path, I can't imagine that people will accept me readily."

There should be no such thing as prejudice, but it certainly did exist in this world. For someone who looked as tough and frightening as Kitou, I was sure that the hurdle to some professions would naturally be quite high.

"But that won't matter if I graduate from Class A," Kitou went on. "I can still leap into that world, no question about it. Once I jump in, all I have to do is silence everyone around me with my skill."

It sounded like, for Kitou, just getting his foot in the door, achieving that first part, was the most challenging task.

"Wow, you're really giving a lot of thought to the future... I mean, that's awesome. You've got a real dream," said Watanabe. He was surprised, but he was impressed by how much thought Kitou had given his future compared to himself, and he offered him genuine praise.

Children grow older whether they like it or not, and they are faced with the necessity of entering society. It was the same even for Watanabe, who didn't have a goal right now, and for Ryuuken, who wasn't talking about his.

"You know, I just kind of asked without thinking, and...now that I know, it kind of makes things harder," mumbled Watanabe, forcing a laugh as he looked up at the ceiling. "I mean, all of us here, we're in different classes, right? So, if you think about it, only one of the four of us can graduate from Class A. I bet everyone here's got a dream that they want to achieve, but, like, if you take that spot in Class A, that means someone else isn't getting it... It's complicated."

If you were classmates, you could share dreams. But if you were rivals, you couldn't. That was how this school worked. Some students would be smiling, while others would weep.

I wondered if spending the night together with students your age normally led to this kind of conversation. It reminded me of

the night that I'd spent talking with Keisei and the other guys at camp last year.

Chapter 6: School Trip Day Four

IT WAS THE MORNING of the fourth day of the school trip. Tomorrow, it would already be time to go back to school. Since this was the second time we were going to have complete freedom, I wanted to make it a day with no regrets.

The results of yesterday's sightseeing tour showed that ten groups, meaning half of the twenty total groups, had managed to score twenty points or more, and so all those people had earned 30,000 Private Points. On the other hand, group fifteen, which Mii-chan and Miyamoto were in, hadn't finished the tour in time and was thus disqualified, so they were unfortunately spending today in study hall at the ryokan.

I felt a little sorry for them, but that's just how things were. I hoped that once their study hall was over, they could take a nice, long soak in the hot springs and enjoy the trip as much as possible, even if it was only a little.

The large bathhouse was being cleaned right now, so I quickly got changed. I was thinking that maybe I'd watch some TV or something, like yesterday, but Kitou had apparently gotten to it before I did, and was staring at the screen with rapt attention. I didn't know what it was exactly, but it looked to be some kind of special feature on fashion that had caught Kitou's interest.

"Hey, Ayanokouji," Watanabe said. "Sounds like they're having a snowball fight outside!"

"Snowball fight?" I repeated.

Watanabe, who had also finished changing, showed me his phone. From the looks of things, some people were going to have a snowball fight starting now, and everyone was free to join in.

"That sounds interesting," I said. "Think I'll go check it out."

"Ryuu-en, Kitou, what about you guys?" asked Watanabe.

Kitou was too absorbed in his TV program to answer, but Ryuuken quickly headed for his usual spot in the room, making a clear statement that he was going to pass.

"Okay, guess it's just you and me then. Let's go," said Watanabe.

"Yeah," I replied. The two people we had left behind were like water and oil, but I'd just place my trust in their consciences.

When Watanabe and I exited the ryokan together, I saw that a considerable number of students had already gathered.

"Good morning, Kiyotaka-kun, Watanabe-kun," Yousuke called out to us. He had been standing near the entrance, his phone in his hand.

"There really are a lot of people here," I remarked.
"Is everyone *that* interested in a snowball fight?"

"I don't think it's that simple. This is a snowball fight where contestants gamble Private Points," Yousuke explained. "Well, though I say gamble, you only have to pay a thousand points to qualify. The winning team basically takes points from the losing team."

I see. Even if you lost, you wouldn't lose that much. If you won, you'd receive enough money to get a souvenir or two. With how casual this was, it was no wonder that people were so excited.

"But still, is it okay for people to do this?" I asked. "Even though it is a wide-open space, we're still on the premises of the ryokan."

"Yeah, it's fine," Yousuke said. "I asked just to be safe, and the staff said that they don't mind as long as we do it early in the day. I think that the fact that there isn't anyone staying at the ryokan other than us students, who are here for a school trip, was probably a crucial factor, too."

The rules were unquestionably plain and simple. You weren't allowed to catch snowballs; you could only dodge them. Students who were hit with a snowball had to leave the field. However, snowballs needed to be a certain size. For example, if you just

tossed snow that was like powder, making it spread out in the air like a shotgun blast, it wouldn't count, even if you did happen to hit someone. It seemed like whether a hit was official was determined by both student self-reporting and referee judgment. Well, I supposed that only a couple people would intentionally cheat just for a few Private Points.

"How many people are planning to participate?" I asked.

"About thirty right now, I think," said Yousuke. "Are you going to play too, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Well, I..." I trailed off. I was thinking that I should probably decline, but still, I had to wonder. A snowball fight. If I chose to sit this one out, then I might not ever get a chance to try it again. "I want to try, but I don't have a team."

"Don't worry. I'll assign you to a team that's short on numbers. Just wait a little bit," said Yousuke.

He seemed to be the one taking care of the bothersome matters, for which I was immensely grateful. I supposed that was probably why he was hanging out near the entrance. Taking care of everything on your own could come with a lot of difficulties, but knowing Yousuke, he might feel more relaxed if he could manage everything on his own. As I was waiting, for what I anticipated to be roughly ten minutes or so until the cutoff for signing up, Horikita showed up. She must also have come after hearing about the snowball fight.

"I've already heard as much, but wow, there really are a lot of people here," she said.

"Are you thinking of joining too, by any chance?" I asked.

"Yes, actually... It is a school trip, after all. If there's an open spot, I think I'll enter."

It sounded like she hadn't originally planned to join in, but she changed her mind after seeing that the snowball fight was more popular than she had expected.

"In that case, you're on, Horikita!" Ibuki emerged from the crowd to challenge Horikita, as though she had been waiting for her.

"...So, you're here too, Ibuki-san," said Horikita. "Seriously, you always seem to just show up out of thin air everywhere I go. But whatever. It's just a simple game anyway, but if you want, I don't mind taking you on."

The instant that Horikita responded, Ibuki clenched her fist tight. "Sure, it may just be a game or whatever, but a loss is a loss. Don't whine and make excuses like a little kid afterward, 'kay?"

"I should say the exact same thing back to you," Horikita replied.

Yousuke must have been watching those two closely. When I snuck a glance at his phone, I could tell he took their situation into account, because he had assigned them to different teams. It likely wouldn't have been overly exciting if they were on the same team. Since I was sneaking a peek at his phone anyway, I whispered into Yousuke's ear and asked him for a small favor.

Just then, Kushida appeared with Yamamura, Nishino, and Amikura in tow.

"Good morning, everyone," she said.

"Oh, Kushida, I was wondering where you were. Looks like you invited Yamamura and the others, too, eh?" I remarked.

"Huh? ...Oh, uh, yeah, I did." I expected her to respond with her usual smile, but Kushida averted her eyes, mumbling. Then she quickly looked back with a smile. "Nishino-san and Yamamura-san said that they'd just wait in their room until it was time to go, but I told them that'd be a waste."

"That was the right decision," I agreed.

We had been spending time as a group, and our relationship had been improving, little by little. It was more worthwhile for us to spend our time together, whether we were actually participating in the event or just spectating.

"You doin' this too?" Ibuki asked Kushida.

"Hm? The snowball fight?" Kushida replied.

"Yeah. It's been decided that me and Horikita are gonna battle it out," said Ibuki.

"I see," said Kushida. "But I think I'll pass, actually. I'd feel bad if I hit someone with a snowball. I don't think I could do it—I'd feel sorry for them."

"Huh?" Ibuki gestured like she was grossed out, as though Kushida's behavior was thoroughly disgusting to her. Seeing that, Horikita thrust her hand into Ibuki's side with a quick chop.

"Ow! The hell was that for?!"

"I'm your opponent, remember?" Horikita said. "If you think about unnecessary things, you'll lose in no time."

"No way am I gonna lose. I am definitely gonna make you cry!" shouted Ibuki.

I see. I had thought that the sense of distance between Horikita and Kushida had changed recently, and it looked like Ibuki was involved, too. The three of them were twisted, for sure, but strangely enough, they might have been doing a decent job of straightening themselves out.

Lit: "Those crooked three, but strangely enough they might be purifying themselves well" Ayanokouji is basically saying that they might be helping each other become better people, in a way, in his view.

The number of students participating continued to increase bit by bit. In the end, there were forty-two people spread across six teams. There were four teams of seven people that had formed on their own, without any assistance. And the two other teams were made up of the odd ones out, like me. The snowball fight wasn't conducted in anything like a tournament setting. It would just be single rounds.

Perhaps Yousuke had done this because he thought it would be more exciting, but he decided to have the Horikita-Ibuki grudge match as the third and final game. For the first game, there was a team of seven boys led by Ishizaki and Albert, and then another team of seven boys, led by Sudou. It truly was a clash between men. Right from the start of the game, snowballs flew with incredible force from both the left and right side.

There were a total of fourteen people throwing snowballs at each other, after all, so it would be difficult for everyone to avoid them all. Within about ten seconds or so, six players from both teams were gone already. Incidentally, the incredibly enthusiastic Ishizaki was one of the players who had left the game in those ten seconds. As for Sudou, he seemed to be putting his frustration over being rejected by Horikita into his snowballs, because he was taking out opponents on the opposing team one after another.

However, Ishizaki's team still had Albert in play, and, demonstrating a level of nimble maneuverability you wouldn't expect considering his massive frame, he avoided being hit. He was putting up a good fight, having taken out two people himself.

Yamamura was quietly spectating the impressive battle, so I decided to try getting a little closer to her.

"It's getting exciting, isn't it?" she said, after noticing my presence. Her facial expression was pretty much the same as usual, with just some slight variation, but she did seem to be enjoying herself somewhat.

"Yeah, it looks that way," I agreed.

Yamamura exhaled deeply, breathing into her palms. I noticed that she wasn't wearing gloves, even though she was supposed to buy another pair at the ski resort.



"Did you forget your gloves again or something?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied.

I went to take off my gloves, but Yamamura stopped me.

"I'm sorry. That was a joke. I did bring them with me," she said, taking a pair of gloves out of her pocket. She wore a faint smile.

"So, you make jokes too, eh, Yamamura?" I said.

"... I certainly don't look the type, it's true," said Yamamura. Her smile had instantly disappeared; she must have been regretting what she said, feeling like it was an unnecessary comment.

"No, no, it's good," I said. "I kind of feel like we've bonded a little bit as a group."

That was a change that would have been unthinkable on the first day of the trip.

"Me too... I've felt that, too," said Yamamura. "I've always just stayed in the background, so people rarely ever noticed me, no matter what I did, but... Kushida-san, Nishino-san, Amikura-san... Everyone has actually been looking at me, and they included me, like a friend. That's thanks to our being a group."

If the school trip hadn't happened, Yamamura likely wouldn't have made much of an impression on anyone before graduation. I was sure that for Yamamura and the other girls, especially, this was going to be an enduringly memorable school trip. In the other groups, too, there must have been a lot of students who were becoming closer to one another in a similar fashion.

After Yamamura finished putting on her gloves, she showed me her hands and held them open.

"Not just the girls, but the boys too," she added. "It's a little different from what I've always imagined."

There was a softness in Yamamura's demeanor now, too, that had been absent on the first day we had come together as a group. Of course, compared to other students, it was only a fraction, but you could still say that there was a clear change.

"At first, I thought this school trip was going to be long, but it's going to end after today," she mused.

"Yeah," I replied.

If you were on a school trip together with people who you didn't like, then I'm sure that it'd seem like time was passing very slowly, that everything was taking forever. However, just by seeing other people in your group as people who you didn't feel uncomfortable being around, a change would be brought about, and you'd hardly imagine the trip was the same span of time.

"I'm sure it's not just you who changed, Yamamura," I said. "Kitou, Watanabe, Amikura, and Nishino must have changed through this experience, too, to a greater or lesser extent."

Our group had been through never-ending troubles, but on the other hand, I suppose those troubles spiced things up.

"I feel that, while only slightly, Kitou-kun says bad things about Ryuuuen-kun less often now," said Yamamura.

"Yeah?" That in itself was huge.

"When we first got together as a group, he was always saying things like 'I'm going to kill him' or 'I'm going to send him to hell,'" said.

Still, rather than feeling that those two had become friends, I felt like it was just that they were growing numb to each other after clashing so much. However, that being said, the image I had of Kitou in my mind had changed quite a lot. I originally thought he was the type of person who didn't talk at all, but after we'd become closer, he talked more than I had expected. Though...there might still be problems with some of the things he said.

Students from Sakayanagi's class and Ryuuuen's class in particular had been wary of each other in many ways. There had been almost no opportunities whatsoever for them to see one another's good sides.

"It seems like Tokitou's been sticking to Sakayanagi like glue lately," I remarked.

"Yes, now that you mention it... It seems like they're always talking with each other, ever since they were put together in a

group," said Yamamura.

Even now, as we spoke, Tokitou and Sakayanagi seemed to be happily engaged in conversation about a great many things, standing side by side as they watched the snowball fight. When I suddenly looked over at Yamamura's side profile, I saw that the joyful look that had been on her face just moments ago had faded away. Perhaps the best way I could describe the look on her face right now was like she was looking at something she found unpleasant. Was she fond of Tokitou herself? Or was she thinking about Sakayanagi? I got the sense that it could be either.

"What do you think about Sakayanagi, Yamamura?" I asked.

It wasn't like I was trying to probe her. I had asked simply because I was genuinely curious about what kind of relationship they had.

"What do I think...about her?" she repeated. She seemed somewhat startled when I spoke to her, as her attention was focused elsewhere.

"I was just wondering how you feel about the capable leader of Class A, speaking from the perspective of a peer," I said.

"I don't really know," she replied. "I'm not close with anyone in particular to begin with, and I've hardly ever spoken with Sakayanagi-san." Yamamura gave a soft, self-deprecating chuckle. She was saying that, because she was so lacking in presence, she had no friendships. So, did that mean that Yamamura was simply experiencing some feeling of yearning, like she was jealous of Tokitou for being able to strike up conversation with Sakayanagi so easily?

"In that case, why don't you take this opportunity to talk to her?" I suggested. "You might be surprised. She could end up becoming a good friend to you."

"I really don't have the courage to do something like that."

"Okay, then what about Kitou? Don't you think that being together as a group on this trip has brought you two closer together?" I asked.

"Um... Well, talking to a boy, that's kind of..."

It was intended as a light joke, but Yamamura was even more taken aback than I had expected.

"Sorry," I said. "Guess I went a little too far with that suggestion."

It was only natural for girls to be more sensitive about the idea of interacting, even if they didn't feel anything for each other.

"I don't mind," said Yamamura. "You said it because you were thinking about me, after all. Thank you."

I looked at Yamamura, and then my eyes scanned over the students in the area. New encounters, new friendships. Then, truth and lies; those who could see through others, and those who would be seen through. This school trip was one where students had tried to find out what others were really thinking and feeling, what their intentions were, through reciprocal investigations into each other. Which class would become the winner in the future?

"It's impossible for me right now, but... I'll try giving it some thought," said Yamamura, amending her previous statement.

"That's good," I replied.

Yamamura and I stopped conversing there and focused our attention on the game. Although Albert had a powerful throwing arm, he didn't appear to have a high rate of accuracy, and ultimately, it was Sudou's agility and precise attacks that determined the winner of the competition. I expected nothing less from Sudou, who had demonstrated that he was a top-rate athlete under any circumstances. Horikita, too, gave Sudou a hearty round of applause. Standing some distance away, Onodera also seemed to be innocently cheering Sudou on.

Now we were on to the second game. This was going to be a mixed-gender battle, but since there were no students with outstanding ability like Sudou or Albert in play, it was more like an extension of casual play than a serious competition, and the game ended up being a lively, playful affair. The match was decided shortly afterward, with both sides congratulating one another on a good fight and saying how much fun they all had.

"I suppose it's about time for you to play now," Yamamura said to me. "Do your best."

At last, the third game. The battle of Ibuki and me against Horikita's team was about to begin.

"Let's do our best together, Yamamura," I replied.

She looked back at me blankly. "Huh...?"

"I asked Yousuke to sign you up too."

"Wh-what?! I-I can't. Forget about me being able to contribute! I'll only be a burden," she wailed.

"If you cost us points, I'll make up for them. So, you don't have to worry."

"That's not really the issue here, though...!"

"Just you being there to give us the right number of people is help enough. Okay, shall we?"

"I..."

After I started walking away, Yamamura followed, though she showed some hesitation at first. She understood that a lot of people would likely end up staring at her when they saw that she was standing there alone, and she wanted to avoid that, which was why she followed me.

"I-I'm telling you, I really don't know how to do this, okay?" she insisted.

"It's okay. You saw the game before. It's just for fun," I told her.

"But...it's not like that for some people here, though."

"I am absolutely gonna win this!" shouted Ibuki.

Ibuki, her fighting spirit burning bright, had begun hyping herself up for the battle by going through a series of motions, practicing scooping up snow, packing it tight, and throwing it.

"You can just forget about her," I said firmly, and then told Yamamura to go ahead and move to the far back.

Since the other team would be targeting the students in front, I asked Yamamura to stand back to avoid her being in their

sights. I wanted her to focus on having fun for as long as possible, rather than get hit by a snowball and fall down.

When the game started, just like in the previous two matches, a lot of students fighting on the front lines were hit by snowballs. Still, there were snowballs that missed their targets and flew toward the back, and those that were thrown there on purpose too. So, if you weren't careful, you'd get hit even if you were standing far back.

"W-wah!"

Yamamura didn't have the composure to gather up and throw snowballs herself; she was frantically trying to avoid getting hit. However, one of the several snowballs that came sailing by flew in at an angle, about to hit Yamamura's left hip.

"Oh—"

To save Yamamura, forcefully, and without permission, I tugged on her right arm and pulled her out of harm's way.

"I-I'm sorry. Thank you," she said breathlessly.

"We're starting to lose people, and the fighting on the front lines is getting intense," I said. "Let's try making some snowballs while we can."

"O-oh, um, o-okay," she stammered.

Flustered, she hastily shoveled up some snow and made a snowball, though it was larger than I had expected. It didn't look like she'd reach her target at all with it, but that in itself was part of the fun, so I decided not to say anything.

"Hah..." With Yamamura's rather timid whimper, far from what I could call an actual battle cry, the large snowball went sailing through the air. Then, it landed with a *splat* in our own area.

"Oh..." said Yamamura.

"Don't worry about it," I told her. "Next time, make a smaller one, and try throwing that."

"O-okay."

Yamamura, still panicking, started gathering up snow. In the meantime, the game was still ramping up more and more, and more students were getting eliminated, one after another. I wanted to get Yamamura to take out at least one person somehow, but... Well, Yamamura successfully managed to make a second snowball, but she overthought her throw, putting too much oomph into it and causing the snowball to fly an even shorter distance than the first, practically throwing it straight down to the ground.

"O-oh," she said, downcast.

Now that three of our vanguards had been taken out, Yamamura started attracting the eyes of the enemy team. I moved away from her in order to draw their attention, and then pressed forward. I quickly gathered up snow and threw a snowball at Nakanishi, who had taken aim at Yamamura and me. I landed a hit, but my plan backfired. Yamamura was frantically trying to gather up snow, so she was looking straight down by her feet, and forgot all about dodging snowballs. Yamamura got hit in the head without warning with a snowball thrown by Yano, bringing her playtime to an abrupt end.

"Ah...!"

The snowball that Yamamura had been clutching in her hands now served no purpose, and she hurried out of the arena with her hands up in the air. I could tell from the look on her face that she was crestfallen, but I could tell she was also feeling frustrated. Still, in any case, I hoped that she had been able to experience at least a little bit of the tension and fun of a snowball fight. Afterward, people on both teams got pelted with snowballs one after another, players getting taken out of the game in succession, until eventually, the only one left standing on Horikita's team was Horikita herself. As for my team, though, there were two of us: myself and Ibuki. Naturally, the situation was in our favor. Ibuki stood behind me, legs spread wide in an imposing stance, arms crossed.

"Yer in the way," she barked.

"I know," I replied.

I deliberately chose not to avoid the snowball that Horikita threw my way, instead catching it in my hands. Of course, catching a snowball meant you were out.

"What do you think you're doing?" asked Horikita.

"Ibuki wants this to be one-on-one," I replied. "My team leader says that she'll win, so I just figured I should do as she wishes."

I had only played for a short while, but I actually enjoyed the snowball fight, so I didn't need to stay in any longer. Forcefully defeating Horikita wasn't interesting to me anyway. On the other hand, though, I was genuinely interested in a showdown between Ibuki and Horikita, whose abilities didn't differ by much.

"I don't think I like this, but whatever," said Horikita. "At any rate, this means that now I can focus solely on Ibuki-san."

"The rest is up to you, Ibuki," I said. "I'm betting my souvenir on you."

"Shut up and get outta here already," she snapped. "There's no way I'd lose to Horikita."

As the crowd watched, the battle between Horikita and Ibuki was just about to begin. The rules stated that there would be no draws in this battle. Even if, hypothetically, a referee determined that they had both landed a hit on each other at the exact same time, that would mean that they'd have to keep playing. It was only a snowball fight, but even so, for both of them, this was a battle they couldn't lose.

"It's kinda awesome that we get to have this decisive match, huh?" said Ibuki.

She had been wearing gloves throughout the snowball fight, but at this point, she took them off and clutched a snowball tightly in her right hand. It must have been a strategy on her part, sacrificing cold resistance to increase the accuracy of her throw. Horikita must have feared losing control of her fingertips due to the cold, so she kept her gloves on. I supposed that meant that Ibuki would have the advantage if this were going to be a short

battle, but Horikita would have the advantage if it ended up being a long one.

"I'm sorry," murmured Yamamura. "I was completely useless." She must have been a little out of breath still, because her shoulders rose and fell with heaving breaths.

"It's okay. Did you have at least a little fun?" I asked.

"Yes... Though I wanted to land a hit, if possible." With that, the corners of Yamamura's mouth curved upward into an ever-so-slight smile.

Even if it was impossible for her to have another snowball fight with the exact same people, there would probably be another opportunity for her to fight in some kind of competition one day. I hoped that she'd hold on to the frustration she felt now until that time came, and then take another shot.

Yamamura and I now went back to spectating, focusing our attention on the two girls who were facing each other one-on-one.

"So, it's a proper, serious competition...is it?" said Horikita.

"Sure is," replied Ibuki.

Ibuki wanted to settle the fight in the short term, but Horikita saw through her strategy and prioritized dodging over attacking.



"No stopping!" shouted Ibuki. She was starting to visibly grow impatient as she became increasingly frustrated and the cold started to seep into her fingers. As the battle began to drag on, though, the mighty snowball that Ibuki launched at Horikita happened to just barely graze her face, near her cheek.

"Come on, already! Give me the win!" yelled Ibuki.

"Not happening," Horikita shouted back.

Even though Ibuki was starting to show signs of fatigue, she gathered up snow once again and chucked another blazing fastball at Horikita. Horikita evaded it, and at the same time, she counterattacked, throwing a snowball that she had been holding on to for a while back at Ibuki. However, Ibuki was skilled. She was worn out, but she didn't drop her guard, and though she lost her footing, she managed to dodge Horikita's attack.

"It seems like you're at your limit," Horikita said, "so why don't we end this here and now?"

It sounded like Horikita didn't want this fight to go on any longer either, so she shifted her priorities toward attacking. Now, both of them were prepared to put themselves on the line, betting everything on one last shot. A prolonged one-on-one battle. Horikita threw a snowball that broke apart and scattered in the air before it could reach Ibuki. It looked like it had lost its shape, perhaps because she had packed it too loosely. As a result, while it technically hit Ibuki, it did so as scattered powder.

Horikita tried to dodge the snowball that Ibuki threw back at her right in the nick of time, but she was unable to avoid it completely, and it grazed the sleeve of her left arm. If someone asked whether it was a hit, you would've said yes, but you could also say that Horikita had dodged it, too. It was a fine line to judge. However, Yousuke, who didn't welcome the idea of dragging this out any longer, made the call.

"Horikita-san's been hit! Ibuki-san wins!" he announced.

"Hell yeah!" Ibuki pumped her fist with intensity, a broad smile on her face. Horikita was trying to play it cool, acting as

though it was “just” a snowball fight, but she seemed to exude frustration.

“Okay, loser!” Ibuki crowed. “Come on, fork over those thousand points!”

Paying no attention to even how her hands were trembling due to the cold, she took out her phone and thrust it at Horikita.

“You’re being extremely annoying... You don’t need to hound me that badly over it. I’ll give you the points,” said Horikita.

“Come on, come on!” said Ibuki. “Come on, I said! Come on! Come on, come on, come on!”

Were they friends? Or were things bad between them? Ibuki continued to whoop and holler around Horikita in circles for a while, in high spirits.

6.1

WE ENJOYED SKIING one last time on this final day. We didn't go our separate ways this time; instead, all eight of us went on the gentle course meant for beginners. Ryuuuen seemed bored the whole time, but I was glad that he didn't selfishly go out on his own, at least. Afterward, I made sure to buy some souvenirs for first-year students during the time I had left. Now, all that we had left on such a fun fourth day of our school trip was tonight.

After I got back from taking a soak in the large bath, I received a message from Sakayanagi. She said that she wanted to see me, and I responded to her request, heading toward the lobby where we had arranged to meet. It was still only around eight o'clock at night now, but there seemed to be much fewer students out and about today.

I figured that students must have a mountain of things to talk about tonight, whether they were at the buffet or in their rooms, since it was the last night of our trip. Perhaps the other students had realized that as well, since I hardly saw anyone in the lobby. That made it a rather convenient location for us.

Sakayanagi was sitting in a chair, quietly waiting for me.

"Did I keep you waiting long?" I asked.

"Not at all," she replied. "Thank you for going to the trouble of meeting me here."

Even though there weren't many people around, me and Sakayanagi being together would certainly attract a fair amount of attention. With that in mind, I would have preferred to make this short, but...

"I know it only lasted a short time, but did you enjoy the school trip?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Yeah, I did," I said. "I've learned a lot about many things I hadn't ever experienced before. More importantly, though, it was a genuinely valuable experience for me to be able to interact with

students from the other classes. I feel like I even know Yamamura and Kitou a little now."

I decided to specifically mention those two by name, but Sakayanagi's expression remained the same as always.

"I see," she said. "I'm not particularly surprised, Ayanokouji-kun, considering you have an insatiable appetite for knowledge."

I decided to try pressing her a little further. "Are you close with those two?" I asked.

"None of my classmates are given special consideration. I think of them all as equals. If you were to ask if we get along, then yes, we do. But if you were to say we aren't that close, I'd have to agree with that, too."

Was that vague answer a lie? Or the truth? Singling someone out for special treatment would likely cause jealousy or similar feelings to stir amongst the other students. Sakayanagi might really have been telling the truth when she said she looked at everyone equally as their leader.

"Can I ask why you called me?" I asked.

"So, that means we're already finished with the small talk? Are you in a rush, by any chance? I suppose if Karuizawa Kei-san were to see us here like this, she would have some suspicions about our relationship," said Sakayanagi, with a devilish little chuckle.

"I'm not keen on the idea of being seen meeting with the representative of Class A one-on-one. You know?"

"Hee hee! I'm only joking. I understand." Sakayanagi took a moment to suppress an amused smile. Then she said, "I've come to understand many things during this school trip. I thought that, before we return to campus, I would talk to you about the person who contacted you during the Sports Festival, Ayanokouji-kun."

She was referring to the time she and I had both been absent from the Sports Festival, when we talked in my room. So... she wanted to talk to me about the identity of the person who'd spoken to me from the other side of my door, hmm?

"I see. I am interested in hearing that," I replied.

"I'm glad. So, you're also interested in knowing whose voice that was, Ayanokouji-kun."

"I've been thinking about it more than a little."

Including what I had sensed in Nanase, it remained unclear whether the person who had spoken to me then was an enemy or not.

"First, though, allow me to ask you something," said Sakayanagi. "What kind of person do you think he is, Ayanokouji-kun? Is it possible that he shares your origins, like Amasawa Ichika-san and Yagami Takuya-kun?"

"No, I don't think so," I replied. "If it was just that you and this other person recognized each other, Sakayanagi, then sure, I wouldn't be able to rule that idea out. But this person called my father 'Ayanokouji-sensei.' That makes an enormous difference."

"Meaning what?"

"If this person were a White Room student, he wouldn't have called him 'Ayanokouji-sensei,' I mean."

That was a common thread shared amongst all of those who were raised in the White Room.

"But that's not ironclad proof, is it?" she said. "If he were from a different generation from you, Ayanokouji-kun, then there might be significantly different policies in place, no?"

"It's true that I can't say it with one hundred percent certainty," I admitted. "It's just my own subjective feelings here, at best. But considering the major fact that this person came to speak with me last year, when that man was... I mean, when my father was visiting the school, I can guess that he's on my father's side. And there's the fact that you yourself said he sounded familiar. That could mean that he's someone close to the political or financial world, right, Sakayanagi?"

It went back to the fact that this person had deliberately called him "sensei."

Though she was a little surprised, Sakayanagi closed her eyes and nodded happily. "Exactly correct. I suppose it might have been unnecessary for me to think about providing hints or advice

after all, then. Yes, I already have an idea as to the person's identity, but I have not yet confirmed who it is at this time. I wanted to clarify that here and now, which is why I called you."

I turned my attention to the cell phone that Sakayanagi had placed in her lap.

"But before we make everything clear, I'm calling someone who should know him," she said. "They said that they would be here shortly."

"So, you're saying that there's someone in our grade who has some connection with our visitor?" I asked.

"It sounds as though no one is coming to mind as a possible candidate, Ayanokouji-kun," she said. "Is that correct?"

It was. I had absolutely no idea who in the world she was referring to. Of course, whoever it was who'd come to talk to me then, he was spending his days at school as a first-year student, so it wouldn't be strange if he was close with someone from my grade. But I didn't think that was what was going on here. There was no reason for Sakayanagi to call this person here unless they at least knew more about the situation than I did. Who else aside from Sakayanagi would know about the White Room, the identity of my father, or both those things?

"In the meantime, let's continue our idle chitchat, shall we?" said Sakayanagi.

"That sounds like a good idea," I agreed. You couldn't say that passing the time in silence was a wise way to do things on a school trip.

"How did you feel about the group assignments this time, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"The effect of the assessments we filled out in our individual charts must have been significant," I said. "I got the sense that the group assignments weren't reflected in just our own groups; it seemed like the school matched up students who had given one another extreme assessments, from what I could tell."

"I feel the same way. There were the students who were rated the best, and the students who weren't. And there was a

middle group that didn't fall into either category. I'm sure that it might not have been applicable to every group, but I think that bias was most certainly in effect. I'm sure that they made combinations that were likely to have an impact on the future."

"Now, on that note, there's something I'd like to ask you," I said.

"That makes me happy to hear. Please go ahead and ask me anything you wish."

"What's your take on the final exam?"

I was sure that the formations of each group for the school trip would surely have an impact later on.

Sakayanagi, looking pleased, closed her eyes and nodded contently a few times. "It truly is quite fun talking with you, Ayanokouji-kun. You and I always seem to be thinking the same thing. I'm sure the final exam this year will be more arduous than last year."

Sakayanagi was predicting that it wouldn't be a surprise if one or two people got expelled.

"You've got a Protect Point, Sakayanagi, so you're safe and secure, but the fact remains that if you lose, you're still going to lose Class Points," I said. "Aren't you worried that the commanding lead you've held until now will fall apart?"

"Do you think that I'll lose in a direct confrontation with Ryuuen-kun? It's already a foregone conclusion that I will win."

So, like Ryuuen, Sakayanagi never even imagined that she could be defeated, huh?

"It's true that he makes some interesting moves," she admitted. "There is an expression that comes to mind: giant killer. And it certainly seems like he has the ability to take down strong opponents at times. However, that is not going to happen in a confrontation with me. At the very least, next year, I will be the one competing with your class, Ayanokouji-kun."

Unshakeable confidence. There were cases where things could end in a draw, but those could be seen as exceptions. It was unlikely that the school would make rules that would allow for a

draw to happen easily in a final exam setting. That's what I'd observed from last year's battle with Class A.

"Or, perhaps... Do you think that I will lose?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Who can say?" I replied.

I couldn't say anything right now, when I couldn't see what was going to be on the test. But if I told Sakayanagi that, she'd likely feel all the more disappointed. It would be nothing more than a suggestion on my part that Sakayanagi might lose, depending on the nature of the exam. Besides, no matter who won and who lost—

"From your perspective, Ayanokouji-kun, whether he falls, or I do, it won't interfere with your plans either way," she said. "Isn't that right?"

It was precisely because our thoughts were aligned that Sakayanagi understood what I was thinking here, too.

"However, Ayanokouji-kun, the future will not always necessarily go as you expect."

"What do you mean?"

Just as I asked her that question, though, she brought her index finger up to her lips. Apparently, the visitor she had been expecting had arrived.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," said Kanzaki.

He must not have heard that I was going to be here, because he seemed somewhat surprised as he came over to stand next to me. Still, though—Kanzaki? In all the times I'd been in contact with him up until this point, I'd never once gotten the impression that he had any special connection with my past.

"Now that we have all the necessary players assembled, let's get started, shall we?" said Sakayanagi. "Oh, first, though, would you mind coming over this way, Kanzaki-kun?" She beckoned him over to her with a broad smile.

"What in the world is going on here, Sakayanagi?" Kanzaki didn't appear to understand the situation. He crossed his arms in

suspicion, seemingly unable to wrap his mind around what was happening here. I felt the same way, as I wondered if there was any particular meaning behind having Kanzaki positioned next to her.

"First, Ayanokouji-kun, what do you think when you see Kanzaki-kun and me together like this?" asked Sakayanagi.

"What do I think?"

"Please tell me your honest opinion," she said.

"All I can say is that something feels off," I replied, "because I've never seen the two of you interact before today."

That fact became even more apparent when they stood side by side like they were doing right now.

"Yes, I'm sure it would feel that way. From the perspective of the students at our school, there is no point of connection between Kanzaki-kun and me. We don't hold the same position in our respective classes, and I don't believe that anyone in school has seen anything resembling a personal friendship. In fact, I've hardly spoken to Kanzaki-kun at all since enrolling in this school."

It sounded like she was trying to say that they had spoken with one another *before* coming to this school.

"How many years has it been since I've spoken to you like this?" asked Sakayanagi, turning to Kanzaki.

"It's hard to recall, exactly," he replied. "If we're not counting speaking through an intermediary, then it must have been at least three or four years."

From the sounds of it, not even they clearly remembered when they spoke last.

"May I ask how you two know each other?" I asked.

"We're connected through our parents," said Sakayanagi. "Though, that being said, it's not as if there is a direct connection between the Sakayanagi and Kanzaki families. When you have parents who are rather well-known in their own right, you are often invited to parties and the like."



Considering that Sakayanagi's father was chairperson of this school, and also that he knew about the White Room, I had no doubt that the Sakayanagi family was one of some renown.

"Kanzaki-kun's father is the head of a corporation known as Kanzaki Engineering," added Sakayanagi.

So, what they shared was the fact that their respective families were business leaders. That would explain why I'd had no suspicions about Kanzaki.

"What in the world is the meaning of this conversation?" Kanzaki demanded. "What's the point of allowing Ayanokouji to hear something like this? Wait, before getting to that, I'd like to hear the reason why you called me here."

"The conversation we're having right now is related to the reason I called you here," said Sakayanagi.

"I don't understand what you mean," he said.

"I was wondering if you might be so kind as to tell us about Ishigami-kun, who is also enrolled at our school," said Sakayanagi.

With that, Kanzaki's expression stiffened more. "You...want to know about Ishigami?"

Ishigami? No one who had that surname came to mind among the second-years. The only student who did was a first-year.

"...I see. So, that's it," Kanzaki said. "You're also interested in Ishigami, then?"

"I don't mind you interpreting it that way," replied Sakayanagi.

"But still, why Ayanokouji? He shouldn't have any point of contact with Ishigami. I can't imagine that he would interact with people from other grade levels for no reason. Or, if he did, it would be because there's some kind of trouble. It's hard to imagine even Ryuuken, or better yet, Ayanokouji, would waste his time with something so pointless," said Kanzaki, simplifying and explaining the situation as he saw it.

"Not right now, but in the past," said Sakayanagi.

"What...?"

"Do you still not understand? You should have deep feelings for the name Ayanokouji as well," said Sakayanagi.

"What do y—wait, you couldn't mean..." Kanzaki, as though he had just realized something, alternated looking at Sakayanagi and me, back and forth.

"You were quite slow in noticing," Sakayanagi remarked.
"Well, that is understandable, I suppose."

"...So, that's what this is." It sounded as though Kanzaki grasped what Sakayanagi was saying. He looked up at the ceiling for a moment, seemingly exasperated, before turning back to look at me.

"Ayanokouji... Hm. I can't believe that you're that person's child," he said.

There was one thing I could understand from what Kanzaki just said. Namely, that Kanzaki happened to know of a person with the name Ayanokouji, or he was acquainted with that person. And it was no longer necessary to even guess that the person in question was my father. That man had strong connections to business leaders. It was an inevitability.

"Does this shake off the feeling of discomfort you had from seeing me sitting next to Ayanokouji-kun just now?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Yes," Kanzaki replied. "I had thought that you were simply interested in Ayanokouji's abilities, but now I see that's not it. When did you know that he was Ayanokouji-sensei's child?"

"I knew from the moment I laid eyes on him here at this school, of course. Besides, unlike you, Kanzaki-kun, I'd seen Ayanokouji-kun before, when he was a little boy. Right?"
Sakayanagi didn't say anything about the White Room, instead answering in a way that made it sound like she was pretending we were childhood friends.

"Meaning he's not just your average nobody. If he's that person's child, then...he must be exceptional." Kanzaki must have understood something, because he turned to look straight at me.

"My father idolizes Ayanokouji-sensei," he said, "and I have had the honor of meeting him several times at parties and other events. However, I have only ever spoken to him on one occasion."

This was a good example of the kind of thing that could happen as long as there was only an indirect connection, through Chairman Sakayanagi. Even so, it sounded like Kanzaki had a lot of respect for that man. Since I didn't know anything at all about his private life, I couldn't imagine what kind of response my father had given Kanzaki, but I couldn't deny that there was a difference in perception.

"My assessment of you has changed over and over in my head, but now, it's finally settled," Kanzaki said. "If there's a child of Ayanokouji-sensei in Horikita's class, then they must be formidable."

He sounded happily convinced. He must have had a high opinion of my father.

"Now then," said Sakayanagi. "Now that we've managed to correct that misunderstanding, let's continue with the conversation, shall we? Ayanokouji-kun, you do not know of Ishigami-kun, correct?"

"It's the first I've ever heard of him," I replied.

Apparently, the person who had approached Sakayanagi and me back then was this Ishigami character.

"He is a young man who idolizes your father, Ayanokouji-kun. Kanzaki-kun, you know him quite well, don't you?" asked Sakayanagi, turning to Kanzaki.

"...Yes. He certainly seems devoted to Ayanokouji-sensei. I didn't have the courage to go up and speak to Ayanokouji-sensei, but Ishigami was different. At some point, he just went over and started talking to him. He was very proactive in doing so."

"Ishigami-kun is one year younger than we are, and is currently a first-year student at our school," Sakayanagi added.

So, someone who idolized that man had enrolled at this school, and, for some reason, had contacted me several times. He even indirectly helped eliminate Yagami during the Cultural

Festival. The goal of this young man named Ishigami was yet to be seen.

"I'm sure you've had opportunities to interact with first-year students, but when exactly did you take notice of Ishigami?" I asked.

"I recognized him immediately when I looked at OAA," Sakayanagi replied. "But he's not the type of person to come out in public, so I haven't had the chance to speak with him. I have communicated with Class 1-A through Takahashi-kun, but it seemed as though Ishigami-kun intentionally avoided contact with me."

It sounded like Sakayanagi herself didn't want to forcefully get in contact with him either, then.

"Is he an exceptional student?" I asked.

"I am sure that Kanzaki-kun, who is much closer to him than I, would know much more about that, yes?"

Kanzaki was entrusted with providing an explanation, but he didn't look pleased at all. In fact, he looked the exact opposite. "It's not as though we're close," he said. "I just happened to go to the same cram school as him, is all. But Ayanokouji, to give you an honest answer: yes, he is, without question, a genius. He came up with ideas that I could never even have dreamed of, and speaking from experience, after seeing him up close, he's exceptional."

While it sounded like he didn't like Ishigami, Kanzaki accepted the truth about him.

"There you have it," said Sakayanagi. "Now, what you've heard reflects Kanzaki-kun's thoughts and viewpoint, but I think it might serve as reference."

"But still, I have to ask: so what? Can't you just leave Ishigami alone?" asked Kanzaki.

"Can't you imagine what might be going on, though? He's someone who respects Ayanokouji-kun's father. If that's true, then it would not be surprising if he had enrolled at this school to see the son's abilities for himself." Sakayanagi still kept information

about the White Room hidden as she skillfully guided the conversation forward.

"Ishigami came to see Ayanokouji's abilities...? Well, yes, I suppose I can't say that's impossible." It sounded like Kanzaki was somewhat convinced that could be true, after applying what he had heard and comparing it with the Ishigami that he knew in his mind.

"We are competing with one another in our grade level," Sakayanagi continued. "Kanzaki-kun, though your class is a step behind, it is still unclear who will emerge victorious. Under such circumstances, don't you think it would be unfair if Ishigami-kun were to launch some unnecessary trap for Ayanokouji-kun sometime in the future, in order to find out his abilities?"

"I do understand what you're trying to say. But still, why are you supporting Ayanokouji? It shouldn't matter to you what happens to a student in a rival class."

Ishigami, if left alone, could go ahead and sabotage a student from a rival class. It was obvious to anyone that that would be an inherent positive for Sakayanagi under normal circumstances.

"I just genuinely want to have fun," Sakayanagi replied. "It is my role to bury Horikita-san's class, Ayanokouji-kun included. Don't you think it would be frustrating if someone were to suddenly come in from out of nowhere and snatch your goal away from you?" After letting out a brief chuckle, Sakayanagi offered her gratitude to Kanzaki. "You have my thanks, Kanzaki-kun. From here forward, I think that Ayanokouji-kun and I will devise countermeasures to deal with Ishigami-kun, just the two of us," she said.

She had expressed her thanks, yes...but she was also strongly implying that anyone not involved in the rest of the discussion should leave immediately.

"I have no intention of getting involved with Ishigami, so I appreciate that," replied Kanzaki without hesitation. "Let's chat again in the near future, Ayanokouji. I'd like to ask you all sorts of questions about your father."

Kanzaki had a burning desire to talk about my father, but unfortunately, I didn't know anything. At any rate, I figured that it was fine to just respond with a gentle nod right now. With that, Kanzaki walked away.

"Now then, Ayanokouji-kun. Let's find out if Ishigami-kun really is the correct answer," said Sakayanagi.

"What are you planning to do?" I asked.

"We'll try asking the person in question directly, of course," she said. "That would be the quickest method, no?"

Cell phone in hand, Sakayanagi's fingers moved smoothly across the screen as she entered the eleven-digit number. Apparently, she had done her research, and she had already obtained Ishigami's phone number. She put the phone on speaker, and, after she hit call, the person on the other end of the line picked up the phone in just a couple rings.

"I've been thinking it was about time I ought to be getting a call from you, Sakayanagi."

His tone also seemed to suggest that he had anticipated a call. The voice I heard was unmistakably the same as the one I'd heard last year, when I had been called on the phone, and when I had been contacted in my room during the Sports Festival.

"You are very quick on the uptake, it seems," said Sakayanagi.

"I asked that if anyone other than a first-year requested my number, it be reported to me ahead of time."

"I suppose I should say that I expected nothing less from you. I've heard talk of you both within and outside," replied Sakayanagi. She had been constantly collecting information, like a spider tracking the ripples in its web. "Couldn't you have approached me earlier, then?"

"I was purposefully avoiding contacting you. You don't need to get involved with me either, do you?"

"Let's not be hasty, now," Sakayanagi said. "I was just thinking that I needed to confirm whether you will stand in Ayanokouji-kun's way in the future."

"In that case, I have to ask, what do you plan to do if I do get in his way?" asked Ishigami.

"I do not believe that Ayanokouji-kun will be defeated by anyone other than me, but I would still feel uncomfortable if someone were to butt in. If you do intend to intervene, then I might have no other choice but to stop you."

"You, stop me? You should ignore me rather than try to do something as pointless as that. I chose this school because Ayanokouji-sensei recommended it to me. So that I could spend my time here as a normal student."

So, Ishigami had come to this school with similar intentions to my own.

"It's safe for you to assume that there's no possibility of Ayanokouji being removed from this school at this time," he added.

"At this time,' hm? That choice of words bothers me," said Sakayanagi.

"It means that, in the unlikely event that Ayanokouji-sensei gives me instructions to eliminate him, I will do so. That's all." Ishigami spoke in a calm manner throughout. I couldn't imagine that he was lying about anything.

"It sounds as though you have become quite loyal to him in no time at all," Sakayanagi observed.

"Don't go any further with this, Sakayanagi. Especially if you wish to stay by Ayanokouji's side."

The only thing that was clear was that Ishigami was warning her very strongly that she wouldn't make it through that situation unscathed.

"I'm not going to tell you to keep my identity hidden. Sooner or later, Ayanokouji will find out about me. So, you warn him for me. Ask him, what's the best option to protect his life here at this school? Well, actually, I suppose if he's listening in on this conversation now, then you won't have to."

He likely had no proof, but he was taking into consideration the possibility that I was eavesdropping right now.

"I will be sure to tell him if I feel so inclined," said Sakayanagi. "I would be incredibly happy if you would permit me to say hello to you at school sometime."

Sakayanagi must have decided that was enough, because she went ahead and ended the call right there.

"So, it is him, after all," she said. "Well, it sounds as if he wasn't really trying to hide it in the first place."

"That's what it sounds like, yeah," I said. "If he came to this school to enjoy student life to the fullest, then, for my part, I have no intention of getting involved with him in the future."

At the very least, I hadn't sensed any danger from Ishigami in the interactions that we'd had up until this point, that phone call included. Now that there was a possibility that my father hadn't been trying to get me expelled in the first place, there was no need to panic.

"I see. If that's what you choose, Ayanokouji-kun, I will respect your wishes," said Sakayanagi.

"I'm grateful to you. Thanks to you, I was able to find out about Ishigami," I replied.

"Well then, now that we have some degree of perspective on the matter, I wouldn't want to trouble you much longer. However, as one last thing, may I continue from where we left off before, and finish what I was about to say earlier?"

"About how the future might not always go the way I think, right?"

It was certainly true that I was curious about the way Sakayanagi had phrased that. However, just as we were about to continue the conversation, someone called my name at the worst time.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun!"

It was Amikura who was calling out to me. She walked quickly through the hallway toward me, seeming a little flustered.

"Um, have you seen Honami-chan?" she asked.

"No, I haven't. Is something the matter with Ichinose?" I asked.

"Well, it's just, the school trip is already almost over, right? So, we were thinking that we'd try to get everyone in class together and chat until lights out, but we couldn't find Honami-chan."

There must have been a fair number of people searching for her, because even as I was speaking with Amikura, other girls from Class D hurriedly walked up to her.

"People have already checked the baths and her room," said one of the girls.

"I heard that she looked like she was really down this evening, like she had a lot on her mind, and...I'm a little worried," said Amikura.

Then, a girl from her same class came up to the anxious Amikura to tell her the news. "Mako-chan, I just checked right now, and it looks like Honami-chan's yukata is here. So, she might still be outside."

"Wait, outside?" said Amikura. "But it's already almost nine, right? Besides, the people in her group are inside, right?"

While we were allowed to be outside until nine o'clock at night, if you were going off and doing things on your own outside the ryokan, that would be a problem.

"I'll check the big bathhouse and stuff one more time!" Amikura, not wanting to waste any more time standing around and talking, ended the conversation there and started walking. Ichinose's absence at this hour was certainly worrying.

"Let's continue this conversation another time," Sakayanagi said. "Please search for Ichinose-san. I'm sure that for you, Ayanokouji-kun, Ichinose-san is still someone indispensable, after all."

"Sorry," I said.

After saying goodbye to Sakayanagi, I exited the lobby. We weren't allowed to go out and do things on our own without the rest of our groups, and Ichinose was not the sort of student who

would break the school's established rules for no reason. Her fundamental stance on that likely wouldn't change even if she were in some kind of trouble. When I looked outside from the hallway in the ryokan, I saw that snow was falling heavily. If she really was outside, then...there were only so many places she could go.

After returning to my room and putting on my casual attire, I slipped outside via the rear garden of the ryokan. There was an elevated deck just ahead that offered an illuminated view of the landscape. This was precisely one of the locations that got locked down at nine o'clock at night, which was our curfew. Technically, since the rear garden was within the confines of the ryokan proper, that meant that the area wasn't subject to the group activity requirements, so you didn't have to worry about being with your group there.

Even though the ground underfoot was well-lit, it was still dangerous because of the accumulated snow. Many students had come up here on the day we had arrived at the ryokan or on the second day. For that reason, few students were likely going to come back to check it out again in the cold, snowy weather. Not to mention the fact that it was our last day. I imagined that most would want to spend their time relaxing in the ryokan.

Chapter 7: A Light Shining at the End of the Darkness

IT WAS NEARLY NINE O'CLOCK, and an intensely chilly wind was blowing outside. The lights at the edge of each step faintly illuminated the area by my feet, but it was hard to say that it was still sufficiently safe, due to the snowfall. I trudged up the few dozen steps, taking care to avoid slipping and falling on the snow underfoot. I was sure that few people would fancy the idea of coming up here at a time like this.

Out in the darkness, where I couldn't even see my own breath, I continued up the steps and arrived at the somewhat open platform. And on that wooden deck...I saw a lone small figure from behind. She must have been gazing out at the scenery, but because of the darkness, she looked awfully melancholy. There was no one else around, of course. I had seen her at mealtime earlier, but I had to wonder, how long had she been here, in this place?

The sound of the wind was so strong that she didn't seem to notice me approaching. I decided to announce my arrival by stomping my feet as I walked, so as not to startle her. It seemed like the sound reached her ears, albeit faintly. When she reacted with a start, I decided to call out to her.

"Is it okay if I stand next to you?" I asked.

"Huh—?! A-Ayanokouji-k-kun?!"

"Quite a coincidence, huh?"

"Y-yes, a coincidence indeed." Ichinose awkwardly looked away, gazing out at the nighttime scenery.

"Sorry, but actually, it's not a coincidence. Amikura and some others were in a panic because they couldn't find you. They said something about how they wanted to get together and talk until lights out."

"Oh, really? O-oh, jeez. I ended up making a mess, didn't I?" said Ichinose, feeling awkward.

"A little, yeah," I said. "We should send a text message, just to be safe. I'm sure if we do that, Amikura will feel relieved, too."

"Have you...exchanged contact info with Mako-chan?" she asked.

"Yeah, since we're in the same group for the school trip. We've messaged each other a lot about stuff."

I sent Amikura a message telling her that I had found Ichinose, and not to worry, as Ichinose would be back by nine o'clock. I noticed that the message was immediately read as soon as I sent it. When Amikura found out where Ichinose was, she replied with two stickers, relieved.

"Okay, the message has been passed on," I said. "At any rate, this should quiet things down."

"I-I'm sorry," said Ichinose.

"It's fine, honestly. It's not like you're breaking curfew, since you're on the grounds still. We're allowed to enter the rear garden until nine, so as long as you head back before then, that's fine. It's up to the individual what they want to do."

"Okay... Thank you."

Ichinose didn't immediately respond with something like how she was going to head back so as to not make anyone worry, though, so there must have been something on her mind. School trips were a fun time, but we had to share that time with a lot of other students.

"Everyone wants to be alone sometimes," I said. "With that in mind, I figure I'm probably bothering you now."

Ichinose didn't say anything in response to that. She simply kept looking out at the nighttime view.

"Sure is cold," I added.

"...Yeah, it is cold, isn't it?" she replied.

The howling wind assailed us, piercing cold shooting through even though we were wearing gloves.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"I'm not sure... I think maybe about five minutes," said Ichinose. She must have realized that I had immediately seen right through her, though, because she corrected herself apologetically. "I'm sorry. It might actually have been more like thirty or forty minutes."

"I figured. I couldn't see any footsteps at all; they were completely gone."

Until I came up here, there had been practically no evidence that Ichinose had gone this way at all. If I had come a few minutes earlier, then I might have been able to see faint footsteps, even though it was dark out. The snow was gradually starting to ease up, but the wind was still howling.

"I'm sure this doesn't need to be said, but if you stay out here for long, you'll catch cold," I added.

"Yeah, you're right..." mumbled Ichinose. It sounded like she understood it in the academic sense, but it hadn't really sunk in, and she showed no signs of heeding my warning.

Before long, the snow had almost completely stopped. But that would most likely just be temporary. According to the forecast, we were supposed to have a strong snowstorm soon.

"I'm going to ask an insensitive question," I said. "But what are you thinking about, staring out at the night sky, all by yourself?"

I had some idea of what to expect, but I still couldn't know until I heard it come from her mouth. Although I had asked her a question, Ichinose didn't answer right away. She didn't even look at me; she just continued staring out at the scenery.

"I think I...I want to be alone right now," she replied softly.

A gentle refusal. She wasn't looking for someone to talk to, and she was urging me to leave. Or perhaps she might have been saying it was me specifically who she didn't want to be near her right now.

"I guess I just don't feel like leaving you alone right now, though," I said. "It's especially dangerous on the way down."

"Thank you for being worried about me. But it would make Karuizawa-san sad if she knew we were alone here like this, just the two of us. I really wouldn't want to do that to her."

No one was coming all this way, so I didn't think that was going to be a problem. Apparently, Ichinose still cared deeply about other people, even at times like this.

"Yeah, it's definitely true that Kei would get the wrong idea if she saw us, for sure," I agreed.

"Yeah."

"You really sure you're okay?"

"Yeah." After giving me that same short answer once more, Ichinose continued looking ahead, not averting her eyes from the scenery. Right away, I turned my back to her and started moving away.

"Okay, then I'll head on back," I said. "But get back before nine. They're going to lock the doors."

"Thank you. I'll be careful," said Ichinose.

After I took one step, the snow that had briefly stopped started falling again, coming back even stronger than before. I turned to take a quick look at Ichinose's back, and saw that it didn't look any different from when I first saw her on the school trip. It had gotten much smaller, much weaker—when was the last time I had seen the lively, animated Ichinose Honami from when we started school in our first year?

It wasn't like something had happened on the school trip. Rather, it was like a buildup of things. The water that had continued to accumulate in the cracked cup was now about to spill out. From what I could tell, Ichinose's emotional well-being, which had been gnawed at and undermined, had now gotten to be in a very precarious state. If it were just that the water was going to spill out, that would be fine. But if the cracks widened and the cup broke apart, it might be impossible to put it back together like it was before.

That is to say, it might be the end of Ichinose's class. The path to Class A would be closed off to them.

Right now was not the moment for her class to fall into ruin. If that happened, it would be a hindrance to my plans.

"I'll wait here," I announced, sitting down on the steps leading back to the ryokan.

"...Why?" asked Ichinose.

"I wonder."

"But someone like me shouldn't matter to you at all, Ayanokouji-kun. So, why...are you waiting?"

"Dunno," I answered evasively. I decided that I shouldn't say anything to her. I knew she wanted me to leave, but since she didn't have the ability to compel me to do so, she had no other choice but to give up. If she really hated the idea of being with me, then the best thing she could do would be to walk away.

A few minutes passed. Nothing happened at all; time passed in silence.

"So, do you...want to chat?" she asked.

I wondered if she simply couldn't stand the silence when it was just the two of us here alone, or if she decided that she might as well say something. She had mumbled her words in such a quiet voice that I might have missed them if I had been lost in thought.

"To tell you the truth, there's actually something I've been wanting to ask you for a long time now, Ayanokouji-kun," she said.

This was far, far better than just sitting in silence for the time we had left. It'd also serve as a distraction from the intense cold of the snow, which was making my butt go numb.

"Do you...know about something called the White Room?" Ichinose asked.

I had wondered what she was going to talk to me about in this situation, but what she said turned out to be something entirely unexpected. I'd been entertaining all kinds of possibilities, but this was completely different from any of them. Why were the words "White Room" coming from Ichinose's mouth?

For an instant, the image of Sakayanagi flashed in the back of my mind. Recently, there'd been some times when the class leaders had gotten friendly with one another, like cooperation between classes. But I couldn't imagine that Sakayanagi would talk about such a thing so casually. In that case...

Perhaps Ichinose had been threatened by Tsukishiro or someone on his side during the special exam on the uninhabited island. It would make sense if she had remembered hearing the name of the White Room from one of them saying it.

"I'm not really sure what you're talking about," I replied.

"I see... Well, if you don't know what it is, Ayanokouji-kun, then please don't worry about it. I might have misheard." After saying as much, Ichinose suddenly stopped talking, just standing there under the cold sky. Then, she exhaled deeply, her breath a white cloud.

I had my doubts as to whether she completely believed my answer. It would probably be best for me to press her a bit on it, just to be safe.

"Where did you hear about it?" I asked.

I decided to question her, to make her think that the words were completely unfamiliar to me. If she didn't answer me honestly, then all I needed to do was stop her from pursuing it any further.

"I heard about it from Shiba-sensei and the acting director during the Uninhabited Island Exam. They mentioned it in their conversation," said Ichinose. "I couldn't make out very much of what they were saying, but I overheard the part about how they wanted to get you expelled, Ayanokouji-kun, and the words 'White Room.' I was curious, so I tried to do some investigating, but I didn't find anything, so I probably just heard them wrong after all. Don't you think?"

"I have to wonder," I said. "At the very least, nothing that sounds like that comes to mind, anyway."

From the sounds of it, she had done some searching on her own, and she was doubting the credibility of her own memories.

"But still, why were they trying to get you expelled, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked, worried. "Are you okay now?"

I supposed she had probably been wanting to ask me that for a long time, too. But it seemed that, thanks to the matter of Kei, Ichinose had pushed those questions to the back of her mind.

"That matter is settled now," I told her. "I can't go into the details, but there aren't any problems anymore."

I decided to steer her away from the matter of the White Room, and deliberately make her think that I had another secret. It would be much more troublesome later if information about the White Room leaked to the outside world.

"I see..."

She might have been a little bothered by me not being able to tell her about it. Depending on how she interpreted it, as either I couldn't tell *anyone* about it, or I couldn't tell *her specifically*, the meaning would change a lot. I could imagine her being shocked by the fact that it sounded like I considered her someone with whom I couldn't share a secret.

Since there was no benefit to Ichinose in continuing this topic any further, I decided to steer the conversation in another direction.

"I have a question for you, too," I said. "The Ichinose that I know isn't the type of person who'd be all alone in a place like this, shivering in the cold. She's the kind of student who would be surrounded by friends, and she and her friends would be smiling and encouraging one another."

Within that statement, I had implied the question: *How much longer do you plan to stay here?*

"I've been having plenty of fun, though," she replied. "I'm enjoying the trip."

"It didn't look that way to me when I saw your side profile just a little while ago. It didn't look like the kind of face someone should be making on a school trip that was all about having fun."

A conversation like this was probably necessary for Ichinose right now, in order to lay bare the part of her that she couldn't talk

about with anyone, that she normally kept buried deep down in her heart. The things that Ichinose, who bore heavy pressure as the leader of her class, continued to carry.

"Are you really going to wait for me?" she asked.

"Yeah. I'll be with you when you come down the stairs," I replied.

"...I see. Okay, well, in that case, at least come over here by me. You'll freeze your butt off over there."

"I'm grateful for the invitation. I think I already froze my butt off, though, actually."

I hurriedly got to my feet, brushed the snow off my backside, and went back to stand beside Ichinose. I looked at her side profile once again, seeing that it hadn't changed from before. When I'd checked my phone just moments ago, I saw that it was about 8:40 p.m. If I factored in the time it'd take to get back, then I'd say we should be able to stay here for another ten minutes or so.

If she wanted to pass the time we had left in silence, that'd be fine, I figured. I decided to wait for Ichinose to do something, with the intention of staying with her until the last minute. Every time the wind blew, snow fluttered. After about half a minute had passed, Ichinose opened her mouth. A puff of white breath dispersed into the air.

"With the way I do things...I can't win against any of the other classes. That's what I've been thinking about." She probably hadn't meant to let it happen, but tears started trickling down Ichinose's cheeks.

"Can't win, huh? Weren't you going to continue pressing forward, though, being yourself, without hesitation, as you have been?"

"But, thanks to me, we're—" Ichinose hesitated for a moment, and then found her words and started again. "Yes, you're right. But...I'm just not getting results. Our class is definitely getting further and further away from Class A. That much is obvious to anyone."

"And you're saying that the cause lies in your approach," I said.

"I can't help but think things like... If only I could give my classmates direction like Sakayanagi-san, or if only I could have a strong pull like Ryuuen-kun, or if only I could bring everyone together like Horikita-san, then..."

"That's just asking for the impossible," I said. "All we are is ourselves. We can't be somebody else."

I knew that I didn't need to even tell her that. But although she already knew it, there were times when it needed to be said.

"Asking for the impossible. Yeah, you're right about that. Right now, I...want something I can't have," said Ichinose.

"Even if it means changing who you are to get it?" I asked.

"If I could win...then I wouldn't mind."



Ichinose was looking for a change. Whether it was right or wrong was a secondary concern; right now, she was desperate for some kind of breakthrough. Normally, this would not have been an occasion when I would have reached out to her. However, the course of events that followed after Ichinose had told me that she had feelings for me back on the uninhabited island had included a number of unexpected incidents, even for me, which might have been why she had broken down so much.

There was still a little over three months to go until my promised meeting with Ichinose. I wondered if she'd really be able to make it until then without any help. Well, on second thought, no, this wasn't the sort of situation where speculating was appropriate. Right at this very moment, Ichinose's heart was on the verge of breaking. The effects of the poison were starting to manifest and circulate through her faster than I had anticipated.

Her love for me, and the presence of Karuizawa Kei.

Her class was in a downward spiral, and she couldn't see any chances for them to make their way back up.

Although Kanzaki and Himeno were making moves, she couldn't see her peers as having developed as much as they should have by this point.

And she wasn't able to see what kind of future awaited her as a member of the student council, either.

Prospects were grim, with many difficulties in store.

She was surrounded by enemies on all sides, forsaken by everybody.

She was completely lost, trapped in a maze.

"It's just so frustrating... It's really frustrating..." she said softly. Her own powerlessness. That was what was hitting Ichinose hard, resulting in strong feelings of guilt. "It's just so hard..."

If this were just a problem that affected her alone, then it would be fine for her to be depressed. But Ichinose was leading her class; she couldn't allow that. Any failure in her class was also her personal responsibility. It was precisely because that's what she thought that this sort of thing was happening.

"I'm sorry, Ayanokouji-kun..." Her feelings of frustration were conveyed very clearly in her trembling voice.

"What are you apologizing for?" I asked.

"For all sorts of things... Me crying like this is just going to make you feel uncomfortable, and yet..."

Ichinose was supposed to be smarter, more sensible. That hidden potential of hers was fading away completely. Her heart was far too fragile. That was her fatal weakness. Neither Horikita nor Ryuuen, nor even Sakayanagi, who was far and away in the lead, would stop for her. I was sure it must have been an unbearably painful struggle for her; she was in agony, about to fall. If I gently told her that she didn't have to work so hard anymore, then she'd be relieved of her burdens. At the same time, however, doing so would cut off Ichinose's legs. It was still too early for that.

You will fall a little later, I thought to myself. I can't let you stop until you reach the final exams for our second year of school, the time that will decide the fate of the second-years. I won't allow you to break. It is you, but not "you," who will decide the time and place where you will either live or die as a student.

As Ichinose tried to endure her misery, I moved closer to her and extended my arm, reaching around her back. Then, I placed my hand on her right shoulder and pulled her in close, embracing her.

"Wh—?! A-Ayanokouji-kun?!"

"It's okay to cry when times are hard," I told her. "It's okay to ask for help when you're in pain. Everyone has times of weakness."

"...B-but..." Ichinose bit her lip, which was already beginning to turn pale blue, and swallowed what she was about to say. She tried to pull away and move her body in the opposite direction, but her strength was fleeting.

"Isn't there something you want?" I asked.

"...It's hopeless. What I wanted, it's..."

"Something you can't have anymore?" I finished her sentence.

She struggled desperately hard to suppress the words that were stuck in the back of her throat—no, rather, the words that were about to pour out of her, from the depths of her heart. Even so, Ichinose simply nodded slightly in response, although she probably hadn't actually intended to affirm what I had asked.

"Things can still work out in the end," I said. "That's what I think."

"But—"

"If you don't have the courage to take that first step, I can lend you a hand," I added, cutting her off.

When I wiped the tears from her cheeks with my fingertips, I noticed that they had almost frozen. She no longer had the strength to run away. Instead, she relaxed, leaning against me, as though she were entrusting me with everything. All the while, she continued to gaze into the distant landscape, the snow still falling into the night.

That day, underneath that cold sky, the two of us huddled close together and felt each other's warmth.

Postscript

YO. IT'S ME, Kinugasa. Your buddy!

You been doing good? Yeah, come to think of it, it's been about four months since last time, huh? Sorry to get down to business right away, but I've got something important to tell you all, so I'd really appreciate it if you'd stick around and listen.

...Yes. There is something I need to apologize to you about. It's regarding the character "Ishigami Kyou" (石上京) from Class 1-A, who has appeared several times now throughout the 2nd Year arc of the story. The correct way of writing his surname is "Ishigami" (石上), not "Ishigami" (石神). The latter is incorrect. I sincerely apologize for the delay in reporting this. As for the exact cause of this issue... It's probably just because I was exhausted! Can't do nothin' 'bout that!

Everyone makes mistakes, so I ask that you please find it in your hearts to forgive me.

And after reading that, all the readers out there laughed gently and forgave me, so this story has come to a close.

Thank you, and I sincerely hope that you continue to enjoy whatever comes your way from Ishigami-kun and from Kinugasa-kun.

Anyway, this volume covered the school trip, but I hope that it didn't come off feeling like, "Wait, isn't this, like, the same thing as the winter break story from Volume 7.5?" rather than a full entry into the story, as the eighth volume of this arc. That being said, this might have seemed like just a vacation story, but it may also play an important part in the future of the narrative.

Next, we're finally nearing the end of the second semester with Volume 9, which will focus on the end of December. After that, I plan to continue on with another winter holiday story. I think I might've said a long, long time ago that the 2nd Year arc

would be shorter than the 1st Year, but it actually might end up being about the same or even a little bit longer.

Everyone makes mistakes, so I ask that you please find it in your hearts to forgive me.

Also, please let me talk a little about the anime adaptation. What did you think of the second season, which made its debut in summer? I sincerely hope that as many people as possible are enjoying the animation now that it's returned after five years. As for me personally, I'm already looking forward to season three, and that's encouraging me to continue working hard on my writing yet again.

There isn't much time left in the year, but I sincerely hope that you'll all keep supporting the series. This might be coming to you a bit early, but I hope I see you all again in good health in my postscript next year.



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

[Sign up for our newsletter!](#)

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter