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NOVEL

7

CLASSROOM  
OF THE ELITE<sup>2</sup>  
YEAR



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# CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

NOVEL 7



**"Go for the most expensive one!"**

I'd need to knock down a heavy target if I was going to win the most expensive prize. Now then, how much power was I going to need in order to achieve that...? Well, for the time being, I figured I'd just give it a try. I fired my first shot while Kei cheered me on in a shrill, high-pitched voice.



AMASAWA ICHIKA ✓

CHABASHIRA SAE



7

WELCOME TO THE CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

# CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

NOVEL 7

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STORY BY

*Syougo Kinugasa*

ART BY

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*Seven Seas Entertainment*

YOUKOSO JITSURYOKUSHIJOUSHUGI NO KYOUSHITSU E 2NENSEIHEN  
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YEAR 2 7

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## **Chapter 1: Hasebe Haruka's Soliloquy**

**W**HEN I EVALUATE MYSELF, I do consider myself to be a bad person. That being said, I'm sure that everyone has done something that they're not supposed to at least once or twice.

Take, for example, ignoring a red traffic light. Even if there wasn't any malicious intent behind doing it, I'm sure that most people have done something like that.

Another example would be accidentally getting more change than you're supposed to at the checkout counter and not giving it back. If the clerk accidentally gives you too much, even if it's just one or ten yen, you just keep it.

Then, there're things like spitting on the side of the road or littering. Those things might not sound like a big deal, but they actually do fall under the category of real crimes.

But I don't think of myself as a bad person just because of those kinds of actions.

I...

Well, I guess my issues might seem trivial from another person's perspective too. Maybe.

Anyway, I dragged my past along with me and decided that I wouldn't make any friends in high school. I wanted to distance myself from the people I knew and start a life with no connections to anyone. I remember that when I heard about the Advanced Nurturing High School, I decided that it was the place for me.

But even though that's what I decided, I ended up making friends before I realized it—Kiyopon, Yukimuu, and Miyacchi.

And...Airi.

I felt like I regained my youth. Or so I thought. And unexpectedly, that youth was snatched away from me one day.

And who stole it from me? Well, that much was obvious.

Horikita Suzune and Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

I became the victim of their selfish actions.

I wouldn't forgive them. There was no way I *could* ever forgive them.

So that was why...I decided I'd get revenge.

## **Chapter 2: Getting Ready for the Cultural Festival**

**I**T WAS MONDAY, November 1<sup>st</sup>, the start of chilly fall weather. The days and months had gone by quickly, and in just two more months, we'd be on winter vacation. I supposed that meant that I wouldn't have this seat or this view from it for too much longer. The fact that I felt a sense of reluctance to part with it was proof to me that the change in seating was a good system. I didn't technically know at that moment if there would be another change in seats next year like this, but whatever happened, the view would likely be very different from what I had before.

Seconds after the bell rang, Chabashira-sensei appeared in the classroom.

"Good morning. Everyone here?" she asked.

The students' chitchatting ceased. They immediately went quiet and faced forward, their eyes and ears focused on the teacher, just like always. This school's unique systems, where even students' behavior and attitude outside of class factored into the evaluation of the entire class, resulted in serious and disciplined attitudes among the student body.

Not that anything had changed that much compared to last week, of course. But even so, I could sense that they'd improved even further since then. Seeing her students, who continued to grow and mature day by day, Chabashira-sensei nodded deeply.

"I'm sure that your preparations for the Cultural Festival are already well underway," she told us, "but I have some additional notes to explain. First, I will once again show you an overview of the Cultural Festival as a refresher for anyone who needs to check it over."

### **Cultural Festival Overview**

Each second-year class will be given 5,000 Private Points per student to be used solely for festival preparations. Students will be

allowed to spend those available points freely. First-year students will be provided with 5,500 points each for start-up costs, and third-year students will be provided with 4,500 points.

Additional funding may be provided for community service activities, such as student council activities, contributions via club activities, and so on. Further details will be announced to each class after the rules have been finalized.

Start-up funds and additional funds will not be reflected in final sales totals. Any funds that are not used must be returned in the end.

100 Class Points will be awarded to classes in first through fourth place. 50 Class Points will be awarded to classes in fifth through eighth place. No Class Points will be awarded to classes in ninth through twelfth place.

"This is what you have seen before. You should have no problems remembering these guidelines," said Chabashira-sensei.

Since there weren't any questions from the students, she went on with the explanation. "The details about additional funding have been finalized, so I'd like to announce those now."

*Additional funding.* According to the overview, additional funding could be earned for community service activities and the like. That meant student council activities, club activities, and so on. Apparently, the time had come for us to hear more about that. If your budget wasn't finalized, it'd be impossible to determine how many activities you could run during the festival, as well as the exact nature and scope of those activities. Despite this inconvenience, it wasn't much of a problem as long as all classes in all grade levels were faced with the same conditions.

"First, I'll show you the total additional funding to be given to this class, along with an itemized breakdown of your totals," announced Chabashira-sensei.

She fiddled with her tablet and pulled up a spreadsheet with lists of data. The file showed that a total of twelve people were eligible to receive additional funding.

Horikita Suzune: Student Council Service Bonus – 10,000 Points

Sudou Ken: Club Activity Bonus – 10,000 Points

Onodera Kayano: Club Activity Bonus – 10,000 Points

...

I had guessed that 10,000 points was likely the maximum as only three students had been able to gain that degree of additional funding. The nine other students received other sums, ranging from several hundred to several thousand points in recognition of their contributions. For example, Yousuke was going to receive 3,000 points as his club activity bonus, while Akito would receive 1,000. The list mainly showed students in the class who were active in clubs.

In total, this class was going to receive 39,400 points in additional funding.

If we were to contextualize the value of those three big bonuses another way, they would be worth more than six people's shares of start-up points. This funding was going to be essential in putting together our plans for the Cultural Festival.

"I cannot give you an itemized breakdown of what the other classes are receiving, but Sakayanagi's Class A received 18,800 points, Ryuuuen's Class C received 17,000 points, and Ichinose's Class D received 26,600 points in additional funding," Chabashira-sensei said. "In other words, you have the most additional funding out of all the second-year classes."

That also meant that, in terms of funding, Ichinose's class was in second, and Sakayanagi's class just barely beat out Ryuuuen's class for third place. *That puts him last, huh.* These were unexpected results, to be sure, but I supposed that the student council service bonus might've been a contributing factor. It was, simply put, a big deal that both Horikita and Ichinose received 10,000 points each. Other students like Sudou and Onodera were considered to be outstanding contributors to their respective clubs —head and shoulders above the rest of the school, even.

Since we couldn't use our own personal Private Points for the Cultural Festival, Horikita's class needed to stay within a total budget of 229,400 points if we added up the value of all students' start-up plus the additional funding. Every single point counted.

However, Horikita's class couldn't be too proud just from looking at this. Those additional funds would be an advantage in the preparatory stage before the start of the Cultural Festival, but if those funds weren't reflected in the final sales totals, they'd end up being a waste if they weren't utilized well. What Chabashira-sensei was showing us was apparently the explanation for additional funding, but that shouldn't have been all there was to know. Several pieces of information we needed about the Cultural Festival still hadn't been disclosed to us.

"Now then... Next, I'll share details about guests with you all, which is going to be important as that's how you'll be making your sales."

How many guests would be coming to the Cultural Festival? What kind of people were they? How much money would those guests have on hand? We didn't have that kind of information yet.

"The guests we've invited include people who have some connections to the operation of this school, as well as their family members," explained Chabashira-sensei. "Naturally, this means guests will represent a wide range of age groups—from the elderly, to toddlers, to elementary school students, and so on. It's also been decided that people who regularly work at Keyaki Mall, the convenience stores, and so on will be invited to attend as guests as well."

Our tablet screens now showed us a graph indicating the number of guests by age. People in their thirties and forties accounted for the greatest percentage of attendees, followed by those under twenty, and then those in their fifties.

"Each adult guest will be provided with 10,000 points. Minors will be provided with 5,000 points. There will be 283 adults and 202 minors. There are 485 attendees in all, meaning that the total amount they will have to spend comes out to 3,840,000 points," explained Chabashira-sensei.

This meant that the ranking of classes across all grade levels would depend on how much they could take in sales from that total.

"I should also mention that the number of participants includes us as well, meaning your teachers," Chabashira-sensei added. "Homeroom teachers are restricted from using their points on anything run by classes in the grade level they teach in, but apart from that, they're treated no differently than any other guest."

I figured it was essential that teachers were prevented from spending their points within the grade level they taught in. After all, as homeroom teachers, they'd inevitably want to spend their money on their own class if they were able to.

"Is it possible for any of the guests to use more than the 10,000 points of spending money?" asked Ike.

Chabashira immediately shook her head. It was a rash question from Ike, like usual, but she didn't really admonish him in any way when she answered. If anything, she seemed to enjoy the fact that Ike hadn't changed. "No," she said. "Guests can only spend the amount they've been given. That limit is set in stone."

Guests weren't provided with unlimited funds, so it wouldn't be possible to try to hook individual big spenders. Instead, it would be a contest over who could snatch up the most guests. There would inevitably be a battle over customers.

"Now, to bring up something important: the payment method," Chabashira said. "The school will be using a system where payments are handled via a dedicated phone app that allows the school to track sales in real time. Please keep in mind that the app will be disabled the moment that the Cultural Festival ends at 4:00 p.m. You're free to choose when exactly you'll have customers check out, but we recommend that you have them pay in advance before you provide any goods or services."

If you decided, for example, to have customers pay *after* eating their meal, then it was possible that 4:00 p.m. could come before they paid. In cases like that, you'd risk not being able to collect those points.

"Now that I've explained all of that, please raise your hands if you have any questions," said Chabashira-sensei.

Horikita's hand shot up straight away. "How will the rankings be determined in the event that multiple classes make the same amount in sales? I understand that this is an extreme example, but what would happen if every class got the same amount in sales—320,000 points—and there was a tie?"

Since the total amount of available points was neatly divisible, you couldn't be sure that Horikita's example wouldn't happen. If everything proceeded normally, the probability that every class would get the same amount in sales was astronomically small, but it wasn't impossible that classes would engage in collusive price-fixing. If everyone tied for first was treated equally and granted the same privileges, then everyone could raise their Class Points equally.

I would have assumed that the school would have considered some kind of countermeasure for that, but...

"In the event that multiple classes earn the same amount in sales, they will be treated as being tied for the same ranking," Chabashira-sensei replied. "So, if all twelve classes achieved equal sales numbers like you suggested, Horikita, then all twelve classes would be treated as though they've won first place and would all receive 100 Class Points."

Was the school being lax here because classes wouldn't lose Class Points even if they lost? No, perhaps they determined in the very beginning that it was unlikely that a large number of classes would be tied.

"However, total sales will only be confirmed after this 'exam' has concluded. Sales manipulation by any third parties are also not allowed," added Chabashira-sensei. "It is impossible for classes to come together, discuss, and make plans to engage in price-fixing and share sales prior to the festival. Also, it'll be impossible for classes to arrange to divide their sales up equally after the Cultural Festival concludes. You understand what this means, I trust?"

If sales numbers couldn't be manipulated after the fact, it was even more unlikely that all the classes would tie for first place.

More importantly, though, it was hard to imagine that all classes would come together in a friendly manner at all, giving up a precious opportunity to compete with each other.

"But we probably *won't* get the same amount in sales, right?" Maezono voiced her doubts, clearly not having understood the reason Horikita had asked that question. "Like, thinking normally? I don't think we need to worry about it."

"Well, if we were fighting normally, then no, we wouldn't need to worry about that, Maezono-san," Horikita replied. "But it's not impractical to find out the rule for such a situation."

Horikita's statement was also valid. It wasn't a bad idea to find out, just in case. As for whether or not there would be any sort of price-fixing agreements, that was unclear at the moment. It was possible that certain grades or classes might collude to create a situation where they would get an equal number of sales. There were several possible ways it could be done, but if the classes worked it out in advance so that their final sales numbers of all goods and services added up in such a way that the classes evened out, it wouldn't be that difficult to create a scenario in which all products being sold equaled the same.

However, we also needed to be prepared for acts of betrayal, unforeseen circumstances, and unforeseen trouble. It would be no laughing matter if, even after you prioritized selling out your product, your sales results put you at the bottom of the rankings. The hurdles that you had to overcome in order to intentionally create a tie were much, much higher than one might have imagined.

"Does anyone else have questions?" asked Chabashira-sensei. No one else raised their hands to ask anything further about the Cultural Festival. "Well then, that's all there is to say about the Cultural Festival. Next, I'll announce the results of the second semester midterm exams. This time, there was a student whose results surprised even me."

She moved on to announcing the results of the written exam. There were quite a few terrified yelps from the students in class who weren't good at handling those kinds of exams. Depending on how you interpreted it, the word *surprised* could be negative, but

since Chabashira-sensei's expression wasn't dark or stern, it seemed that wasn't the case.

All at once, the names of all thirty-eight students in class were displayed in order, starting with the student with the highest overall score.

Keisei had taken first place. Keisei had gotten incredible marks, scoring well in all subjects. Slightly behind him, in second, was Horikita. She was almost on par with Keisei, and there was only a three-point difference in their scores. From there, there was the usual lineup of honors students, but without a doubt, it was the person in eleventh place that had surprised Chabashira-sensei.

### **11<sup>th</sup> Place – Sudou Ken**

Modern Literature = 73 Points; Chemistry = 76 Points; Social Studies = 70 Points; Mathematics = 78 Points; English = 70 Points

He had a score of 367 points overall with a good balance in all subjects. All the people ranked above him were honors students like Yousuke, Kushida, Matsushita, and Wang, and that was exactly why Sudou's ranking was such a surprise to everyone. It was a well-known fact that Sudou was studying fervently, but he was out late every day because he was busy with his club activities. It was completely unexpected for him to come in at the top of the rankings.

"Whoa, for real?!" exclaimed Ike. "Ken got eleventh...? That's crazy..."

There was honest admiration in Ike's voice. Well, it was more like dumbstruck amazement. Ike had started at almost the same level as Sudou—rather, he had actually been above Sudou's level at the start. This was a major upset; the huge leap Sudou had made was beyond imagining. This test had been moderately challenging. There was only a difference of about fifteen points in overall score between Sudou's score and the bottom twenty, but even so, his results astonished many.

I expected the man in question to be jumping for joy at this, but he simply did a small fist pump. He wasn't bragging or poking fun of others for scoring less than him.

I checked out the latest updates to OAA on my phone.

Sudou Ken. Academic Ability: C+, Physical Ability: A+, Adaptability: C-, Societal Contribution: D-.

Though he was maintaining close to an average score on the whole, his Physical Ability score was a cut above the rest. If he kept his test scores up, then we could see Sudou being on the cusp of an Academic Ability score of B in the near future. Furthermore, if he continued brushing up on his studies, he might eventually achieve an A or above in both Academic Ability and Physical Ability. From the looks of things, Sudou's efforts over the past year had borne fruit in a truly unexpected way.

There had also been fewer instances of problematic behaviors in his personal life, and even his Societal Contribution score had risen to a D-. Even his growth potential in OAA was a cut above the rest.

Incidentally, I came in fourteenth place in the test rankings, placing lower than Sudou. I got a perfect score in mathematics, but I deliberately held back in the other subjects. It would be fair to say that I had cut some corners, but in truth, I actually had another goal in mind. If I showed everyone a perfect score in all subjects on the second-semester midterm test, it would've only caused unnecessary confusion.

It was many times more important for me to make the students feel like they needed to grow up themselves and help the class like Sudou had done, rather than reassuring them that there was a classmate in their midst who they could rely on to get high scores. In truth, Sudou's eleventh place finish generated a wide range of emotions among his classmates. Almost all of those could be used in a positive way.

While there were some students whose names appeared at the top of the rankings, there were others who inevitably sank to the bottom. Those students who scored near the bottom were, for lack of a better word, regulars there, but when compared to the

average scores of other classes, it was clear that they were changing, little by little. The number of students who were trying to improve, while still low, was increasing. And it seemed that, slowly but surely, they were starting to show results.

Of course, not everyone was going to do as well as Sudou. Even when it came to things like studying, people had differences in the amount of talent they had for absorbing information. There were also significant differences in perseverance and stamina. But more importantly, in Sudou's case, we couldn't forget that his motivation stemmed from his love for Horikita, who was also tutoring him.

At any rate, a fire had been lit under the other students now that Airi had been expelled, and the competition to stay out of the bottom of the rankings had begun.

## 2.1

**W**HEN MOST of the students had cleared out after class that day, several important players remained in the classroom. They were the four students who jointly proposed the maid café idea: Satou, Matsushita, Mii-chan, and Maezono. Horikita and I were also there, bringing the total to six.

After the girls gave us their initial presentation, discussion related to the maid café had been mostly conducted over the phone in order to prevent information leakage. Now that we had reached a stage where we could finally proceed in earnest to determine things such as our layout and stall location, however, it was necessary to have a detailed discussion. We had decided to hold it in the special building, the same place that we had actually planned on renting space in.

Considering the concept for the maid café and the scale of it, the first idea we eliminated was having it outside. In other words, the interior space of the classroom had been a given since the beginning, but we weren't sure about the actual location for our café business, even today. Students from other classes and grade levels were going around every day to investigate and scout around, looking for suitable locations for their stalls. We had to be creative while we scouted for space ourselves so that the others wouldn't be able to narrow down which place we were planning to use.

We could've dealt with onlookers more effectively if we were able to include some of the boys in this endeavor, like Yousuke, but unfortunately he and the others were busy with club activities around this time. Having too large a group would create its own set of problems, anyway.

As soon as the six of us got together and started moving, Matsushita turned to Horikita and me.

"So, what are you going to do...about Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun?" she asked.

"What do you mean, what am I going to do?" asked Horikita.

"All they do is show up at school every day. They don't try to talk to anyone. It's like they still consider us, the whole class, as their enemies."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Horikita said. "Well, they're mostly directing their hostility at me though."

Haruka had put up a big wall after she had been forced to expel her best friend, Airi. Even though she was coming back to class, the wall remained.

"I think that Hasebe-san might try to get revenge on the class, somewhere down the line," said Matsushita.

Matsushita probably hadn't been approached directly by Haruka, and it was doubtful she had heard anything about what she was planning. But if someone like Matsushita took a look at Haruka and the way she was acting right now, it would be easy to surmise that something was up.

"That might happen, yes," Horikita admitted. "But it's also true that I haven't seen any instances of problematic behavior from her so far. She's even been participating in meetings for the Cultural Festival."

Haruka knew about the maid café anyway, since we had approached her about it from an early stage, after it was initially proposed. There wasn't any reason not to include her.

"Does that mean you're *condoning* her revenge?" Matsushita asked Horikita.

"Of course not. I understand why she's upset, but that doesn't mean I'll simply sit back and tolerate her making trouble for the class."

Any interference with the class, besides extenuating circumstances like an unavoidable event in a special exam, would be treated as an absolute act of evil. As for Horikita, I was sure she strongly hoped that Haruka wouldn't do anything reckless.

"Okay, but this isn't a situation where that sort of logic applies," Matsushita argued. "It shouldn't be taking this long to resolve it."

Matsushita kept shooting me looks, pointedly moving her eyes my way without moving her head. She seemed to be trying to get me to say something while still making sure to treat Horikita as the leader. However, I wasn't about to offer my perspective at this time. It was obvious that Haruka was plotting revenge, but right now, she was going to school, taking tests normally, and wasn't doing anything to cause trouble for the class. Even if we didn't know what was going to happen in the future, we couldn't question her at this point in time.

"There are a few steps that we can take in advance," Matsushita went on. "If you outright tell someone to stop thinking about revenge, then you'll only end up getting on their nerves. It's just..."

"Just...?" asked Horikita.

"If she's really looking for an opportunity to take revenge, she definitely won't be putting it off for months."

I agreed with Matsushita's opinion. It was hard to believe that Haruka would just quietly go about her business in school like this for the next six months or a year.

In other words, the most critical time for us to be on the lookout for anything would be...

"I can't deny the possibility that she'll do something at the Cultural Festival," Horikita agreed.

Matsushita nodded quietly. That was probably the exact thing she wanted Horikita to acknowledge.

"According to Ayanokouji-kun, Hasebe-san said she has no intention of working as a maid," Horikita went on. "We gave her and Miyake-kun general staff roles, still letting them know what's going on. If we were to carelessly try to hide information or exclude her from the group, it would be as good as telling her that we're suspicious of her."

If Horikita or one of the rest of us did something to slight Haruka and her allies, even if they previously had no intention of doing something, it was possible that the once-extinguished spark could be ignited once again.

"So, you're saying that we keep the line open to be friendly, but we avoid giving them important roles," said Matsushita.

"Yes," said Horikita. "Just in case."

Of course, Horikita probably didn't have particularly strong concerns that things would go off the rails during the Cultural Festival. But, as a leader, it was important to act ahead of time. Many guests would be coming to the Cultural Festival, after all; if Horikita's class was received poorly by them, it wouldn't be surprising if they were penalized in some way.

"I know you're worried about Haruka and Miyake, but we're just about there," I remarked.

Matsushita was so engrossed in her conversation with Horikita that she hadn't realized we were getting close to our destination. Many classes were still agonizing over where to set up their stalls, so there was no telling where any careless comments might be overheard.

The special classroom building had three floors, and there were eight classrooms that could be used as potential stall locations. We were on the third floor right now, and the closer you were to the stairs by the entrance, the higher the cost would be.

Our current location had the advantage of being the furthest point away from the main entrance, making it the most cost-effective of the indoor options. Rooms on the third floor could be rented from anywhere between 10,000 and 13,000 points, while rooms on the first floor had a flat rate of 50,000 points. With a difference in cost of nearly 40,000 points, that would mean we had much more to spare for food expenses and so on.

The amount of points given to each class was finite. It was inevitable that classes would worry about things like how much they should spend on their stall location and how to allocate their funds overall.

"It's a lot further back than I thought it'd be." Mii-chan's first comment was about the distance from the entrance. I figured everyone else felt the same way she did. "What do you think, Satou-san?" she then asked, turning to Satou.

Satou hadn't said anything yet today, but even after Mii-chan asked that question, she didn't respond immediately.

"Satou-san?"

After Mii-chan called her once again, this time from much closer, Satou answered in a fluster. "Oh, um. Yeah, I think that it might be...a little far."

"I don't think everyone would go this out of the way unless we had something really special to offer," commented Mii-chan.

Opinions amongst the group were generally aligned, which was probably why we didn't stay on the third floor for too long. It was lower on our list of preferences. Instead, we all went down a level to look at the second floor.

"I really think the second floor is better than the third after all. The first would be ideal though..." muttered Maezono, looking out the window.

"That's true. But...won't the first floor be really rough, in terms of cost?" said Mii-chan. She stared down at her phone with a glum expression on her face.

"Even so, we need to make a decision soon," said Matsushita. She glanced over at Mii-chan's phone. "The rooms are already pretty booked up."

"Yes, you're right," said Mii-chan. "Two of the five places that we picked out as possible locations have already been taken... But we do still have choices left on all three floors, which I guess is actually a bit of a headache."

Should we pay more points for convenience? Or should we abandon that and keep our costs low?

"I still think we should pick the first floor," Maezono stated. "If the other stalls get people's attention and we can't get them to come up to the second floor, then we'll be at a disadvantage."

"I don't think it really matters all that much if we're on the second or third floor though, as long as people want to come," said Matsushita.

Maezono, Mii-chan, and Matsushita debated what to do. I realized that Satou, who was always in high spirits and often spoke up even when she wasn't asked, had been quiet for a while now. Her friends occasionally glanced at her, seemingly worried. It looked like while Satou was here in body, she wasn't in spirit.

Once Matsushita noticed that I was worried about her too, she came over and whispered in my ear.

"She's been like that all the time lately, it seems like. Satou-san, I mean."

"Come to think of it, she has looked especially down the last few days," I replied.

"I thought you might know something about it, Ayanokouji-kun, but I guess not."

Was Matsushita under the mistaken idea that I was a telepath or something? Or perhaps she thought I could have picked something up via Kei, since she was close friends with Satou... Either way, I didn't have any more information.

"I don't get the sense that she's feeling unwell or anything," Matsushita went on. "I asked her if there was anything on her mind, but she didn't give me a clear answer either."

"Sometimes people just want to be left alone. Maybe that's it?" I asked.

"You're right about that. But for some reason, I get the feeling that it's not like that."

"Meaning what?"

She must have had some idea about what was up with Satou, because after I pressed her for more, she replied, "I feel like it's something she wants to talk about but can't. Something like that. After all, she's the type of person who keeps things that bother her bottled up deep down inside."

It was amazing how much you could understand after being friends with someone for a year and a half.

"If she's keeping it to herself, then that's all there is to it, right?" I said.

"Well, sure, but...she usually comes to me for advice," said Matsushita.

"In that case, I guess we'll just wait and see for a while longer. If your read of the situation is right, she'll probably come to you for help sometime soon, Matsushita. Right?"

"...Probably, yeah."

Although Matsushita found that a bit difficult to accept, she quietly withdrew for now, since we both knew that this was not a conversation we could carry on for a long time with Satou so close by. The fact that Satou was a bit absent right now was somewhat concerning, but at the moment, deciding on our stall's location took priority. It was time to finalize that decision and move onto the next phase of planning.

Just as we finished inspecting the second floor and were about to move on to the last leg of our tour on the first floor, we happened to come across another small group of people.

"'Sup, Ayanokouji. You looking for stall locations for the Cultural Festival too?"

The person who called out to me was none other than Hashimoto from Class 2-A. Shortly after that, Kamuro and the leader of their class, Sakayanagi, showed up as well. If all three of them were here at the same time, they likely weren't simply going for a stroll.

"Who can say?" I replied. "Maybe we've already decided. Or maybe we haven't even decided whether we're going to be inside or outside yet."

"You haven't decided yet?" said Hashimoto. "Nah dude, that's clearly a lie. Are you trying to tell me that you're taking Horikita and these other girls for a walk around the special building for no reason? Come on, tell me what kinda thing you're gonna do at the festival."

Sakayanagi didn't join the conversation, instead just watching with a faint smile on her lips. Horikita though, unable to just stand there and listen quietly, intervened to stop the conversation right there.

"There's no point in asking him. He's not in a position where he would understand everything about the class."

"So what, you're just enjoying your harem then?" asked Hashimoto, pointing out that I was the only guy in our group of six, before turning to Kamuro for agreement.

"Well, I'm sure it's the same for you then, Hashimoto-kun," Horikita calmly fired back. "You're with Sakayanagi-san and Kamuro-san. The only thing that's different is the number of girls, but you're the only boy in your group too. I wonder if you were aware of that when you made such a strange remark about us."

Horikita certainly got him there, dropping to his same level, but I didn't think it would really work on Hashimoto. Instead, he simply changed the subject, as though their previous exchange hadn't even happened.

"So... Satou, Matsushita, Wang, and Maezono, huh," he said, turning to the four who had proposed the maid café. "You guys have been chatting a lot at school lately, haven't you?"

While three of the girls put up their guard, Matsushita took a step forward with the same demeanor she usually had.

"It's no use trying to get anything out of us," she snapped.

"I would hope that you understand now," added Horikita.

The two of them glared at Hashimoto.

"Hey, come on, I didn't mean it like that, 'kay? Seriously. I just—" He suddenly stopped. The others in my group started to feel a sense of unease over the way he had hinted at something. "Oops, guess I probably shouldn't say any more than that, huh?" he said with a grin, shooting a sideways glance at Sakayanagi for the first time during this conversation.

That look seemed to be asking her, "*You don't mind if I talk, do you?*"

"It seems like you have something to say, Hashimoto-kun," said Matsushita, sounding somewhat irritated.

Matsushita stood between Hashimoto and the three other girls, protecting them. Hashimoto must have been waiting for

someone to say that though, because his smooth-talking mouth immediately went into action.

"Hey, I'm just worried for you guys, like how things will go for you in the Cultural Festival. I mean, it seems like you worked well with Ryuuuen during the Sports Festival, but do you really think you can trust that guy forever?"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Matsushita.

"What it sounds like. He'll pretend to be your ally, but he won't be afraid to stab you in the back later."

"The Sports Festival was the Sports Festival. This is the Cultural Festival," Matsushita replied. "You and Sakayanagi-san's class are obviously enemies we need to beat, but Ryuuuen-kun's class is an enemy too. Of course, there's no way we'd trust him."

"Well, that's good. I was just thinking that you'd be teaming up with Ryuuuen again for sure," said Hashimoto.

Hashimoto said it with an air of concern for our welfare, as though he were telling us to watch out, in case we were going to team up. I was sure that Matsushita was sharp enough to pick up on the implications behind what he was saying, however. I figured Matsushita was tempted to ask Hashimoto if he knew something, but she held herself back.

"We're in a hurry, and I don't really think we can stand here and play word games forever. Right, everyone?" said Matsushita, turning to the girls and me for agreement.

"You're right," said Horikita. "I think it's about time we left. Talking with him is just a waste of time."

"Wow, they really hate you, huh?" Kamuro teased Hashimoto over the awkward atmosphere, prompting the latter to let out a forced, unnatural-sounding sigh.

"Maybe they do," he said. "I just figured I'd try telling them, I guess, but... Well, I'm sure they'll do their best."

In the end, Sakayanagi hadn't uttered a single word during that entire conversation, and she went into the classroom that we had been looking at earlier.

"That was a little scary..." Mii-chan placed her hand to her chest, murmuring to Satou, who was standing to her left.

"...Huh? Oh, uh, yeah. It was, a little, wasn't it?" If Satou even heard what she said, her behavior was unnatural.

"Anyway, let's get moving," said Horikita.

If we stood here and continued talking, we'd run into those Class A students again soon. Everyone wanted to avoid that, so we decided to look at another potential stall location.

"Um, so about what Hashimoto-kun was talking about earlier... Is that bothering anyone else?" Maezono mumbled.

While we were making preparations for the maid café, there was one thing that Horikita and I had shared only with the people present. I figured that Maezono was shaken up because of what Hashimoto said and was feeling anxious.

"We confirmed that we're going to cooperate with Ryuu-en's class for the upcoming Cultural Festival too...right?" Maezono went on.

"Yes. I received permission from Ryuu-en-kun's side while we were working together during the Sports Festival," said Horikita.

Horikita and Ryuu-en had worked things out so our services wouldn't overlap with each other. And if we ended up offering something similar, or if we had competing ideas, we would avoid having similar stall locations. We would engage in an efficient exchange of personnel, we would temporarily loan and borrow amongst each other, and we could support each other as necessary. Even though these were only minor arrangements, Horikita and Ryuu-en came to an agreement to prepare for unforeseen circumstances.

"I wasn't that bothered before since things went so well in the Sports Festival, but after everything Hashimoto said, I can't help but feel anxious, I guess... Are we really sure that we can trust Ryuu-en-kun?" said Maezono.

"It's most certainly doubtful that we can trust Ryuu-en-kun, in my opinion," said Horikita. "Which is exactly why I brought Katsuragi-kun into the discussion. I think that it'll be okay."

"I want to believe that too," Maezono replied. "But didn't it seem like Hashimoto-kun knew something?"

"Yes, I got that feeling too," said Mii-chan. "Even if their class isn't going to betray us, isn't it possible that the fact we're working together has gotten out?"

"The only ones who know that are me, Ayanokouji-kun, and you four who came up with the idea for the maid café," Horikita said. "Then, there's also Katsuragi-kun in Ryuuuen-kun's class, of course. Some of his classmates who are important in running their stall might have heard, but there wouldn't be any benefit in leaking that information."

"I agree with Horikita's opinion," I added casually. "I'm sure no one expected Horikita and Ryuuuen to work together during the Sports Festival and that Class A would lose. They're just wary that the next time won't be so different. I expect Class A might try to make contact again and probe for information in similar fashion, but it's best we don't worry about it too much."

"Y-yeah, that makes sense. I understand," replied Maezono.

She and Mii-chan nodded while Matsushita and Satou both focused their minds once again. After that, we returned to the classroom and gathered to make a final decision.

"I think we should decide where to have our stall by way of a majority vote with the people present here," Horikita said. "Is that okay?"

"What if opinions are evenly split?" asked Maezono.

"We'll figure that out if the time comes. First, let's try coming to a decision and see where we land. Throw rock for the first floor, scissors for the second, and paper for the third. All right?"

Mii-chan recited those instructions in a quiet voice, perhaps so she wouldn't get confused. She then looked at her palm.

"Here goes. One, two, three!"

The six of us, me included, simultaneously expressed which floor we preferred using our hands. The decision was obvious at a glance. Four people had thrown rock, while two had thrown scissors. No one had thrown paper. I figured that the third floor

had been excluded because of the hassle involved in getting up there. I had thrown scissors myself because of the lower initial cost, but going with the first floor wasn't a bad choice because of how convenient it was. Matsushita was the other person who had thrown scissors.

At any rate, now that we decided we'd be applying for space on the first floor, we had officially taken a step forward.

"I'll put in our application right away," Horikita said. "There are still many classes that are waiting to see how things go, and it'd be a hassle if the rooms on the first floor got snatched up."

Using her phone, Horikita immediately began applying for a spot on the first floor.

"All right. So, are we done for the day now?" asked Maezono.

"No," I replied. "Actually, there's one thing I have to talk to you about before we split."

I had been gathering information on maid cafés on my own up until recently, and I figured that I should share what I had found.

"Men are the target audience for a maid café," I said. "Although there will be many families among the guests coming to the Cultural Festival, basically, male visitors will be our main target."

"Well, I wouldn't assume we won't see any female customers at all, but I suppose that there will be a considerable difference in the ratio of men to women," said Horikita.

Everyone seemed to agree on that point; you didn't need to do any research on the topic to come to that conclusion.

"I've heard that there's the opposite of the maid café out there in the world too—the butler café. Rather than a girl dressed in a maid outfit serving customers, it's a guy, dressed up as a butler," I explained.

Perhaps Matsushita and the others hadn't heard that before because they seemed impressed and surprised.

"Yes, both maid café and butler café are both types of concept cafés," said Horikita.

"...You're apparently quite knowledgeable too, Horikita," I replied.

"I at least gathered some information about it," she said. "I can only decide if something is useful or not after I've learned it, after all."

I expected as much from her.

"All right then, we can move on," I said. "The most important thing is a sense of cleanliness. That is paramount. I think we need to take that aspect into account, and not just focus on what floor we'll be on in the special building."

For example, each of the classrooms had seen significantly different degrees of usage for classes and such.

"The floors, walls, ceilings, and even other things like chairs, will probably have no small variation in scuffs and damage due to age degradation. We'll want to make sure people don't miss checking for those things as well," I added.

"That's important, for sure," agreed Horikita. "Even if we clean ourselves up to a certain extent, there are some things we just won't be able to cover up. The cleaner everything looks, the better it'll be for our café."

Everyone agreed, and so they began to look here and there around the classroom. Up until now, everyone had only been taking things like convenience and the view outside the room into account. Now, they'd start focusing on different things.

"And, regarding the uniforms, we can't push the eroticism too blatantly," I remarked.

"Huh?" Horikita sputtered. "Wh-what did you just say...?"

"Eroticism," I repeated. "Eros and erotic elements have been considered important aspects in art since ancient times. While it would be out of the question for the maids to do something like outright show their underwear, it's also important that we don't dispel the hope that the customers might catch a glimpse."

Even Horikita looked taken aback by that. Perhaps she hadn't wrapped her mind around that point, after all. "U-um, Ayanokouji-kun... What's with the, uh, excessive level of detail?" asked Horikita.

"I obviously can't cut any corners since you've asked me to help run the maid café. I simply studied so I could be as much help as I possibly could," I replied.

It was also deeply reassuring that there were several students who were quite familiar with this topic. I had avoided stating that Horikita's class was going to be running a maid café, of course, when I approached those students with the context of me personally being interested in such things. I felt a little sorry about it—some students mistakenly came to the conclusion that I had an otaku awakening, and they treated me with an unusual degree of hospitality as they taught me what they knew. They even told me they didn't need anything in return, because it meant they were gaining a comrade.

"May I continue?" I asked.

"Y-yes, please... Go ahead..." said Horikita.

It didn't seem like anyone was going to stop me from talking, so I decided to spend some time telling them what it would be like to be a maid. It was important for those who were actually wearing the costumes to understand that. It was possible that they'd be more self-conscious when they were interacting with customers.

"In that case, next, think about a sales strategy," I said. "In addition to providing food and drinks, we will allow customers to pay for pictures. We'll provide special instant cameras for this and charge 800 points for a picture with one maid. If a customer wants a picture with two maids, the price will be 1,200 points. I suggested taking pictures with our phones and then using a printer to print them to reduce costs, but the Professor, the one who told me all of this stuff, rejected that idea. He told me that if we neglected quality in favor of profit, no one would give us a second look."

I figured that if we made good use of this system, sales of the photos could be just as good as sales from the food menu.

"But then we'd have to worry about inventory, won't we?" asked Horikita.

"No, we'll be careful with the film's use," I explained. "We'll just have to consider that the pictures could sell out. Oh, and this will be done on the condition that photos are not public, of course. Then, under Horikita's leadership, we'll set up a food stall led by the boys, but the food offered there should be linked to the maid café too."

After I finished speaking, Horikita was silent for a while. Eventually, she cleared her throat and began to speak.

"The competition will inevitably be fiercer for food service stalls because there are signs that there will be many of them across the other classes and grades. So, we'll specialize in lighter fare at the food stall and keep our prices low."

"But we won't earn a lot of money that way, will we?" asked Maezono.

"That's true," said Horikita. "Which is why it's just a way to get people over to our main event, the maid café. People who purchase items at the food stall will receive a ticket for half-off one drink, which can be used at the café."

After all, we needed to make people aware of the maid café, and then we needed to get them to come all the way over to the special building. To do that, we needed to advertise outside and to establish a conduit that would lead people to the café.

## 2.2

AFTER WE WERE DONE with our maid café discussion, I walked over to Keyaki Mall. Today, I was going to do some research on food prices. Some ingredients were sold at the mall, and others we could purchase online. It was important that we were able to prepare quality food at the lowest possible price. I knew that if I invited Kei to come along, this trip would've turned into a date rather than an investigation, so I decided to go it alone today.

While I was on my way over to the supermarket, I saw someone staring at the mall map. I was a little worried about the rather grim look he had on his face, so I decided to go over and talk to him.

"You sure were the center of attention today, Sudou," I remarked.

Perhaps he hadn't noticed I was there until I got a little closer because he turned around with a bit of a start.

"Huh?! Oh, it's you, Ayanokouji. Whaddya mean, center of attention?"

"The midterm," I clarified.

"Oh, that," he said. "I'm happy, but... I mean, I think I pretty much did as well as I thought I did, with how much effort I put into it and all. It's just... I dunno, I guess the best way to put it is that it felt the same as when you just grade your own test."

It sounded like Sudou checked over his answers on tests in detail, even after midterms.

"I bet if the old you, from before you came to this school, saw the new you, he'd be pretty surprised," I said.

"Ha ha ha. Yeah, definitely, dude." Sudou chuckled, imagining his past self. "I bet he'd be yellin' at me all angry, like 'What're you studyin' and learnin' words and formulas for?! Don't waste your time on that stuff! Go and practice basketball more!' or something."

There was one question I wanted to ask Sudou, so I decided to come out with it. "If your old self *did* tell you something like 'Don't waste your time!' how would the new you respond?"

"Huh? Hmm..." After stopping to think for a moment, Sudou put his answer into words. "I'd probably say... 'If you can't remember words and formulas, what are you gonna even amount to?' or something, I guess?"

It was an uncharacteristically brilliant comeback on Sudou's part, but it was also true that it probably wouldn't work on the old Sudou.

"I bet he'd answer, 'It doesn't matter, 'cause I'm gonna be a pro basketball player,' right?" I replied.

"Oh! Yeah, you've got a point...! Yeah, the old me *would* say that... In that case, what would be the right thing to say back? Would it be a better answer to say something like...it's better to be a pro with brains and brawn? Man, it's really a hassle when logic doesn't work on somebody..."

There was a wry smile on his face as he racked his brain over the answer.

"To be honest, I feel like things are getting tougher to understand, and I'm just feeling impatient," he admitted. "Up until now, I felt like once I got the knack for something, everything would go pretty smoothly, but it's..."

He trailed off. I could see anxiety and impatience in him; he was pulling back from how he used to be, when he used to just race ahead as fast as he could. It was like restarting from a junior high level. Or, rather, in Sudou's case, like starting over from an elementary school level. Was he feeling like he was hitting a plateau now that he had caught up to the level of a second-year high school student?

Although he could most definitely be proud of his eleventh-place finish this time, having tested better than half of the class, he was afraid that his momentum had come to a stop. From this point on, it wouldn't just be a matter of simply devoting more time to studying. Multiple factors would be required beyond just effort, like comprehension, efficiency, and talent.

"Anyway, you need somethin' from me?" he asked.

"No, I was just a little curious. Don't you have club today?"

While the look on his face earlier had been strange, the simple fact that Sudou was here at Keyaki Mall at this time of day was even more odd. Even though the Cultural Festival was approaching, club activities were still going on.

"I took a little time off for today," said Sudou.

"That's unusual."

He didn't appear to be sick or anything to me.

"Well, I got...another little problem," he admitted.

"Another problem?" I asked.

"My eyesight's been gettin' worse lately, to the point where I can really tell it's happenin'," he said, staring off into the distance. "I've had twenty/ten vision since I was a little kid, but lately, I dunno, it's been weird."

Did this mean that adverse effects from Sudou devoting himself to his studies were starting to manifest in the form of physical changes in his body? Eyesight was important for a sportsman. If his eyesight were to continue to deteriorate in the future, it would probably affect his game. Of course, glasses and contact lenses could compensate for this, but even so, having naturally good eyesight was preferable.

"Anyway, I'm lookin' for an optometrist to check my eyesight and stuff. I've never gone to one before, so I was wonderin' where I could find it."

So that was why he was staring so intently at the mall map. If Sudou had a strong feeling that there was some change in his eyes, then there was a good chance that his vision could actually be deteriorating.

"I'm still gonna keep studying even if my eyes get worse in the future though," he said. "I mean, yeah, I love basketball to death, and it's super important to me and all, so I ain't plannin' on stopping... But while I'm still dreamin' of goin' pro, I'm startin' to think it might be good to have other options."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well... Don't laugh, okay?"

"Don't worry, I won't."

"I was thinkin' that I could go onto college, like everyone else, and continue my studies. I mean, even if I could basically force my way into goin' pro with the special privileges from Class A, there ain't no way people out in the sports world would actually pick me if I wasn't good enough on my own. So I thought I could get into the university I want and do my best from there."

Though Sudou was reluctant to start studying at first, it brought about significant changes in his way of thinking.

"I mean, I can go to college, graduate, and *then* go pro, right?" he said.

"You're right," I answered.

It wasn't as if you had to head right toward your career right out of high school. Until now, Sudou only thought his path after high school graduation was to be a professional athlete. Now, the option of going to college had entered his mind. He was probably going to subdivide the path he was considering even further now.

"Oh," said Sudou, noticing something out of the corner of his eye. I turned to look at what he'd seen, and found it was Akito and Haruka.

"They're prolly not...on a date, are they?" asked Sudou.

"Probably not, no."

If you just saw the two of them from a distance, then you might only see a guy and a girl, walking together as a couple. However, their classmates understood quite well what Haruka and Akito's situation was.

"Is it really a good idea to just keep leavin' 'em be?"

"It's not like this is a problem that can be fixed if I just go and talk to them now," I said.

"Yeah, you might be right about that, I guess." Sudou, frustrated, clenched his fist tightly. "Y'know, I wasn't really close

with Sakura or anythin', but I've gone through somethin' like that too."

Sudou used to mess around with Yamauchi and Ike so much that, a long time ago, the three of them were called the Three Idiots. That was exactly why Yamauchi's expulsion must have been a painful memory for him.

"But I guess what happened with me back then was a whole different thing. If it'd been me, I don't think I could've told people to expel me instead."

To Haruka, it seemed like having Airi around was just as valuable to her as being at this school herself. Actually, no, having Airi around was seemingly even more valuable to her.

"If you're ever in trouble, give me a shout, okay? Any time," Sudou said. "Though I'm sure you don't need help from someone like me."

"That's not true," I replied. "If I ever want to come to you, I'll be sure to take you up on that."

"Sure. Anyway, guess I better be goin'. See ya later, Ayanokouji."

After saying goodbye, I headed to the supermarket.

## 2.3

THE NEXT MORNING, I had planned to meet up with Kei, so I waited for her on the first floor of the dormitory.

"Sorry, Kiyotaka, were you waiting a long time?" she asked.

"Not really. Let's go."

Standing beside me, Kei took my hand without hesitation, and we started walking. Going around hand-in-hand like this wasn't an unusual occurrence for us anymore.

"About yesterday... Thanks for staying up so late with me last night." Kei blushed slightly. She briefly squeezed my hand. "I was really, really happy."

"It would be a bit of a problem if we got found out, though," I replied.

Kei had stayed in my room past curfew last night. Fortunately for us, there weren't any witnesses around when she had left, so we weren't going to be penalized.

"Ah ha ha, yeah, you're right about that," said Kei.

I looked at her from the side, and she looked somewhat hopeful. I wondered if someone could change like that in just half a day.

"Did it hurt?" I asked.

"...You're really asking me that?"

"Is it bad to ask?"

"No, it's not bad, it's just... Well, I guess, I thought I was used to it," said Kei. Even though her face was red, her eyes squinted happily. "In a sense, it was my first time, so maybe I was a little out of sorts. Like, mentally, I guess. But that's why it was really reassuring for me to know that you were holding me so close the whole time, Kiyotaka. That you weren't caring about stuff like curfew."

That was true—there was no telling what could have happened if I hadn't been there.

"I see," I said.

What happened yesterday might have been yet another single step on the path to adulthood for Kei. Though she was still being supported by someone, Kei had succeeded in standing up now, on her own two feet. It had been a long period of rehabilitation for her, starting from a time when she thought she wouldn't be able to stand tall ever again. Learning how to get back up after taking a fall was what was most important for her. Like with other students, hers was a special case that wasn't going to be fixed overnight. But her goal, too, was finally within view.

It seemed like Satou had gotten to the classroom before us, and as soon as we arrived there, she got up from her seat and ran over to Kei.

"G-good morning, Kei-chan!" she squeaked.

"Oh—Uh, morning, Maya-chan!"

Kei first looked at me like she was asking for my permission, and after I responded in kind with my eyes, she stood close to Satou and started talking to her without hesitation. While there appeared to be some sense of awkwardness, they soon started chatting in the same manner they always did. Actually, perhaps they seemed to be even closer than usual. That circle of happiness that started with Kei and Satou began to spread and include more girls, and even grew to include the likes of Shinohara, who they'd had a falling out with briefly, as well as students they didn't usually interact with, like Mii-chan.

Horikita had been starting to demonstrate her skill as a leader more and more and was discovering her skills at bringing a large group together. But this gathering was something different—the ability to create a small group, and then to pull in and include others. Without a doubt, Kei was someone with the qualities and disposition needed to bring people together. That kind of thing was essential in keeping the class stable, and with things in that area seemingly going well, everything looked like smooth sailing for the Cultural Festival.

However, we were about to get sudden news that could trigger a major incident.

"Dude, is it really true that our class is doing a maid café?!" Ike shouted the second he burst into the classroom.

Maezono shot up, shocked—that was something that was still secret to all but a select few. Satou, Matsushita, and Mii-chan, the other proponents of the maid café all exchanged glances. A few more girls in the class, those who we had confirmed would be serving as staff for the maid café and those we had approached about it, were the ones who knew about it. Then, of course, there was Horikita, who was organizing our efforts overall.

Horikita calmly listened to what Ike had to say without any hint of impatience. If she overreacted, the whole class would know that we really *were* putting on a maid café. And the same went for the other classes as well. However, since Maezono and the other girls already reacted strongly to the outburst, that no longer mattered. And besides, considering the fact that Ike had *specifically* said a maid café, it was unlikely that it was just some random guess.

"Where did you hear that, Ike-kun?" asked Maezono.

"Wh-where? Um..." Ike flinched and stumbled over his words when he saw the tense and angry look on Maezono's face. "Just a bit ago, in the lobby. From Ishizaki and Suzuki, and...um, Nomura, I think. The three of 'em were talking about it super loud, like, as loudly as they could."

Matsushita went over to Horikita, clearly recalling what happened when Hashimoto came up to talk to us yesterday. "Hey, Horikita-san, what's going on here?" she said. "Wasn't this still supposed to be a secret?"

"Yes, it was. I hoped that something like this happening was out of the question, but apparently, I was naïve."

Now that Ishizaki and those other students were making a scene about it, the answer was obvious.

"Does this mean that Ryuuken-kun betrayed us after all?" Maezono angrily stormed up to Horikita. "You said it would be okay

though, Horikita-san!"

Just then, the classroom door was flung wide open, and in came a flustered-looking Sudou.

"H-hey, Ryuuen and his guys are comin' this way!" he shouted.

"...I suppose I'll just have to go greet them," said Horikita. "You all stay here in the classroom and settle down."

She must have decided that the conversation could get complicated if bystanders got involved, so she got up from her seat, visibly frustrated, and went to meet Ryuuen in the hallway.

"Yo," said Ryuuen. "You came all the way out here to meet me, eh, Suzune?"

He was out in front, with Ishizaki, Albert, and Kaneda behind him.

"I'm just wondering why you've come here with such noisy students in tow," replied Horikita.

"We have somethin' to tell you guys today. Ain't that right, Ishizaki?"

"Y-yeah."

Ishizaki appeared somewhat nervous as he looked us over. Even the students in our class who had been told to stay put were watching, perhaps because they were curious and couldn't hold themselves back. Maezono in particular couldn't hide her frustration and was glaring at Ishizaki and the others.

"Guess they got wind of that little fuss you made this mornin', eh Ishizaki?" said Ryuuen with a laugh, sensing the tense mood in the air.

"To be honest, I'm shocked. You really have no qualms about doing the unpredictable, after all, do you?" said Horikita.

"Ku ku. Bein' predictable is boring, isn't it?"

Ike and some of the other members of our class couldn't seem to understand what was going on, so Ryuuen started explaining it to them, politely.

"See, it was Suzune's idea for our two classes to partner up and work together for the Sports Festival," he said. "We had planned on doin' the same kind of thing for the Cultural Festival, from early on."

To be more precise, I was the one who initiated the request for cooperation in the Cultural Festival, but that was a trivial technicality. Horikita and Katsuragi were the ones who discussed it further and came to an agreement to work together for the Cultural Festival.

"The arrangement was we'd make sure our businesses didn't overlap," Ryuuen went on. "We'd discuss where we'd set up, and we'd lend and borrow people as needed so we could support each other. That about right?"

"Precisely correct," said Kaneda, smirking. "However, the mutual student support idea was planned to come somewhat later. We had discovered what kind of business you'd be running early on, and we found out about your stall location yesterday."

"You were planning on betraying us from the very beginning, then," Horikita said. "The reason you were hiding that until today was because you wanted to find out what our stall location was first. Isn't that right?"

"Exactly right," Ryuuen replied. "Sorry, but I'm afraid we're gonna have to go back to the drawing board on our little cooperation contract."

"Back to the drawing board?" said Horikita. "That's rather unfair. I can't believe that not only did you find out our location, but you went as far as disclosing our business plan."

"Disclose? Ishizaki and the others were just makin' conversation, that's all. It just so happened that people from your class and other classes overheard us. The people that overheard aren't *really* that important to you anyway, right?"

Little by little, Horikita's classmates began to understand what was going on.

"Is what he said just now true, Horikita-san?" asked Yousuke.

Horikita still hadn't even told Yousuke about her ongoing partnership with Ryuuen's class yet, from the sounds of it.

"I was going to tell you once everything was settled, but..." she began.

They had been in the final stages of preparations, but Ryuuen had suddenly flipped the table on her. Horikita's classmates, Yousuke included, understood this thanks to what they were hearing now.

"May I ask the reason why? What benefit is there in betraying us? Did you team up with Sakayanagi-san instead? Or maybe Ichinose-san and her class?" asked Horikita.

"We gave you a hand in the Sports Festival so we could crush Class A. But you know, you guys have been doing your fair share of winnin' lately, and you've been savorin' that sweet taste pretty well, yeah?" said Ryuuen.

Though our classes had helped each other pick up wins at the Sports Festival, in the end, we had a hundred Class Points on them.

"We moved forward under an equal contract. The proposal for the Cultural Festival was the same thing," said Horikita.

"But at the end of the day, if we crush Class A together and you guys in Class B rise up and take their place, then that's pointless to us," Ryuuen said. "We're not gonna get a lot of Class Points for it, but we're gonna take the win in the Cultural Festival. And we're gonna do the same thing you are."

"You mean you're putting on a maid café?" asked Maezono, immediately reacting to Ryuuen's words.

"Well, we're gonna change up the concept a little," he said. "But it'll be somethin' similar to yours."

That wouldn't have been so significant if what our class was offering hadn't been leaked. However, the fact that Ryuuen was deliberately going to have his class's business overlap with ours could be a fatal blow to Horikita's class. The original proponents of the idea in our class, like Maezono, as well as the other classmates, likely understood this as well. Ryuuen was declaring

that they were going to be fighting for one of the top four spots, the places that would net you 100 Class Points.

"So, you're telling me that you are intentionally offering something in the same genre as us? I can't imagine how that will benefit you," said Horikita.

"Well, it's true that when it comes to competing for customers, going with this idea might be riskier. But so what? We've figured out a way to outsell you and snag a spot at the top."

I didn't get the feeling that Ryuuen came all this way just to tell us these things.

"So, how 'bout we make this showdown even more intense, Suzune?" he then said.

"...Showdown?" asked Horikita.

The commotion gradually began to grow more and more, and now even students from other classes like Kanzaki and others who weren't involved at all, were starting to overhear Ryuuen's declaration of war against us. Hashimoto was watching the situation with some degree of amusement, probably because he had learned of this before anyone in Horikita's class did.

"How about whoever earns more in sales gets five million points from the loser?" Ryuuen suggested. "Wouldn't that make for an interesting competition?"

"Are you being serious right now?" snapped Horikita. "There's no way I could see that as a sane wager."

"Well, if you ask me, five million makes sense," said Ryuuen.

People couldn't transfer Class Points whenever they felt like it. However, Private Points, being owned by individuals, could be moved about freely. Ryuuen was proposing a wager that took advantage of that fact. He was suggesting a one-on-one showdown, separate from the contest between all twelve classes. Even if they didn't get into the top spots in the Cultural Festival, if they won in this direct competition and got five million Private Points for it, then you could certainly say it was a more intense battle.

"To be honest, I would've preferred a different opponent and more money on the line, but that Nagumo dude from the student council said he wasn't gonna get involved in this Cultural Festival thing. He basically ran away. And none of the other third-years had the nerve either—they weren't interested. I mean, it wasn't like they were *runnin'* exactly, but since I couldn't find the right person to challenge, I figured I had to look elsewhere. So...I had to challenge someone in our grade."

"Don't just carry on with this idea like it's been decided already. I have no intention of accepting such an absurd proposal," said Horikita.

"So, you're runnin' too, huh?"

"You went ahead on your own, breaching our contract and leaking our plans. And then, on top of that, you tell us you're copying our idea, and that you want to have a showdown? That's absolutely ridiculous. I can finally see the true meaning of why Katsuragi-kun avoided agreeing to a penalty clause in our contract."

"Who cares about all that?" Ryuuken scoffed. "You're not confident you can win in a fight with me?"

"I didn't say that," replied Horikita.

"Oh?"

"You've just been blathering about whatever you want, and I, for one, cannot remain silent. I will seriously consider this wager of yours."

"*Ku ku*, happy to hear it. I'll be waitin' for the good word, Suzune."

Perhaps Ryuuken's business here was finished after that, because he pulled back, seemingly satisfied. He walked off triumphantly, with Hashimoto and the other spectators clearing the way for him to pass. As Ryuuken and his followers left, students from other classes who had been watching started to disperse too.

In the midst of all of this, Hashimoto's eyes met mine. He had a thin smile on his lips and he shrugged his shoulders at me.

*It was almost as though he were telling me, "So, now do you understand what teaming up with Ryuuuen is like?"*

That was something that all of the second-year students, and likely students in all the other grade levels, understood well by now. Since Ryuuuen had made a loud proclamation that he was putting on a maid café too, the maid café business was likely going to be faced with difficulties. If other classes were considering doing the same thing too, it wouldn't be all that surprising if they decided to change course. But in our case, we had already laid down a lot of the groundwork.

"What are we going to do, Horikita-san?" said Maezono. "We've already done a lot of the preparations, right...?"

"Is Ryuuuen-kun's class really going to put on a maid café too?" asked Mii-chan.

Maezono and the others sounded anxious, and some frustration was also apparent in their voices, although they tried to hide it.

"Chances of that are high, I'd say," Horikita replied. "I can't imagine it was an idle threat."

"Then how about we change our idea? Pivot and do something different?" Yousuke suggested we could turn things around, but...

"We can't do that," said Horikita. "Part of our budget has already been spent."

We had already taken care of as many things as we possibly could, such as ordering maid outfits. We couldn't just eat the cost of everything we spent so far. If we quit, we'd be throwing precious funding out the window. Instead, we needed to reevaluate how to handle things in the days to come. The clock was still ticking, and we truly were suffering from sunk-cost bias.

"For now, we just have to take advantage of this situation," Horikita went on. "Even if he weren't offering five million points, let's accept his wager and take this opportunity to collect as many points as possible."

That depended, of course, on whether or not her classmates agreed to the potential wager: it would be necessary for the entire class to work together if we were going to prepare such a large sum.

## 2.4

THOUGH THERE WERE SOME cases like Horikita's class where plans were exposed thanks to an act of betrayal, it was still relatively unknown what kind of stalls the different classes would be running and where they would be located, and they would, at least ostensibly, remain a mystery until the day of the show. However, the larger the scale of the thing a class was doing, the more work they would need to do before the festival. In truth, at every location on campus that was available to set up a stall, there was a class already working there steadily.

And, in the midst of all of this, some surprising information came to light regarding Nagumo's class, Class 3-A. Perhaps they had no intention of hiding it from the very beginning, but rumors were circulating that Class 3-A was going to rent out a large space—the gym—and put on a combination "haunted house" and "maze." I figured I should see this as the actions of a king who didn't need to worry about competing over Class Points.

Perhaps it wasn't Nagumo who spearheaded the idea. It could have been the consensus of the class, and he let them do what they wanted. The way they were going about it made me think that winning was a secondary concern to them. Just by looking at the props and such that were being brought in from a distance, you could tell that they were investing a fair amount into this production. And, as if to demonstrate that fact, as of yesterday, Class 3-A had finally announced their own independent pre-opening. You couldn't help but sense the strong resolve they had to try to put on a high-quality show for the guests on the day of the festival.

As someone who didn't know the first thing about cultural festivals, I wanted to experience firsthand what kinds of things the other classes were offering, no matter what they were. So, after class, I headed over to the gymnasium to participate in the pre-opening.

Even though it was the first day, there weren't very many first-year or second-year students around. Perhaps it was because the pre-opening was going to be held over several days. The vibe in the gym was different from usual thanks to the lights being turned down low. Instead, it had a somewhat frightening feeling.

I hadn't been standing at the end of the line for long when I heard a familiar voice nearby.

"The Student Council President really is amazing, isn't he? Showing off this exhibit so proudly and confidently like this, I mean," said Ichinose.

"It wouldn't be easy to keep something like this hidden since it takes this much preparation," said Kanzaki. "It was wise of him to decide to reveal it now, early on, if they're going to use this as a trial run."

I casually turned around to see the two of them walking my way. Apparently, they came here to check things out, just as I did.

"Oh..."

They obviously noticed that I was standing there once they moved to get in line. Ichinose was the first to react, clearly nervous. She bowed only slightly to me and then averted her eyes. Kanzaki silently glanced at Ichinose, then at me, before getting in line. There was an awkward silence in the air, and the line wasn't moving as fast as I expected. Perhaps it was because it was the first day, but the third-year students seemed like they were having trouble getting things moving smoothly.

"O-oh, um...that reminds me," mumbled Ichinose. "I actually remembered that there's, um, some urgent business I have to attend to. I'm sorry Kanzaki-kun, but can you handle things from here...?"

It was clearly an excuse to leave, but Kanzaki didn't question it. He nodded in agreement.

"S-see you later," said Ichinose.

Ichinose was upright and conscientious, the sort of person who didn't have it in her to be coldhearted, no matter the circumstances. She still gave me a polite word as well before she

left the line. Only Kanzaki and I remained there, and there was a depressing feeling hanging around us. It was the kind of situation where even someone who didn't know anything about what was going on was likely to start to put it together. And in Kanzaki's case, it was probably as clear as day.

"How are things?" I asked.

Kanzaki's face immediately turned grim. "Do you think we're fine?" he said curtly.

There was no way that Ichinose's class, which had been slowly but surely losing Class Points, could be in good shape. What I had just said probably sounded more like a provocation.

I went ahead and filled in my name and received an explanation of the rules. Well, even though I called it an explanation, it was more like a breakdown of the bare minimum etiquette expected.

*"Cell phone use is forbidden while inside the attraction. Be sure to put your phone on silent."*

*"No loud chitchatting."*

*"No loitering inside."*

*"Do not touch any part of the attraction."*

By the time I finished reviewing the rules, Kanzaki had left the line and his back was turned to me. He was probably waiting for Ichinose to come back. He must've been assuming Ichinose would come back around the time I left the gym.

After I walked away from Kanzaki and signed the form indicating that I agreed to the rules, I stepped inside the attraction.

It was naturally quite cramped inside the walled haunted house, and visibility was poor. I assumed the lights were purchased at some kind of discount shop. They were covered with tape, presumably to reduce the illumination even further. I guessed they didn't really serve much purpose as a light source. I had been doing a lot of research online on cultural festivals, but I was surprised that this class was able to pull off such a high-quality production. I was honestly surprised at the impressive level of

technique that the third-years—no, that Class 3-A specifically—had on display here.

I ignored the ghosts and began observing things even more closely. I supposed that it wasn't that surprising, but essentially, they had adorned the production with decorations to create the atmosphere inside. It looked like most of the more frightening elements, the essential parts of the experience, were crafted by human hands. The long neck of a *rokurokubi* yokai was timed to come out when students entered, with more students lurking behind them. And of course, someone else had to pull out the sword when the fallen soldier jumped out as well.

There were several elements in this exhibit that still seemed to be under construction, but once the day of the Cultural Festival arrived, they would be completed and probably even be better in quality. Although this exhibit might not be so well received by adults, it could be very popular among families, especially ones with children. If the price was set too high, adults might stay away, but if their children wanted to see it, those adults would probably loosen their purse strings. That was going to be an important factor down the road in further solidifying our policies with the maid café, as well.

I figured I was about halfway through the attraction now, and I saw a sign telling me to take a left. I did as instructed and went to move that way, but just then, I saw a shadow move out of the corner of my vision. It seemed like a new trick meant to scare me.



"Wah! Aaaah?!"

I was supposed to be the one screaming in fear, but after the ghost jumped out, the figure tripped on the steps right in front of me, taking a huge spill. It was none other than Asahina Nazuna from Class 3-A. I thought that maybe it was all part of the show, so I didn't move to help. But when I saw her wincing in agony, I realized that it was an accident.

It wasn't surprising that someone might lose their footing in this pitch darkness, but...

"Ow! That really hurts!!" she wailed.

"...Are you all right?" I asked.

I suppose that it was a scary image, in a sense, to reach out to a ghost—something that shouldn't be alive anymore.

"Th-thanks... Owwww."

She apparently had difficulty standing on her own, so she plopped back down on the spot. Since I couldn't just leave her there, I decided to offer her my shoulder.

"Where's the exit?" I asked.

"Huh? Th-the exit...? It's probably this way... I think...?"

"If you're worried about it, we can turn back and go the way I came from."

Since I remembered the way back to the entrance, I figured we could get back there quickly, even with me helping her move.

"It's all right, trust your senp—ow...!"

She yelped in pain again. It was because she had tried, in vain, to put up a tough front and strike a pose. Her instructions sounded rather untrustworthy, but I figured it would be best just to quietly go along with them. It would be faster than me scrambling for the exit myself, anyway.

After a few pauses, and after a few screams of terror from my classmates who were spooked to see Asahina with me, we arrived at the exit. I had planned on leaving immediately and

letting someone else help her, but it didn't look like there were any students available since it was just a pre-opening.

"Don't worry about me," Asahina insisted. "Thanks, Ayanokouji-kun. I think I'll be fine if I just rest a bit."

I squatted down to take a look at her ankle.

"H-hey, what are you doing?" she asked.

"Please let me see."

"S-sure..."

It was beginning to swell up already. It was happening too quickly for her to have only slightly twisted it. If she didn't receive proper treatment, there could be consequences later on.

"I think you should go to the nurse's office," I told her. "Won't it be difficult for your class if you can't participate in the Cultural Festival?"

"Yeah, you're right... Okay, I'll go."

She stood up and tried to walk on her own, only to realize that she couldn't due to the pain. She instead decided to put her weight only on her left leg, the one that was in good shape, and hop forward on one leg. However, with every small jump, the vibrations in her right leg caused her to wince in pain.

"Come on, I'll give you a hand," I told her.

"Uh... But..." she protested.

I was sure that there were some feelings of embarrassment there, but from the looks of things, there was apparently another reason why she was hesitant to accept my help.

"You're worried about President Nagumo, right?" I asked.

"...You figured it out, huh?"

"More or less."

"If he saw you involved with a student from Class A, he probably wouldn't take too kindly to it, Ayanokouji-kun. I can't have you getting in trouble on my account, can I?"

She seemed more worried for me than her own injuries.

"There's no need for concern," I assured her. "I'm pretty sure that President Nagumo isn't going to be coming after me anymore."

"Really?"

"I think he realized that he was overestimating me."

I decided to lend Asahina a hand and escort her all the way to the nurse's office.

"Thank you," she said.

I figured that her somewhat conspicuous outfit must've been a bit embarrassing for her, but there was nothing that could be done about that. I offered her my shoulder and helped her all the way to the nurse's office, with several people giving us curious glances along the way. The doctor immediately had her sit down in the bed to start treatment. She was instructed to wait a little while so the doctor could get things ready.

When I turned my back to leave, figuring that it was time for me to go, Asahina called out to me.

"That reminds me," she said. "You had a bit of a disaster in your class, didn't you, Ayanokouji-kun."

Now that I had missed my chance to leave the nurse's office, I stayed put to talk with her.

"Are you talking about how our plans were leaked, by any chance?" I asked. "About the maid café?"

"Yeah."

In fact, Ryuuen had enacted his scheme just that very morning. The whole school knew about the maid café now, even though we had been preparing for it in secret. Obviously, there were a lot of disadvantages in people knowing what we were offering at such an early stage.

"And Class C... I mean, Ryuuen's class also came forward and said they'll have their own maid café to compete with you, right?" added Asahina.

The simple fact that we had competing services would mean that we were going to be fighting over the same customers.

"We can only hope that now that two classes are offering similar things, we won't be seeing any more," I said.

"Yeah, if three or four classes were doing the same thing, it would make the fight for customers that much worse," Asahina agreed.

Another class doing what we were doing would only increase their own risks. It wouldn't be impossible for other classes to devote some of their free time to setting up something similar, but it wouldn't be so easy for them to beat us when we were dedicating a significant amount of resources to our offerings.

Before too long, the doctor came back with bandages and other tools. In the end, I decided to stick around and watch the process. The doctor finished treating Asahina's injury in short order and told her that she should be able to walk without issue after a few days of rest.

When Asahina realized that it wasn't going to negatively impact the Cultural Festival, she let out a sigh of relief. Even so, I could tell she was still struggling to endure the pain she was in. "Whew, thank goodness. I guess this means I'm not going to cause problems for the class."

"It's not like the rankings are going to change in your case though," I pointed out. "You don't have to worry that much, do you?"

Even if her class got last place in the Cultural Festival, they wouldn't lose any Class Points.

"It doesn't work that way," she said. "There's no such thing as too many Class Points, y'know? Besides, there are actually quite a few kids who are against what Miyabi's doing this time, backing off and giving us free reign like this."

Asahina's eyes were downcast as she spoke.

"The students who aren't going to win are still going to need as many Class Points as they can get, right? If they get first place in the Cultural Festival, that's more Private Points they can get their hands on before graduation."

Taking into consideration the rules for the third-years under Nagumo's control, it was only natural that he would want as many students to graduate from Class A as possible. Even for the students already in that class, there was no way they could bring themselves to just abandon the students in Class B and below.

"Just FYI," Asahina began, "apparently, Nagumo's official stance is that he's going to let non-A kids compete too. He said that he'll bring one person from the class that gets first place into Class A."

That meant the complaints coming from the three lower classes wouldn't be so loud. Even so, the opposition couldn't be completely suppressed without a willingness to get as many Class Points as possible. And it was likely the pressure on Class 3-A would keep increasing more and more in the days to come, even after they gave up on winning.

"Hey, about what you said earlier... You told me that Miyabi recognized that he was overestimating you, right, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Asahina.

"Yes."

"At first, I thought, 'Okay, sure.' But now, I don't think that's it, actually."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Well, there was never a clear winner and loser between you and Miyabi, right?"

"That's true." After all, Nagumo and I had never gone head-to-head to settle the contest between us.

"In that case, I don't think it's really over, then," said Asahina.

"I don't have any intention of engaging with him though," I replied. "And I don't think I ever will, no matter what he does."

Trying to engage with me would only be a waste of Nagumo's time.

"I don't think that really matters," Asahina said. "If anything...I think things might even get worse than they are now.

He might try to do something. Not to you, Ayanokouji-kun, but maybe to someone close to you."

There were some things that only Asahina could see, as someone who had been watching Nagumo from right beside him for the past three years.

"Student Council President Nagumo sure likes competitions, doesn't he?" I mused. "Just like the former student council president, Horikita?"

"Yeah, he does. I don't have any doubt about that."

"Has he ever been clearly beaten by anyone, ever? Or has he even suffered a small setback, at least?"

It wasn't difficult for me to guess the answer to those questions, looking at Nagumo's behavior up until this point.

"Miyabi has... I don't think he's ever stumbled," Asahina replied. "Not even once. At least, not as far as I know."

Nagumo's classmates had a great deal of confidence in his ability to win.

"It's definitely a fact that Student Council President Nagumo is an outstanding person," I said. "Even if he were faking the kind of abilities he has, it would be impossible for him to misrepresent his scores in OAA or to become the student council president."

There were more than a few things that couldn't be managed through political maneuvers alone.

"He likes being number one," Asahina said. "That's why he's been fighting to be on top, even here at this school. He became student council president in the end, so I guess that makes him a man of his word."

"But, if you were to ask me if Nagumo was number one, then I'd immediately say no, he's not," I said.

"How could you say that...? He hasn't really lost to anyone in particular this whole time."

"I think it's because he's been very fortunate with who he's been up against." Nagumo wasn't weak, not at all. But I didn't have any doubt that his opponents had been. "I think that perhaps

his greatest misfortune was that he didn't have anyone in his grade level who was his equal or better who was also willing to compete with him."

"A worthy opponent... You mean he didn't have a rival?" she asked.

"Exactly."

Unfortunately, by only going up against lesser opponents, Nagumo had been able to take and hold onto the number-one spot without much effort. Of course, it was possible he might've started at number two or three right from the start, but he soon overtook his opponents and then was far and away in the lead. So, when he turned back to see where his opponents were after finishing the race, he saw that there was no one on his tail. Everyone had given up and either started walking the rest of the way or just stopped completely because they knew they couldn't beat Nagumo.

There might have been times where people with talent, like Kiryuuin, were lurking nearby, but if those people didn't try to catch up to and overtake Nagumo, then to him, they wouldn't be any different from weeds and pebbles on the side of the road. The fact that Nagumo hadn't experienced the harshness and difficulty of competition or the frustration of losing while he was still young could be the reason his thinking had become so warped. Even in planning and executing this bizarre revenge plot against me, there wasn't anything like a sense of defeat in it, or an inferiority complex. He was simply fixated on dragging me out into the open. When he told me that he wished to have a one-on-one showdown with me during the Sports Festival, he never even considered that he could lose.

Of course, there was no arguing with the fact that he didn't know everything about me, so it was a given he'd think that way. But hypothetically, even if he *had* seen my full ability in action, he still probably wouldn't think he could lose. He was a man who had never truly known defeat. That was the downside of continuously experiencing winning streak after winning streak.

"I wish we could just stop the fighting in this school already," said Asahina.

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

"At least, I hope that nothing happens now..."

I didn't think that was likely. Nagumo's way of thinking had been made clear to everyone, albeit indirectly, via the Cultural Festival. It had blatantly changed. To the casual observer, it would appear that Nagumo's belligerent side, and his curiosity, had simply died down. However, that wasn't really the case—this was the calm before the storm. After this, Nagumo was going to come after me... No, not just me. He was going to do something to people aside from me, too, to hold them accountable. Getting one or two people expelled might not be enough for him.

I supposed that this was the bill that had come due—the cost of the disrespect that I had shown Nagumo so far. If I let this bomb go unchecked after it had swelled this much, then those worries would come to pass.

I recalled what Manabu had said. "*Nagumo's way of doing things would make a great number of people unhappy.*"

What he said then was half-true. I wasn't going to deny that I had played a part in what was happening, but Nagumo's choice had already been made, and he was smoldering in his feelings and thought processes. But what Manabu said was half wrong too. That was because, through Nagumo's methods, some of the students who originally wouldn't have been able to graduate from Class A were indeed getting the chance to do just that.

It wasn't just the third-year students either. The first-years and second-years were getting the chance too, albeit on a limited basis, with the Class Transfer Tickets. Though there were restrictions in their usage, they didn't exist during Manabu's time. If I had been the old me, the version of me that existed through last year, I probably would've just stood by and watched what Nagumo was doing.

"I'm starting to get a little interested in Student Council President Nagumo," I remarked.

"You heard what I said before, right?" asked Asahina.

"I did." I felt a curiosity welling up from deep inside me, which I hadn't felt before.

"I knew you were strange," Asahina teased, smiling. Lowering her gaze to her bandaged leg, she let out a small chuckle. "I'm sure that your meeting was a coincidence, but maybe that's why Miyabi wants to fight you."

Thinking back, that "coincidence," or rather, the result of it, had been a major factor in my meeting Asahina. *Coincidence, huh.* Just now, in this very conversation, I had come to one logical realization. The coincidence that we had just talked about was something that wasn't controlled. However, that didn't necessarily mean that coincidences *couldn't* be controlled. They could change form greatly depending on your point of view, your perspective.

Asahina Nazuna and her charm, the existence of coincidence, and Nagumo Miyabi. This wasn't bad as a single test case. Just like an experiment was a series of failures followed by success.

## 2.5

**A**FTER LEAVING ASAHLNA in the nurse's office, I returned to the gymnasium. I wanted to check in on Kanzaki since I had been wondering about him—and Ichinose too, who I had expected to have returned. If I drew attention to myself, though, it would probably just be a repeat of what happened before, so I stayed further away from the entrance when I went back there. The fact that I couldn't see Kanzaki in line made me wonder if he was somewhere inside the attraction, or if he had already left.

However, considering how he had been acting earlier, he would definitely have waited. I couldn't imagine that Kanzaki, who had been waiting for Ichinose to come back and waiting for me to leave, would have missed what happened earlier. There had been a bit of a commotion when I escorted the injured Asahina out, after all. I had then taken her to the nurse's office and come back here, so I had been gone for roughly fifteen minutes.

Unless Ichinose had returned immediately after I had left, I expected she'd be inside the gym somewhere, if she were still in the nearby area. As I was making general observations on the situation, I decided to take a closer look at the faces of the students as they were coming out. A few minutes passed, and then Kanzaki slowly emerged from the exit.

*So, he was in the gym after all,* I thought to myself.

But it was what I noticed afterward that surprised me.

I thought for sure that Ichinose would've been beside him, but he was alone. It didn't seem like he had followed her out just now, nor did he seem concerned about whether anyone was following him. I expected him to continue walking, but then he looked around and spotted me. He eyed me suspiciously for a few seconds and then approached.

"So, you came back after all," he said. "I guess her injuries weren't too serious."

I supposed he was right. If her injuries had been serious, it'd be difficult to imagine that I'd just be standing here casually like this.

"I'm guessing you find it strange that Ichinose isn't here with me?" he continued.

"To be honest, a little, yeah."

"I didn't call her over because I was concerned about the possibility we'd bump into you as you came back from the nurse's office," he explained. "Besides, there are still a few days left for the pre-opening, anyway."

Did that mean that Ichinose would have time to inspect the pre-opening, even if she didn't rush now? It seemed like what Ichinose's class would be doing for the festival had been decided then, at least to some extent. If they were still looking for ideas as to what to do, then they would have needed to go ahead and experience the pre-opening as soon as possible, without bothering with anything like engaging with me.

"I'd like to continue our conversation from earlier," said Kanzaki. "It seems like your class is doing very well."

It was clear that he was referring to the series of events around the same times as the Uninhabited Island Special Exam and the Unanimous Special Exam—and if we were going back even a little further still, what happened at the start of our second year too.

"It's not like we've emerged from it all entirely unscathed or anything," I replied. "Unlike your class, Kanzaki, we've lost people. There are negatives that aren't reflected in Class Points alone."

"Your class isn't the only one facing unseen risks. And taking into account the things that can be seen as a positive, I'd say that there's a sizable difference between you and us."

I didn't take what he said as envy. Rather, it sounded like Kanzaki's honest, candid opinion.

"A class like yours will eventually contend with Sakayanagi's class," he added.

One thing that caught my attention was Kanzaki's somewhat farsighted view of his own class. It was like he had taken a step back and observed the big picture.

"Have you already given up, then? On trying to make it to Class A?" I asked.

"...Maybe so."

His response was more like an admission than saying no. It wasn't difficult to guess what was going through his mind. It wasn't like Ichinose's class was performing disastrously; they hardly ever lost Class Points from things like tardiness, absence, or behavioral problems because their class was so serious. They also weren't at much risk of losing a great number of points anywhere because they rarely made big mistakes in the special exams. However, on the other hand, they weren't blessed with opportunities to make big jumps forward in special exams either.

"No one has noticed, but our class is a slowly sinking ship," he said. "It would be cute if they were simply pretending not to see it, but everyone actually thinks that we aren't, sincerely."

"You alone seem different in that regard, Kanzaki," I observed.

"Only until a little while ago. There's no point in trying to raise the banner of rebellion alone."

"Meaning that you've given up?"

"My class can't make it to A," he said, clearly and definitively. "If the possibility of us getting to Class A has been reduced to zero, then the only thing left to do is find another way. If we're going to sink, we should give as many people as possible a chance to escape."

"Saving up twenty million points and transferring classes?" I guessed.

"Yes, because Student Council President Nagumo has actually pulled it off and it's been proven effective. Ichinose has been storing Private Points for some time now. If we increase the percentage saved to the limit, we could transfer at least two or three students over to Class A. In addition, we first learned of the

existence of Class Transfer Tickets at the Sports Festival. It won't be easy for us to get them, of course, but it's a genuinely heartening factor to have more options to plan for."

"Why bother telling me the state of affairs in your class?" I asked. "I can't imagine that you're trying to stir up confusion."

"Why indeed... I don't really understand what I'm doing myself."

That was an uncharacteristic response for him. Even though he gave me that answer, he paused for a moment and began searching for the reason why he told me those things. Perhaps he felt like his previous answer didn't seem quite right.

"I just didn't have anyone to vent to," he concluded. "That might be why."

If you had worries about your daily life, then you would share them with those close to you, regardless of whether they were in your class or not. By doing that, you could work toward a resolution. However, when it came to worries about your class, you inevitably had to seek solutions from outside. If you said something like "We have no other choice but to give up on Class A and transfer classes" to your classmates, it would obviously cause unavoidable discord. It would be impossible to reach a consensus on that point in Ichinose's class.

"You were the only person who came to mind who could understand what I had to say, and who wouldn't carelessly let anything slip," he said.

It looked like he thought I'd be a good outlet to vent to. That probably wasn't the only reason, of course. It seemed like he also bore some resentment toward me since I had a strong influence on Ichinose.

"I don't care about what's happened between you and Ichinose, nor do I care what kind of relationship you two have," he said. "Even the fact that you're such a bad influence on her that we can't even conduct satisfactory information gathering here is trivial."

"That's a scathing way of putting it," I remarked.

"You'll have to forgive me for that much. I've had my fair share of frustration."

He then gave me a gentle wave, signaling that he was leaving. *The class strategist who had given up on winning...* As I looked at his back as he left, I noticed he looked one size smaller than usual.

It might've been a little uncouth for me to call over to him and stop him right now, but I couldn't let Kanzaki walk away as he was right now.

"Could I get a minute of your time sometime soon?" I asked him. "I want to talk to you a little more. About the future."

"Can we just talk now? You can take as much time as you need if you want to discuss the future."

"Sorry, but I want to do some research on what the third-years are doing for the festival at the moment."

Besides, even if we did start our discussion now, I wouldn't be able to move things forward in any way. In order to discuss what lay ahead, I would need another piece of the puzzle, with which I could get them to take that step toward the future.

"In that case, that's fine, I suppose," Kanzaki said. "Contact me anytime."

## 2.6

ON FRIDAY of the following week, I went to a place I didn't normally go to in order to meet with a certain student.

The door to the student council office opened at my knock, and I saw Nagumo there. He looked momentarily surprised. There weren't any other students in sight, or any teachers either. He seemed to be alone today, as Asahina had told me.

My arrival was probably unexpected, even for Nagumo. He must have been watching me up until just moments ago since he was clutching his phone in his left hand. I thought I'd be an unwelcome visitor, but he didn't turn me away. Instead, he encouraged me to step inside.

"Please pardon the intrusion," I remarked as I came inside.

With a *ka-chak* sound, the door to the office closed shut, and there was a moment of still silence between the two of us.

"When Nazuna told me to set aside some time today, I didn't expect it to be you who'd be paying me a visit," Nagumo said. "You have some business with the student council?"

"No, I don't have any student council business," I replied. "I came to speak to you personally, President Nagumo."

Nagumo reclined further back in his chair and placed the phone in his hand down on the desk. "In that case, I have to commend you for showing your face to me like this right now. Don't you think so, Ayanokouji?"

"I assume you're talking about what happened with the Sports Festival. But isn't physical illness a legitimately accepted reason for absence?" I asked.

"Don't make me laugh," scoffed Nagumo. "There are witnesses who saw you at Keyaki Mall the day after the Sports Festival. They said you looked fine."

"I recovered quickly," I answered.

"A clear lie."

"It could be true."

I was engaging in word games a little bit, but Nagumo seemed to realize that pressing the matter any further was pointless.

"Fact or fiction, it doesn't matter," he said. "Anyway, let's hear the reason you're here."

I got the impression his irritable attitude, like he was tired of dealing with me, was sincere. He wasn't even trying to hide it—it was like he wanted to end this discussion quickly and leave. However, that transparent behavior was actually evidence that he was hiding his *true* feelings even deeper down.

"May I sit?" I asked. "I think this might take a while."

"You said that this isn't a matter that concerns me as student council president. That means you won't mind if I refuse to engage in this conversation, will you?"

As the head of the student council, Nagumo was prepared to listen to people, even to those he didn't care for. But apparently, if this wasn't a student council matter, he didn't want to hear any more of what I had to say.

Well, I supposed that made sense. "If you won't listen to what I have to say, I'll be going," I said.

If Nagumo couldn't be bothered to have a conversation with me as an individual, I couldn't blame him. However, that probably wasn't what was happening here. If his interest in me had genuinely disappeared completely, then sure, that would be a different story...but I could still see that the spark was there somewhere.

In other words, he was absolutely not going to refuse me. It was precisely because he had taken some precious time out of his day to meet me here that I could state that so definitively. After a few more moments of silence, Nagumo instructed me to sit. I shifted my chair so we could face each other directly sitting down.

"Sorry, I don't have anything to drink," said Nagumo.

"I don't mind."

I could tell from the way he was staring at me that he knew I wasn't here to apologize. And looking at him, he was probably wondering why I came *now*, after all this time.

"Anyway, I never would have expected Class 3-A to hold a pre-opening," I said. "It's usually considered a disadvantage to reveal what kind of show you're putting on, after all."

"You know, on that note, I also heard that some idiotic class had their festival plans exposed," he shot back.

"Ouch. That really hits home. That reminds me... President Nagumo, I heard that Ryuuuen came to see you."

"He was hounding me to wager tens of millions of points against him, like we were betting on horse races or something," said Nagumo dismissively.

"And apparently you refused."

"Just like my competition with you, my days here at this school are practically over. It's a throwaway match at this point—I've already won. I couldn't care less about the Cultural Festival; I don't even need to bother giving people instructions on what to do. I'm just letting them do whatever they want so they can make some memories here now until graduation."

So he changed his stance. It sounded like he decided to be completely open about whatever his class was doing, letting everyone enjoy the Cultural Festival like they would at any other school. Whether they took first place or twelfth place, it wouldn't change Class 3-A's rock-solid lead. It likely didn't matter at all to Nagumo if the students in classes 3-B and below were grumbling about it either.

"But really, tens of millions of points?" I said. "Even if we gathered up points from all of our classes, it probably wouldn't be enough to come to that."

Ryuuuen's class was bringing in income, but they were extravagant spenders too. There was no way that their financial standing was all that good.

"He told me that he'd give me the right to expel any student I wanted," Nagumo said. "Himself included."

Ryuuuen was going to use the students themselves as collateral for the funds that he couldn't provide.

"If he asked me last year, I might've taken him up on his offer. It's not my grade, sure, but it would've been interesting to play for people's expulsion." Nagumo was telling me that he had already lost his enthusiasm and interest in school. "If your class and his class want to compete with each other, go ahead and do it, it's fine. You're free to do whatever you want."

"I understand your personal feelings on the matter," I said. "But aren't there a lot of students out there who don't agree with what you're doing?"

"No one can come complain to me," Nagumo shrugged. "If they did something like that, then their spot in Class A would no longer be guaranteed. When the day of the Cultural Festival gets closer, I—or officially speaking, the student council president—will come forward and make a proposal. It'll be one that's not so bad for them. A little help for the classes that are struggling desperately to win."

"I see. You've been giving this a lot of thought."

"Well, I *am* the student council president, after all." After that textbook answer, Nagumo let out a deep sigh and urged me to speak. "Anyway, let's hear what you have to say."

"All I want is to talk to you, Student Council President Nagumo," I told him. "That's all."

"I don't understand what you're trying to say."

"Does that sound too unbelievable? Actually, I'm a little surprised by what I'm doing too. Up until now, President Nagumo, I've been trying to keep my distance from you."

Nagumo himself knew that very well. However, he likely didn't understand the underlying reason.

"Do you know why?" I asked.

"No idea. I'm sure it's not because you're afraid of my abilities or anything, though," he said.

"Well, President Nagumo, unlike Student Council President Horikita Manabu before you, you attract people's attention. So, part of the reason I avoided you was because you were too dazzling for a shady person like me to deal with."

"I see... But that's just the official reason, right? Surface level?"

Nagumo casually dismissed the pretense of respect in my answer and encouraged me to admit the true feelings lurking beneath my words.

"I just wasn't interested," I replied, bluntly.

If he was asking me to simply say what I really felt, I figured I'd come right out with it. While I did acknowledge his abilities to a certain extent, I really wasn't interested. That was why I didn't think it was necessary for me to get involved in whatever Nagumo was doing.

"You know, if someone else said what you just said to me now, I might've gotten a little offended," said Nagumo.

"I didn't mean to come off as rude. I—"

"No need to apologize. You're free to feel that way. I was the one who made you speak your mind. But you know," he added quickly, "if that had come from someone *other* than you, I'm sure I would've made that person change their mind. Immediately."

Nagumo probably wouldn't have hesitated to trap anyone else who said what I did, even if they didn't like it, until they *became* interested in dealing with him. With his influence and power, that wouldn't have been difficult for him.

"Your term as student council president will be coming to an end soon, and you'll remain in Class A and graduate from there," I said. "I thought that was fine, President Nagumo, at least up until just a few days ago."

"And now you feel differently?" he asked.

"I had a change of heart, and I thought that I'd like to face you directly. That's why I'm here."

There was no need for flattery only meant as a diversionary tactic, or for false joy or anger either. For what was to come in the future, it'd be better simply to say what I was thinking. Nagumo was waiting to hear me tell him the main reason why I had come here today, and I decided to indulge him.

"I have a proposal for you, President Nagumo," I declared. "I was wondering if you'd allow me to propose a contest this time—a challenge from me to you."

It most likely hadn't ever crossed Nagumo's mind that I might make an offer like that.

"I don't like this. It's not like you," he replied. Just saying that I changed my mind probably wasn't enough to convince him. "I don't know exactly when this whole change-of-heart business happened, but it's too late. You ran away from the last chance I gave you at the Sports Festival. I believe that was, if I'm borrowing your own words from earlier, because you 'weren't interested.' Isn't that right?"

"Yes, I did say that. I'm sure this comes off sounding all rather convenient," I replied.

"You're right about that. There's no way that I can just come out and agree to your proposal for a contest *now* after you threw out three previous opportunities, simply because you had a change of heart."

Nagumo didn't adjust his posture, still sitting in his seat as he had been. He continued speaking, seemingly without holding anything back.

"Then, there's what happened in the Sports Festival. You said that you were sick the whole time, but I've determined that was an obvious lie. And don't tell me that you've forgotten about what happened on the island, have you?"

"In that case, would you like to reenact that, but with the positions reversed this time?" I asked.

If Nagumo could punch me in the stomach right here and now, he could take that as an apology for what happened before,

more or less. However, I was sure that wouldn't be enough to satisfy him.

"You think that you can make up for everything with just one punch?" Nagumo scoffed. "Don't make me laugh. You're not worth the dirt on the bottom of my shoe."

Obviously, there was no room for discussion on this, not even a suggestion. It was clear that there was at least that significant of a difference between Ayanokouji Kiyotaka and Nagumo Miyabi. One was an ordinary student from Class 2-B, and the other was the leader of Class 3-A and the student council president. The difference in "ability" between these two people was so vast that such a comparison was unacceptable.

"I'm going to shelve this discussion because there's no point to it, not even if I tried drilling it into you right now," he said. "Listen here: I'm allowed to go to *you* for a contest. You are *not* allowed to approach me with one. Understand?"

"I do, but that's exactly what you're shelving here," I said. "A contest. I'm here in front of you today, telling you that I'm willing to fight you. Doesn't that satisfy you, President Nagumo?"

I was deliberately cutting my own finger, letting it drip blood in front of a hungry wolf. However, the wolf before me wasn't rushing over to bite so readily. Nagumo wasn't being defensively provocative, as he had been in the past. Instead, he was being extremely wary. If he hadn't thought of me as an enemy before, then his fangs would already be closing in on my fingertips. Nagumo might not have realized this himself, but what he was doing now was proof that he saw me as an enemy.

"You really are strange," he said. "You're not intimidated by me at all. Actually, come to think of it...it's not just me. You weren't intimidated by Horikita-senpai either."

Nagumo then looked out the window, as though he were recalling the days when Horikita Manabu was here. His original desire had been to fight Manabu, not me. That goal was unattainable now, but there was no one else who could act as Manabu's substitute either.

"Suppose...I was to have a showdown with you," he conceded at last. "What would we even do? The second semester's almost gone, and the third semester is coming up fast. As you probably know, I already gave my classmates carte blanche to do what they wanted, even in competitions in sales at the Cultural Festival. I can't just tell them to give that back now. And even if you wanted to wait for the next special exam, there's no guarantee it'll be a competition between all grades."

We could just leave the matter to Lady Luck and wait, hoping that there would still be an opportunity for all three grades to face off again. It wasn't like we *couldn't* do that, but one could hardly say it was a realistic approach.

"More importantly," I said, "you know very well from what happened with the former student council president that it's difficult to have an actual, no-holds-barred competition with someone from a different grade, right?"

Last year, Nagumo had persistently tried to compete against Horikita Manabu in events like the Sports Festival, the Training Camp, and so on. It didn't matter to him what kind of event it was, or how large or small it was. He had a strong desire to settle the score and make sure there was a clear winner. However, Manabu had skillfully evaded Nagumo's provocations, and had avoided being sucked into a competition with him that would've gotten everyone else involved too.

"More than anyone else, yeah. How hard did you work at adjusting things, anyway? And not just this year. It was your fault I didn't get to compete with Horikita-senpai last year."

In that sense too, I had constantly been a source of annoyance to Nagumo.

"Please listen to what I'm about to say, and then consider whether or not we can make a showdown happen," I replied.

At that, Nagumo leaned further back in his chair, correcting his posture a bit. Since there were many unknowns when it came to special exams the school would be giving us, I laid out several possibilities. After all, since Nagumo would welcome a challenge no

matter what form it took, there was still a way to make our potential confrontation a reality.

After I finished telling him everything I had to say, Nagumo remained silent, seemingly deep in thought.

"I don't know whether or not we'll be able to make a 100 percent perfect competition a reality, but I do think I've gotten close to making it happen," I concluded.

"It certainly sounds like it," Nagumo admitted. "But do you really think you can pull this off?"

"I'm sure that you can already see the situation, President Nagumo. You've been observing her on a daily basis, haven't you? If that's the case, surely you must understand."

"I see... I only did that to rile you up, but instead of getting upset, you're trying to use that."

"So, will you accept my proposal?" I asked. "Or will you not?"

We had been talking for a long time now, especially for someone like me. However, putting in the effort to have this sort of drawn-out conversation with Nagumo was necessary to negotiate with him.

"I'd be happy to take you up on your offer, but..."

Although his answer was positive, it seemed he had something else to say.

"...What is your real objective here?" he asked.

"I just want to have a competition with you, President Nagumo. You don't believe me?"

"I don't, no." Nagumo answered me without even a second's delay; he really didn't believe me at all. While I was a little pleased, I decided to wait for what Nagumo said next.

"Cut to the chase already," he said. "I'll think about whether or not I accept your proposal after you tell me more."

If he was ready to hear it, I figured I wouldn't hesitate. I'd get down to business and broach the next subject.

"I have a request for you, President Nagumo," I told him.

I then explained the nature of my request, taking into account the specific developments that would unfold as well. After he heard everything, Nagumo reclined further in the student council president's chair, the very seat he had continued to occupy for a year now.

"I understand what you're trying to say," he said. "But this isn't a proposal based on your desire to compete with me, is it? You've brought up the idea of a competition with me because it's the only way to make what you want to happen, happen. Right?"

"That's half correct, but half incorrect," I replied. "The truth is also that I wanted to compete against you precisely because I've changed my opinion of you, President Nagumo. However, half of me does still feel like this is a bothersome affair."

"You're certainly an honest guy."

"That's exactly why I want you to accept my proposal. Factoring in what I've discussed with you, of course."

"You're ridiculous," Nagumo said. "You're acting so shameless despite the fact you're coming to me to ask for a showdown."

"I won't deny that."

"And knowing that, do you honestly think that I'm going to play along with you?"

"If you refuse, then that'll be the end of it," I said. "I won't fight you, President Nagumo. Not ever. Even if you were to use one of my classmates or someone from my grade, or if you tried something like taking a hostage, I would completely ignore you."

"I'm not so sure about that. If it were just any random person, sure, you might leave them for dead. But...what if it were Karuizawa Kei?"

Nagumo shook things up by mentioning Kei's name.

"It wouldn't matter," I answered, without hesitation.

Nagumo's smile disappeared.

"It certainly doesn't sound like you're just...trying to make me think something like that wouldn't work, by saying that so definitively," he said.

"I'm not an all-knowing, almighty god," I said. "Whether we're talking about Kei or another classmate, I can't protect everyone 24/7, 365 days a year. Besides, you're the student council president, the most powerful person in the school who's capable of controlling many students. If you wanted to, you could get a person expelled, even in ways and places where I wouldn't be able to keep an eye on them."

Of course, there were risks involved in expelling someone. It would have a hefty price and require a great deal of effort. But I didn't care about that.

"No matter who you made disappear, I wouldn't engage with you ever again," I added.

I wasn't bargaining here. It was precisely because what I was saying was purely sincere that even someone like Nagumo had stopped smiling.

"So, if I want to go up against you...I have no choice but to accept your current proposal. Is that right?" he asked.

"I wouldn't mind one bit if you disregarded it and graduated with pride instead, of course."

"But you're going to be in trouble if I don't lend you a hand."

"I've already been coming up with another plan," I replied.

That was true—there wasn't any real need for me to talk to Nagumo about this proposal. But half of the reason I was doing this had already been stated: I came here to have this discussion with Nagumo today because I wanted to fight him.

Whatever Nagumo said next would decide everything. We were at the moment of final judgment: a moment that would determine whether or not a competition between Nagumo and I would take place.

"All right," he agreed. "You're trying to coax me into this, but sure, Ayanokouji, I'll do it. My graduation from Class A is assured anyway. It wouldn't be too bad to finish things off by playing a game with you."

He didn't have even the slightest inkling that he could lose. He couldn't even imagine it. This was the overwhelming confidence

of a man who prided himself on repeated victories.

"Thank you very much," I said.

"But are you sure you're okay with this? If we do as you've suggested, then... No matter how things turn out, people around you are going to get hurt."

"Of course. After all, you would've been involved either way, President Nagumo."

He reacted strongly to my words. After my parting shot, President Nagumo stood up and walked closer to me.

"You..." he began. "You knew?"

"I've been observing you, President Nagumo, even though we were a distance apart," I told him. "I've had some idea of what you were planning to do in the future."

Even though I had already told him that I didn't want to fight before, he constantly kept me in his sights. I expected him to make a move before it was too late.

"So...it's not just Karuizawa who's an exception, but even Honami?" he asked.

"As I told you before, it's all the same, no matter who we're talking about. Whether you try to expel Kei, or toy with Ichinose, or Horikita, or anyone else for that matter. Even so, I think it would be unwise for you to think that you can rile me up."

Nagumo snickered at that, but then immediately switched to a serious expression.

"I take back what I said earlier, about it being a game," he said. "You're the only person that Horikita-senpai acknowledged. I'm sure of that now."

"I'm glad. Well then, if you'll please excuse me," I said, preparing to leave.

"Hey," said Nagumo.

"Is there something else?" I asked.

"I admit that you've got a hell of a poker face. I also understand that you negotiated pretty hard to draw me out. So,

for once, let me hear what you really think. If Karuizawa really were to be expelled, would you truly just stand by and watch?"

"I wouldn't want Kei, or, well, any of my classmates to go away, no matter who we're talking about. I would resist that happening as much as possible."

"That's not an answer. What you said just now was about if people left the class. I didn't sense any worry at all from you when you told me what you'd do if Karuizawa, someone special to you, disappeared."

I turned to look at him. Normally, the answer here would be obvious. I would make a statement like "*I was just bluffing to keep you from realizing my true feelings,*" or something along those lines. But that wouldn't be the best answer for dealing with Nagumo right now.

"If she disappears, she disappears. That'd be the end of her," I said. "Nothing more, nothing less. In fact, it would make sorting things out easier, so it would be a great help to me."

"...You have seriously got a screw loose," muttered Nagumo, and I saw for the first time that he was shaken—or rather, that he couldn't understand me.

"I'll contact you again in due time," I said. I then exited the student council office, quietly closed the door behind me, and walked off.

Nagumo described me as having a screw loose, but that wasn't true. From my point of view, a person who made the wrong decision based on temporary feelings was one who didn't have their head screwed on tight instead. It was the same whether that person was a stranger, a lover, or a family member. If the time came when that person failed and dropped out, that was the end of it.

Your utmost priority was to protect yourself. That was the undeniable solution.

## Chapter 3: The Signal Fire of Rebellion

**W**E WERE SURPRISED by Ryuuuen's announcement that his class would step into the ring with a concept café on Monday, November 8<sup>th</sup>. As a result, we had to respond to a variety of issues, but my classmates were determined to fight, and what they had to do remained unchanged.

In response to Ryuuuen's proposed bet, Horikita made a presentation for the class and asked for their agreement to fight head-to-head against his class for a million Private Points. The arrangement was that the class with greater sales in the Cultural Festival would receive that million points from the other class. Many of our classmates had a positive attitude, which was a big plus. They weren't letting themselves get flustered, and instead were determined to fight seriously and win.

When Chabashira-sensei left the room after class ended, I took out my cell phone. I noticed I'd received a response to my earlier message in chat, so I went ahead and read it.

*"I have time. I'm headed to the designated location."*

Apparently, he was open to my request. I suppose that meant that the preface to this conversation that I had brought up to him the other day, about the future, had proven successful.

"Hey, Kiyotaka," said Kei. "Let's walk back to the dorms together."

"Sorry, but I have plans today," I replied.

"Huh? Really? Okay, then..." Kei quickly changed gears and turned to Satou, who was still in the classroom. "Hey, Maya-chan, let's go, you and me!"

"I come after Ayanokouji-kun?!" she laughed.

"Hey, hey, don't say it like that. Okay?"

Her joking aside, Satou didn't appear displeased by Kei's request at all, and she actually accepted Kei's offer to walk

together with a big smile. Kei invited another group of girls to join them, and they all left the classroom happily. Among them was Shinohara, who, up until just a little while ago, had been on poor terms with the others. It looked like Kei had matured even more since she'd gotten closer with Satou.

At any rate, I was grateful that the other girls could keep Kei company. I decided to exit the classroom and head over to the special building to meet with Kanzaki, the person who I'd asked to come out. We wouldn't be able to simply discuss this matter over the phone, via chat, or out in public.

On my way over, I spotted Mashima-sensei, the homeroom instructor for Class 2-A, standing in the hallway and chatting with some teachers from other grade levels. Although the unusual sight caught my attention, I didn't stop. As I passed them by though, a part of the teachers' conversation reached my ears.

"Chabashira-sensei sure has changed lately, don't you think?"

"It's like she's softened up," another said. "Or rather, she seems to smile more."

"Mashima-sensei, you were in the same grade as Chabashira-sensei when you were in school, right? I wanted to ask you a few things..."

Apparently, they were talking about Chabashira-sensei. I figured that the teachers could've just hung out in the faculty lounge if they wanted to talk, but I supposed that if the topic of conversation was a specific teacher—and one of the opposite sex, no less—it might make more sense for them to have their conversation here. It went without saying that the change they were talking about had been triggered by the Unanimous Special Exam. Chabashira-sensei had come out of her shell, not only as a homeroom instructor, but as a teacher in general. There was no doubt that they perceived that difference.

Noticing my presence, Mashima-sensei brought the conversation to a stop. He must have decided it wouldn't be a good idea to unintentionally let a student overhear what they were saying.

"Ayanokouji, what is your business here in the special building?" he asked.

It was a fair question, since few students passed through these hallways after class for no reason.

"I have a short meeting with someone," I replied. "We have some things to talk about that we don't want to be overheard."

Hearing that answer, the teachers, with the exception of Mashima-sensei, looked somewhat embarrassed. Perhaps they decided to disperse, because they then started walking away. I could've left immediately too, but I had a little time to spare before my meeting.

"Actually, this is perfect timing, Mashima-sensei. If you wouldn't mind, I have a few questions that I'd like to ask you."

I figured it must've meant something that Mashima-sensei stuck around even after all the others walked away.

"Questions for me? What did you want to ask?" he replied.

"It's about the Cultural Festival," I said. "Regarding the rules that aren't explicitly stated."

He had a slightly dubious look on his face, but Mashima-sensei immediately responded appropriately and honestly to my request, as a teacher. This school was built on special rules that were very different from ones at a normal high school. School officials were well aware that each individual student had their own unique perspective on things and would focus on different aspects. However, there would inevitably be things that would catch people's attention.

"I'm not sure what it is you want to ask me," he began, "but I must ask you—are you sure you shouldn't be checking with your own homeroom instructor, Chabashira-sensei, first?"

He didn't hesitate to make sure that I wasn't mistaken in approaching him with my questions. Indeed, normally, it would've made more sense to go to your own homeroom instructor if you were looking for an explanation of the rules.

"There are instances when, depending on the time and circumstances, it's more expedient to ask someone other than

Chabashira-sensei," I replied.

"Teachers are supposed to be fair to the students," said Mashima-sensei. "But even so, it's not like no problems ever arise when teachers deal with students from other classes in the same grade level. I'm sure that you're aware of that."

He was warning me that sometimes it's too late to be asking things.

"I've determined that you're not the sort of person who would betray my expectations, Mashima-sensei," I told him.

"If that's what you've decided, then let's not do anything uncouth," he said. He was basically telling me that, rather than worrying about whether he'd reciprocate my trust, if I was going to trust him, then I should just go ahead and say what I wanted.

"So then, what was it you wanted to ask, exactly, about the unstated rules?" he pressed.

Now that I had Mashima-sensei's permission, I went ahead and asked him for advice on a special case. He didn't seem at all surprised by my words, but I supposed that was to be expected. Even the school officials had a set of unstated, behind-the-scenes rules so that they could satisfy students' various wishes. That was exactly why Mashima-sensei didn't find it strange that there were students who thought like me.

"Your line of thinking is exactly correct," Mashima-sensei said. "It's not impossible to do, if it's necessary."

"I knew it," I replied.

It wasn't a crazy idea. There could be cases where it was called for, like if a class was placed in an unfortunate situation, or in the event of a major inconvenience.

"However, if you were to ask me whether it's efficient...I have my doubts," Mashima-sensei said. "As I'm sure you're already aware, no problems would arise if it happened between students. Or, well, to be more precise, you would discuss it amongst yourselves to avoid any problems. You understand what I mean when I say that, yes?"

"Yes. I was wondering if it was something that didn't need to be explicitly stated in the rules and could just be done independently."

"That's right. Of course, the risks would be different for each, but why take that option into consideration?"

"I thought it was only natural to be prepared for any contingencies."

He nodded, thinking it over. "Putting aside whether you exercise it or not, then... Hm. Yes, I suppose that getting an understanding of it beforehand certainly wouldn't be a bad thing," he reasoned.

Although Mashima-sensei hadn't mentioned it, he might have had a general idea about our sales strategy based on what I'd said.

"I'm glad to get confirmation on this," I said. "Thank you very much."

"You're quite welcome," said Mashima-sensei.

That made one less thing that I needed to check on for the Cultural Festival—an unexpected boon.

I gave Mashima-sensei a slight bow as thanks and was about to leave, but then he called out to me once more.

"Ayanokouji, I believe you had heard a little bit of our conversation earlier, about Chabashira-sensei, but... What happened in the Unanimous Special Exam?" he asked.

"You haven't heard anything about it from Chabashira-sensei?" I asked.

Even Mashima-sensei knew the results, obviously, but when it came to Chabashira-sensei's change of heart, there were some things he apparently still didn't understand.

"It seems like, regardless of the fact that someone was expelled, she's now able to look forward and smile," he said. "Something significant must have happened during the course of the special exam to cause her change of heart. Am I right?"

If I remembered correctly, Mashima-sensei and Chabashira-sensei had been in the same grade level when they attended the Advanced Nurturing High School. As he knew things about her past, it wasn't shocking that her sudden change would come as a surprise to him.

"Forget what I said just now," Mashima-sensei said quickly.  
"This isn't the sort of thing I should be asking a student."

"I understand. If you'll please excuse me."

I gave Mashima-sensei another courteous bow and then headed over to where I would be meeting Kanzaki in the special building.

## 3.1

THE CULTURAL FESTIVAL was gradually approaching, but there were some other issues that also needed to be addressed in tandem with those preparations.

One was to bring about a change in Ichinose's class. The countdown clock to their collapse was ticking down even faster than I'd anticipated. I needed to take steps in order to avoid that, and this time, I wouldn't be dealing with its leader, Ichinose.

What I needed to do now was make changes in the people under her—her classmates. However, that was a measure that needed to be handled with care, and who else could be capable enough to fulfill that role except for *him*?

"Sorry for calling you out here," I began.

When I arrived at our designated meeting place after class, I saw that Kanzaki was already waiting for me with a grim look on his face. He certainly didn't appear to be in the mood for a pleasant chit-chat.

"What business do you have with me?" he asked.

I met Kanzaki shortly after I enrolled here at this school, but he was in another class, and we weren't particularly close acquaintances. Lately, I felt like he distrusted me; if anything, I'd say he probably disliked me too. I didn't necessarily expect him not to respond to my call because of that, though. It wouldn't be any wonder to me if that very wariness of me was why he wanted to talk. And if it was the sort of rendezvous where he wouldn't want to be seen, then it was all the more likely he'd go through it.

"The time has come to talk about the future," I replied.

"The future?" he repeated. "What in the world are you... Never mind. First, there's something I want you to hear."

Kanzaki adjusted his posture and stood up straight, wanting to speak before I could get to business. I was a little surprised by his unexpected first move, but I decided to listen to what he had to say.

"I've been troubled all the time lately. I haven't had anyone to talk to, so I've just been mulling things over by myself." After that, he paused and corrected himself. "No, it would be an exaggeration to say that I was *troubled*, I suppose. Every day, I was thinking about my future path."

His words were filled with emotion, which was unusual for the calm and collected Kanzaki. I decided to stand quietly and listen until he specifically asked me to answer back.

"I thought about things like... What I should be looking for during the rest of my time at this school?" he said.

I figured he wasn't agonizing over things like stumbles in friendships or problems with the opposite sex. There was only one issue that would be preoccupying students at this school: being promoted to Class A.

"I'm sure that I probably don't even need to tell you this, but our class cannot win," said Kanzaki.

What exactly would they be unable to win? The Cultural Festival? The year-end final exam that was a little further down the road?

No, he wasn't talking about such minor things. The reality was that Ichinose's class couldn't make it to Class A. And that fact was what Kanzaki was lamenting.

"It's not as though we're lagging behind the other classes in terms of academic ability, physical ability, or leadership skills—not whatsoever. Actually, I feel we've been rather blessed in those regards. But I've learned that those things don't necessarily lead to victory," said Kanzaki.

He had begun to think for himself, understand things by himself, worry over things by himself. Just as I had imagined, Kanzaki was the beginning.

"I know what you're trying to say," I said. "So? What do you want from me, Kanzaki?"

If he just needed someone to listen and show that they understood things well, that was something anyone could do.

"I want...your advice, regarding Ichinose," said Kanzaki.

But why did it have to be me? The names of a few other people with whom common ground might've been shared came to mind immediately.

"No, actually, that's not all," he corrected himself. "I'd like to hear your opinion on what our class should do in the future."

"That's a ridiculously huge ask," I told him. "And you're looking for that from me, someone who isn't your classmate, to boot?"

"...Yes, you're right about that."

It was easy to read Kanzaki's state of mind from the pained expression on his face. He was not the type of person who could casually go to others for help. It was precisely because he had been driven to this point that he had no choice but to resort to such measures. Actually, at first, he couldn't have even considered asking for help like this. He must have been suffering all alone for long enough that he had figured that the only future that awaited him was even more suffering.

"She doesn't really listen to my opinions," he said. "Actually, no, not just me. It's the same for anyone else."

"I've always seen Ichinose as the kind of student who would listen to anyone," I countered.

"That's only when you're facing in the same direction as her. I'm sure I don't need to explain that to you now."

I said that deliberately to test him, but it seemed that hadn't been necessary. To put this in simpler terms, if you asked Ichinose to help save someone, she wouldn't give a second thought to the risks. She wouldn't betray you and would stay with you until the end to give a helping hand. However, on the flipside, if you were to ask Ichinose to help you put someone in harm's way for no reason, she would never, ever help.

You could describe her as someone who righted wrongs, someone who stood for justice, and those descriptions would be appropriate. Ichinose would remain steadfast and refuse to go against her nature, even if you were to offer her some kind of incentive, like money.

"I won't say that she's facing the wrong direction," Kanzaki said. "But idealism is just that."

"There are more than a few situations where that idealism is necessary, though," I countered.

"I suppose so. And I'm prepared to go through hardships together, when things are going well." In fact, Kanzaki and his fellow classmates had shared many joys and sorrows together with Ichinose up through this point. "But what about right now? We've lost Class Points by continuing to follow Ichinose's policies. We're at the bottom of the rankings, and we can't find a way to break out of it."

"You're being very frank and open. Are you sure it's okay to tell me about what's going on in your class like this?"

"It's a stupid plan," he muttered self-deprecatingly, as though he were laughing at himself. "But even if it is stupid, it's still a plan. And right now, I have no other choice but to rely on you."

He averted his somewhat resigned gaze from me and stared at the empty hallway floor.

"During the Unanimous Special Exam, I asserted that we should have expelled one of our classmates so that we could get Class Points," he said, continuing. "I cast my vote in favor of doing so and struggled against the others, but even so, my attempts ended in failure."

While I didn't know anything about the state of affairs in their class, it was easy to imagine that situation. Kanzaki agreed with the idea of having someone expelled in order to elevate their class's rank and make everyone better understand reality. He continued to vote in favor and tried to change the opinions of his classmates, but none of them, Ichinose included, agreed with him. However, his classmates didn't mercilessly attack Kanzaki after he staged this revolt; they simply stated that they should all work hard, together.

I didn't reply to that, and Kanzaki eventually broke the silence.

"...It's funny, isn't it?" he muttered Kanzaki. "What would even come from me telling someone this kind of thing, whether they're friend or foe?"

He realized all on his own that there was no way he would be able to get any advice. What he was doing was truly nonsensical, something he had lost his mind over. Right now, he probably wanted to kick himself over it.

"Ichinose holds you in great esteem. She's devoted to you," he said. "Only a unique person such as yourself would be able to bring about a change in her policies. She could see things clearly, if it came from you."

"I see," I replied.

In order to save the class, there had to be a change in the leader's thoughts and values—meaning Ichinose's. The capabilities of the students in their class were certainly nothing to scoff at, and by doing so, they would definitely be able to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

"It sounds like you genuinely want to break the current trend and escape this deadlock," I remarked.

Since there was no need to keep up appearances any longer, Kanzaki nodded deeply. However, in being so flustered, there was something he wasn't seeing. You had to think carefully about whether such a change would truly be for the benefit of the class. The idea that changing Ichinose would save their class was, in essence, nothing but make-believe. A fantasy. Besides, even if Ichinose were to change with just a few hypothetical words from me, could that really be called growth? If she became the sort of person who could sometimes make ruthless, coldhearted decisions, could she then pursue the other classes? Once things were steered in that direction, there was no guarantee that they could go back.

"I agree with you that you need to change the status quo," I said. "But I don't think I can agree with you as to how."

"We don't have any other options. You're the only one who can get Ichinose to move, Ayanokouji."

"I'm not so sure about that. I can't help but think there is someone else out there more qualified for the job."

"I can't think of anyone," he replied.

From Kanzaki's point of view, since there was no one else who came to mind, what I was saying right now must have been puzzling.

"To tell you the truth, after I approached you, Kanzaki, I asked another student to come meet us here," I told him.

"Who?"

"One of your classmates. Someone you know well."

"Don't tell me you called Ichinose... Did you?"

I figured that in some sense, she was probably the last person he wanted to see right now.

"Unfortunately, no, it's not her. It's a student with the potential to change the course of things."

"I'm sorry to put a damper on whatever this is, but there is no one in our class other than me who can argue against Ichinose," Kanzaki insisted. "I've experienced this firsthand, so I know what I'm talking about."

"Isn't that exactly the kind of narrow vision that you're fighting against, Kanzaki?" I countered.

"Huh?" he blinked.

"Ichinose's class might seem monolithic at a glance, but it really isn't, not in the true sense," I explained. "Since it feels like everyone is joined together, there are more than a few students who just can't help but feel like they have to go along with everyone else. They've been swept up by those around them."

It still didn't seem like I was setting off any light bulbs over Kanzaki's head. Well, I supposed that was understandable—after all, he would never casually present himself to his classmates in such a way that would make them feel anxious.

"Why has Ichinose's class dropped down in the rankings? And why is it now facing a major crisis?" I asked.

If you followed the chain of errors, what answer would you eventually arrive at? That was what I needed to make Kanzaki and his classmates understand.

"Huh? Why is Kanzaki-kun here too?" asked Himeno as she approached.

She looked somewhat confused—she must have thought that I'd be the only one meeting her here. She arrived a little earlier than we had agreed, but in reality her timing was perfect.

"Himeno? Do you have some connection with Ayanokouji?" asked Kanzaki.

"A little, I guess," she replied.

It wasn't just Kanzaki; most of the students at this school probably had the impression that she was someone I never interacted with.

"I honestly cannot believe that Himeno is the person you're referring to when you say there's someone qualified for the job," said Kanzaki.

I could roughly imagine what kind of impression Kanzaki must have of Himeno, considering the kind of life that she led at this school. To him, she probably was just another one of the girls in his class, no different from any other.

"I'm going to prove it to you now," I told him.

"Wait a second," Himeno said. "I feel like this conversation is about me for some reason. What gives?"

It was perfectly reasonable for her to be perplexed by this, having been summoned here.

Just as I was about to explain, Kanzaki spoke up, having realized a contradiction. "That's... No, wait, hold on," he said. "What is the meaning of this, Ayanokouji?"

"What?" I replied.

"You called me here, but what on earth were you planning on talking to me about? It sounds like you also called Himeno in advance. It seems as though, from the very beginning, you've—"

Kanzaki then closed his mouth and alternated looking at Himeno and me.

"Huh? What's going on?" asked Himeno.

"You anticipated that I was going to talk to you about my class today, about what was going on... Were you thinking that you *yourself* should bring about a revolution in our class? No, I can't understand why you'd think such a thing, and I can't understand what there'd even be in it for you to do that..." mused Kanzaki.

I called Kanzaki to meet me here, and then he proceeded to tell me about what was going on in his class before I could start talking. For Himeno to show up right now, and to also be somehow connected to the topic at hand, must have seemed extremely unnatural to him.

"How far ahead can you see...?" he asked, stunned.

Kanzaki, being the one to start this conversation, had come to understand my calculations in a surprising way. No wonder he was startled.

"Let's get down to business now, shall we?" I said. "I'll tell you why I called you here today, Kanzaki. There is no need to change Ichinose through me. What instead needs to change is the mindset of the class. By changing the class's mindset, you can bring about a change in Ichinose."

"That's...futile," Kanzaki argued. "I've experienced that firsthand."

"If we're talking about one person alone, sure. But what about two? Or three?" I asked. "If everyone in your class besides Ichinose had a different mindset, the results of the Unanimous Special Exam would've been different."

"Everyone changing their mindset is a pipe dream. Besides, even if they did change, how would the special exam have gone differently? Ichinose would have never accepted the idea of expelling someone," said Kanzaki.

"It certainly is hard to imagine that Ichinose, someone who cares about her class, would agree to having someone expelled.

However, if the issue at hand was if that would end in your class failing the exam and getting penalized, it'd a different story."

"Hold on a second." Himeno had been listening on the sidelines until now, but now she interjected in our conversation. "Ichinose-san would protect her classmates, even if there was a heavy penalty."

"I really have to wonder if she could still stick to her guns, though, with thirty-nine people opposing her," I replied.

"She would," said Himeno. "Knowing Ichinose-san, she would. Right, Kanzaki-kun?"

"I think so too," he said. "But...it's also true there would be an inconsistency then, in that situation."

Ichinose stood at the front, fighting for her classmates. But what would happen if all of her classmates opposed her? Could she stick to her guns until the end, even after being made aware that she was wrong? That was another matter. But even if she did carry on, self-loathing would await her afterward. All that would remain would be the fact that her class lost Class Points because of her.

"If Ichinose was seized with feelings of self-condemnation, would she be able to carry out her duties as leader? That's another issue," I said.

"If that happened, the results would've been even worse than where we are now, wouldn't they?" said Himeno.

"Yes. Ichinose wouldn't want that kind of development. What do you think would've actually happened, Kanzaki?" I asked, turning to him.

"You mean if all my classmates shared my opinion, to accept the idea of expelling someone?" he asked.

While he understood that this wasn't a realistic discussion, he imagined what could have happened in that hypothetical situation.

"If thirty-nine people in our class continued to cast their vote in favor of it, even prepared to let time run out, Ichinose would eventually back down and vote *For*. And, she would have likely

tried to guide the class toward expelling herself... Or so I think," Kanzaki said.

They wouldn't have gotten stuck and would've eventually come to an answer. And that answer would've been to have Ichinose expelled so their class would successfully gain Class Points. Furthermore, they would've been able to free themselves from the bondage of goodness that was Ichinose.

"It's unthinkable," Kanzaki said. "In the unlikely event that something like that did happen, the disadvantages would be far too great."

Ichinose being removed from that class—it was a development that Kanzaki had never considered, and in his eyes, it was absurd.

"I'm not trying to tell you to expel Ichinose, of course," I said. "But, if her classmates change, your class as a whole will change. I think that you shouldn't focus on changing Ichinose; you should change the mindset of the class. And the first ones to do it must be you two—Kanzaki, Himeno."

"M-me?" Himeno stammered.

"You don't agree with everything Ichinose is doing. Unlike your classmates, those with blind faith in her, you can question Ichinose just like Kanzaki can. Right?" I asked.

"W-well, I—"

"What did you think, back when Kanzaki was challenging the class during the Unanimous Special Exam?" I asked, interrupting her.

Himeno was silent and hung her head, looking toward the ground.

"I'd like to hear that too," said Kanzaki. "I want to know what you were thinking then."

"I thought it was impossible," Himeno answered. "Our class isn't going to change so easily. They're always just spouting off stupid lip service, like how they'd rather see themselves get hurt than someone else."

Gradually, Himeno told us how she felt.

"I felt like your resistance was simply a waste of time, Kanzaki-kun. I just wanted that excruciating moment to be over as soon as possible. And I told you... I just wanted you to knock it off already."

Perhaps Kanzaki remembered what happened then as he closed his eyes and nodded slowly.

"So, after you heard what Himeno said, you took that to mean that she was the same as the rest of your classmates, didn't you?" I said. "You must have interpreted what she said as, 'Don't rebel against Ichinose, there's no way you could choose to abandon our friends,' or something along those lines."

Kanzaki didn't deny it. Instead, he nodded deeply.

"But the truth is that she didn't mean that. Himeno has her own doubts about the way things are in your class."

"In that case, why didn't you just say so?" Kanzaki turned to Himeno. "You could have spoken up at any time, as much as you wanted. Even if it wasn't during the Unanimous Special Exam."

I didn't really know what was truly going on in their class, so I didn't interrupt their conversation now that it had started. Besides, this normally wouldn't be the place to have this kind of conversation either. I was an outsider, and they wouldn't have anything to gain from sharing this information with me. However, the situation was reversed now. It was precisely because I was here at this moment that we were able to draw out an agreement from Himeno.

In other words, if they missed this chance, they'd just go back to the normal, everyday routine of Ichinose's class, and nothing would ever change again.

"Ugh... Don't make it sound like it's so easy." Letting out a deep sigh, Himeno averted her gaze, like she was running away. Her eyes didn't show the color of a diverse range of emotions, the same way that Kanzaki's didn't.

"You don't need me to tell you the answer to that. There's a huge amount of peer pressure in our class," she said, continuing.

"Even if I know something's white, if a bunch of people say it's black, it's black. Whether you're right or wrong, it doesn't matter. There's no point in the minority speaking up in a class like ours. It's complete agony to be surrounded by people who deliberately go out of their way to suppress their own opinions until they're eventually persuaded to say it's white. That's why I've never spoken up, and I never plan to."

"But if you don't say anything, then what's white will stay black forever," said Kanzaki.

"That's fine," said Himeno. "Others have selfishly concluded it's black. I can accept their claims. But even so, in my mind, deep down, I can keep believing the color is white."

There wasn't any emotion behind what she was saying. From the way Himeno was acting, she was truly describing the way the class was right now.

"Besides, even you must have felt heartbroken when you pointlessly tried to argue that day, Kanzaki-kun. Right? That was because what you believed to be white had been forcibly dyed black. It was overwritten. I'm sure that must've been tough to put up with."

Unnecessary hardship. Himeno had chosen to be swept away in order to avoid that. But in reality, it wasn't just Himeno who chose that way. It was something that seemed to be shared among other students in Ichinose's class too.

"I wish you'd stop thinking that I'm one of your allies," Himeno said. "Sorry Kanzaki-kun, but I can't be passionate like you."

She took a step back, as though she were trying to make space between her and Kanzaki. He moved closer to her, like he was trying to press her.

"Are you okay with leaving the class like it is now?" he asked her.

At first, Kanzaki assumed that Himeno was no different from his other classmates. But suddenly, he started trying desperately hard to force a dialogue with her, without me having to mediate.

"Before even getting to whether it's good or bad, it's more important to me that I protect myself," she replied. "I can't be best friends with anyone, and I can't be nasty with anyone either. Sometimes people invite me out, sometimes they don't. I don't want to destroy that level of distance, that kind of vibe."

There was nothing wrong with Himeno's assertion that the best thing to do was just stay quiet and avoid rocking the boat. But if she stuck to that forever, the class would never move forward.

"Listen. If what you're pushing for gains momentum and you get a majority of the class onto your side, Kanzaki-kun, then I'll join your side too. That okay?" asked Himeno.

She was stating definitively that she didn't intend to stand out as a minority under any circumstances.

Kanzaki grumbled at that.

Himeno's words conveyed both her true intentions and her reluctance. If she and Kanzaki did raise the banner of revolt, what awaited Himeno was an attack from the majority in the form of gentle persuasion and placation, repeated endlessly until she abandoned her own ideas.

"Can I go now?" she said. "I won't tell anyone about this. It'd only cause trouble for me if I did, anyway."

What was Kanzaki going to do now that Himeno was trying to leave? If he just watched her go, there wouldn't be any change in their class in the end.

"...Wait," said Kanzaki.

"I don't want to wait," she shot back.

"I wasn't planning on telling anyone about this, but I'm about to make a pretty big decision," he said.

"What're you talking about?" asked Himeno.

"I'm not going to sink with Ichinose and the rest of the class forever," Kanzaki declared. He had probably never put these thoughts into words before, but now he was letting Himeno hear it.

"Wait, does that... Does that mean you're going to betray the class?" she asked.

"I won't deny it. There's no point in staying in a class that can't win," said Kanzaki.

If he were to leave their class, there certainly wouldn't be any signals to entice a rebellion. In Ichinose's class's current climate, Kanzaki was probably the only student who could lead the charge of change.

"I'm not trying to make threats," he added. "But I just thought I'd tell you at least that much."

If Kanzaki were to leave his class by some means, it wouldn't have any effect on Himeno personally. However, she had to at least understand that her class would lose its chance to rise to the top of the rankings.

Himeno was shaken. She was reacting clearly differently now than she had been even just a few moments ago, when she was trying to act like nothing bothered her.

"Are you all right with that, Himeno?" asked Kanzaki.

"That's not fair," she said. "That *is* a threat..."

"You could interpret it that way, I suppose."

It was possible that Ichinose and the others could sniff out signs of betrayal from Himeno. Ichinose aside, it was conceivable that their classmates could block Kanzaki's movements too, so as not to allow him the right to transfer classes.

Kanzaki disclosing his plan to Himeno was a risk, and that was what Kanzaki was gambling on. Whether he was serious about it or if it was just a bluff was irrelevant.

"Are you really planning to change the class?" asked Himeno.

"It might not be a pleasant thing to say, but what Ayanokouji said was correct. I want to believe that by changing Ichinose, with our own hands, it will lead to a way to save the class."

"But I..." she began.

Himeno bit her lower lip and squeezed her eyes shut. If she sided with Kanzaki, fighting alone and unassisted, it was inevitable

she'd be given the cold shoulder by her other classmates. Kanzaki knew full well that was not something she wanted. Even so, someone had to do something.

"I... If we can win...I want to," said Himeno.

Kanzaki revealed to Himeno the possibility that he would give up on leading and remove himself from the class. By doing so, he unlocked what she was feeling deep inside. Himeno hadn't given up on the possibility of the class changing and coming out on top, and in no small measure. However, all that she did was unlock the door. It wasn't open yet.

"In that case, we have to act now," Kanzaki said. "Am I wrong?"

If Himeno didn't make a move soon, there really wouldn't be anything else Kanzaki could do. And supposing if Kanzaki didn't want to make a choice here, he would have no other path but to change course and try to win himself by transferring to another class. And then Himeno, who couldn't say that something black was black without the majority agreeing to it, would be completely defeated.

"I understand what you're trying to say... But still—"

Kanzaki cut her off there. "I hope you're not going to say that there's still a chance we can win under Ichinose's policies."

That struck a chord with Himeno, resonating with her deeply. Her lips closed shut tightly and she stopped speaking partway through her sentence.

"Himeno, don't you want to graduate from Class A?" asked Kanzaki.

His words pierced Himeno's heart like a spear, making it bleed.

"If I could graduate from Class A, then yes. Of course I want to!!!" she screamed, the words bursting forth.

Himeno's loud voice echoed down the hall. Kanzaki was so taken aback by the sheer impact of it that he was rendered speechless; it must have been several times louder than he was expecting.



"But the way things are now, no matter how hard I rack my brain, I can't think of any way we could do it! It *can't* be done!" she shouted, her emotions exploding. "Even you understand that, Kanzaki-kun, don't you?!"

"Of course I know that! It's *because* I understand that we have to do something now! I don't want to lose to the other classes!!!" he shouted back.

Although his voice didn't come out as loud as hers, she was just as taken aback by his impassioned shouting. When I saw Himeno flinch and realized how she looked amused and bewildered, I became even more convinced that Himeno had shown her true self for the first time. I was also convinced that Kanzaki had a childlike side. On top of that, I was convinced that there were probably more than a few other students in Ichinose's class who only went along with things to go with the flow. Underneath the surface, things had to be different.

A year and a half into being at this school, many people in Horikita's class had exposed their weaknesses. There were those who presented themselves as honors students who didn't care at all if others were expelled. There were those who couldn't study or hold discussions well and immediately resorted to violence. There were also those who were parasites, clinging to powerful people in order to get to the top of the caste system. There were those who made plans to expel their fellow classmates in order to erase their own past. Those weak-minded students had fallen as far as they could, and then they were starting to climb back up. And, among them, some were now showing unbelievable growth.

"...I didn't know you felt like that, Kanzaki-kun," Himeno said at last. "You're always so calm and quiet. I'm really surprised."

"...Me too," said Kanzaki. "I had no idea that you had those kinds of thoughts, Himeno."

Ichinose's class likely hadn't faced the obvious hardships Horikita's class had. When students saw that someone had fallen behind, they would be cared for, kindly and warmly. Students were supported and protected from all sides so they wouldn't tumble again. Help would repeatedly be given to a student who had hurt

their hand. Eventually, the students would understand that they had to be careful, because others worried about them. Why did they fall? Why did they hurt their hand? The truth was that there would be more pain ahead, but they held onto it silently so as not to cause worry. And the result of all of that was that Ichinose's class consisted only of superficial relationships.

I had been silent for a long time, but I spoke up again at last. "Now is the time to become friends, in the true sense."

"But what should we do?" said Kanzaki. "How can we move forward? Even if Himeno is the one who can change people's thinking, it's meaningless if it doesn't lead to the next step."

"There's no need to rush for an answer," I replied. "Starting now, you both should try searching."

"Searching...? For what?" asked Himeno.

"For students like you, those who keep their true feelings hidden deep down," I replied.

Even if they couldn't find other people on their own, as long as they discussed it with each other, I was sure they could broaden their view many times over. The addition of another person's point of view would bring about a number of new discoveries.

"And if...supposing we find one person...?" said Himeno.

"That's easy," I replied. "Then the three of you search. Then three become four, and you repeat the process."

Eventually, this small spark would turn into a huge flame. And at that point, Ichinose would come to understand that her class was about to change.

"It's not too late. Get stronger. And try to defeat Horikita's class in the year-end exam," I added.

If they did that, they would have a slight hope of making it to Class A when we entered our third year.

"What are you going to do, Kanzaki-kun?" asked Himeno.

"We have to be prepared to work," he said. "More grueling work than we could imagine. But...it's not impossible."

Now that he saw what Himeno was like, Kanzaki wouldn't ever be able to say that there weren't any likeminded people in his class. As for Himeno, she probably gained an understanding of Kanzaki's strong will from seeing it up close.

"We both want to graduate from Class A," Himeno said. "Until now, I hadn't been able to admit that to anyone..."

Regardless of the circumstances it had taken to get here, Himeno had conveyed her feelings to Kanzaki.

"Yes, you're right about that," he agreed. "Our goal hasn't changed one bit since the beginning."

Starting now, these two were preparing to move forward, like little children taking their first steps.

"You know...after hearing what Ayanokouji-kun said, there's one kid in our class that I'm kind of curious about," Himeno said. "If you want, after this, would you want to come with me to talk to them?"

Kanzaki nodded vigorously. From this point on, there was no point in me sticking around. I would just be a third wheel.

"Ayanokouji, I'll repay my debt to you in the year-end exam," said Kanzaki.

I figured that repayment meant winning and earning the right to challenge the other classes for Class A.

"Horikita's class is formidable, Kanzaki," I cautioned him.

"Yes, I know..." he said. "Sorry, but I have to be going now. I don't want to waste a single minute. No, not a single second."

Himeno nodded, took out her phone, and together with Kanzaki, she turned her back to me and walked away.

There was a side of me that was worried about just how much change those two would be able to bring about, but from the sounds of things, they could be even more successful than I had imagined. Maybe they really *would* win the year-end special exam, or maybe they really could beat Horikita's class.

However things turned out, it wouldn't interfere with my plans, but it was one more thing for me to look forward to.

## **Chapter 4: A Love Letter**

**T**UESDAY, NOVEMBER 9TH. That morning, I met with Horikita in the elevator on our way to school. After exchanging a brief greeting, we walked through the lobby and exited the dormitory building together.

"Have you heard?" she said. "The entire third-year grade is supposedly going to be practicing for the Cultural Festival the day before the festival proper."

"Yeah. Apparently, they're inviting first-years and second-years to participate as well."

This news had actually been posted to the school's bulletin board last night, informing students in all grades. It originated from the student council, essentially meaning that it was Nagumo's decision. I figured this must have been what Nagumo had been referring to last week when he mentioned the student council were putting forward a proposal that wouldn't be so bad. We were free to participate in any form. We could provide actual food or just an imitation. This proposal would let us put all our offerings on at once, and then we could make last-minute adjustments prior to the real Cultural Festival the next day.

"The student council has already heard that many classes intend to participate," said Horikita. "I'm sure that even other classes who have been keeping what they're doing under wraps will want an evaluation from a third party."

"So a lot of classes are receptive to the idea?"

"I think that the fact that Class 3-A rented the gym and demonstrated their showing publicly was probably a big factor."

Class 3-A hadn't hidden what they were doing; they announced it openly, and then they actually did a trial run. The improvements they made after their demonstration were public knowledge to the students enrolled here. I figured there must've

been a number of students who weren't just hoping to win the Cultural Festival—they wanted to make it a real success as students, and they were looking forward to it as a whole.

"I'm guessing that the student council's decision to pay for consumables and other goods pushed more people to join," Horikita added.

After all, even if you were just doing a trial run, it would still cost money. A separate budget from the one that was provided to us specifically for the Cultural Festival would have to be set up, and naturally, individuals would have to fund it with Private Points. If students had to pay out of their own pockets, I was sure more classes would decide to skip doing a trial, but I supposed this was yet another example of what the student council could do.

The student council covering the expenses was a godsend, and it also meant that there was little to no reason not to participate. Students were also told that if they submitted receipts, they would be reimbursed from the student council's budget. Of course, it wasn't like they'd pay out limitlessly. There was an equal purchasing limit for all classes in the several tens of thousands of points.

"It's all right for us to participate too, yes?" asked Horikita.

"Of course," I replied. "The whole school knows that we're putting on a maid café anyway. It can't hurt."

"You're right. It's the same for Ryuu-en-kun and his class too."

Horikita shot me a meaningful look after that, and I responded with a light nod.

"You're saying we can get a peek at their skills," I said.

This would be a great opportunity for us to see what kinds of things Ryuu-en was doing and to get more details.

"You don't think we're going to lose?" asked Horikita.

"I'm not sure."

"You look pretty confident."

"It's not like that. I'm not feeling too confident," I said. "I'm just doing everything that I can."

"That's true, I suppose. But even so, isn't it normal to feel anxious?" Apparently, Horikita was concerned that even though we were fully prepared, we could still come up short. "Maybe I'm scared about losing."

Even if a class didn't win, they wouldn't lose any Class Points. But even so, if you didn't win any and other classes did, it was all the same in the end. It was only natural that she didn't want our class to stagnate. We had been steadily building momentum and closing in on Class A.

"You probably wouldn't be so anxious if you were still the old you," I remarked.

"That was just me being reckless... No, rather, it was just that I didn't see anything around me."

Now, Horikita's vision had begun to widen, little by little. That was exactly why she couldn't help but consider the possibility of losing.

"As a class leader, there's nothing wrong with considering the possibilities of what might happen if you win or if you lose," I said. "I'm simply one of your pawns. I just made an irresponsible statement, that's all."

Well, I supposed that the fact that Horikita couldn't easily dismiss that statement was both one of her weaknesses and one of her strengths. If it were Sakayanagi and Ryuuen I was speaking to, they wouldn't have listened at all. In the case of Ichinose, she would've listened and focused on it. Horikita, on the other hand, did both.

"I think that I understand what I'm doing, but...I don't know," she said.

In response to Horikita's self-derision, I lightly smacked her back with the palm of my hand, just once.

"Hey, what are you doing?" she asked.

"It's far too early to get accustomed to winning," I told her.

"Hmph..." The look on her face suggested that she was slightly angry, but she must have realized I had hit the nail on the head. "Yes, you're right. It was a conceited way of thinking on my part, even though what happened wasn't all down to my own actions."

Whether we were talking about what happened on the uninhabited island or the Unanimous Special Exam... Either way, those weren't wins based solely on her ability.

"You..." she began.

"What?"

"I'm not trying to take what you're saying too seriously, but you've been awfully cooperative lately, which I find extra annoying. I don't know how to process that in my mind, and it's bothering me."

"In that case, I would appreciate it if you wouldn't seek my cooperation at all in the future."

I tried to walk away as quickly as I could, but she grabbed a hold of my shoulder.

"That's a no-go," she declared.

Even though I attempted to make a break for it, I was immediately captured and brought back.

"I'd like to stop by the convenience store on the way to school," she said. "Would you like to come with me?"

"The convenience store?"

"I have my own preparations to do for the day before the Cultural Festival, so I wanted to make the most of my lunch break today."

"Sure, that's fine, I guess."

It wasn't like stopping there for a few minutes was going to cause any problems. I followed Horikita there and went inside. I just so happened to see Kouenji there as well, paying for his items. He was purchasing only two things: a bottle of soy milk and a chicken tenderloin salad. It was a very light meal to have for lunch, so I wondered if maybe he was going to eat it during

the morning break. Actually, as I thought about it, I realized hardly ever saw Kouenji eating anything at all... His life really was a complete mystery.

"Good morning, Kouenji-kun," Horikita called out to him.

After finishing paying for his items, Kouenji simply smiled in response and said nothing in return.

"So, I hear that Kouenji's the only one who hasn't been assigned a role," I said. "He's not doing anything for the Cultural Festival?"

"He told me that he wasn't going to do anything," Horikita replied. "And he's not likely going to change his mind."

She didn't seem particularly concerned about that, though. She went to the register and chose a meal she could eat quickly. She declined a plastic bag and instead stuck her purchases in her own bag.

"You're sure you're not going to buy anything?" she asked.

"I don't need anything, and it's not like I have a surplus of Private Points anyway."

November had been easier on my wallet to some extent, but I had plans to spend very soon.

"You're not giving points to Kushida-san anymore, are you?" she asked.

"She's not really demanding it from me, so no."

"So, if she demanded you pay up, you'd pay her?"

"Do you really think that she'll ask me to pay?" I said sarcastically.

"No, I guess not," Horikita muttered. "Well, if she did, that'd be a problem. I'd end up having to worry about her again."

Despite the twisted route it had taken, Kushida had undergone a significant change. And if it was heading in the direction of growth, then I had to believe in it.

## 4.1

AFTER CLASS THAT DAY, as Horikita sat at the front of the classroom, Ichihashi approached her, albeit somewhat hesitantly.

"Um, excuse me, Horikita-san...? May I have a minute?"

Ichihashi didn't really have any point of connection with Horikita normally, and she had rarely ever gone to talk to her. The normal thing to assume was that this must be about the upcoming Cultural Festival, which was just around the corner. However...the thing that girl was holding in her hand suggested that she had a different reason for approaching Horikita.

"What is it?" asked Horikita.

"Actually, I have a small favor to ask. You have student council business later today, right?"

"Yes. As I told everyone in class a little while ago, I have student council business. I can't help with the Cultural Festival all the time."

"Yes, I know, but, um, it's not like that. Could you...please deliver this for me?"

I happened to catch a glimpse of an envelope with a heart-shaped sticker on the flap as she handed it over.

"What's this?" asked Horikita.

"It's, um, a love letter..." said Ichihashi.

Horikita blinked. "...Huh?"

It wasn't surprising that for a moment, Horikita had a look of complete bewilderment on her face, like she couldn't understand the meaning of this. Even though we were living in an age where diversity was accepted, it was understandable that it would be more of a shock for a girl to receive a love letter from another girl instead of from a boy.

"O-oh, um, this isn't a letter from me to you, Horikita-san," Ichihashi said. "Okay? Actually, it's...from a friend of mine, she

asked me to give it to Student Council President Nagumo."

"To the Student Council President?" said Horikita. "Isn't this something that she should be giving to him directly?"

If you were going to tell someone that you had feelings for them, the standard procedure was, naturally, to go for it and tell them directly.

"She asked me to do it because she was too nervous to give it herself. But it's like, I guess I don't really have the guts to just hand it over to the Student Council President directly myself, either..." said Ichihashi. "I mean, it's not like I have any connection to him or anything."

Although Nagumo was a more sociable person than, say, the former Student Council President Horikita Manabu, he was still our senpai and a representative of this school. It would be a very high ask for someone who had never spoken to him before to approach him. For Horikita, though, things were different. It was easy to imagine that she talked to him on a daily basis for student council business.

"I can understand your situation, but..." Horikita began.

"Please. She's really been agonizing over this for a long, long time, and... She seems to have finally found the courage."

If this had been the Horikita of a little while ago, she might've turned down the request. However, it was important for her to build relationships with her classmates now. That was unavoidable if she was going to get back what was lost in the Unanimous Special Exam.

"...Very well," she said. "If I see an opportunity, I'll hand it to him. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, that's fine." But even though Ichihashi said that, her answer seemed somewhat evasive.

"Is there something wrong?" asked Horikita.

"Oh, um, well, it's just that there's a...slight problem with the love letter."

Horikita, upon taking the envelope in her hands, looked at both the front and back of it and realized that no name was written on it. Which meant that the identity of the sender would be unknown unless you opened the envelope and looked at the letter inside.

"Am I correct in assuming that this letter is from whoever wrote it?" asked Horikita.

"I'm not sure... Normally, yes, you think that the sender would write it themselves, but... Well, if she's satisfied just with telling him how she feels, then she might not have actually written it herself."

In other words, neither the messenger, Horikita, nor the recipient, Nagumo, would know the identity of the sender of the love letter.

"This is a little difficult... I'll explain when I give it to him, of course, but if I'm not careful, he might get the wrong idea and think this letter is from me."

The possibility that Nagumo might interpret the situation in a different way, like, *Horikita said that she was asked to deliver the letter on behalf of someone else, but it was actually from her*, wasn't zero. There was no way that you could say the possibility was nonexistent.

"W-well, could you ask someone *else* to do that?" asked Ichihashi. "Like, maybe...a boy you know on the student council or something? Would that work? I'd kind of like this to get delivered today."

"Easier said than done..." grumbled Horikita.

Despite her misgivings, though, she thought about it for a moment, and then nodded. "I'll try my best, but there's no guarantee that I'll be able to get it to him. Okay?"

"I'm just glad that you're going to try, Horikita-san," Ichihashi said. "I'm sure my friend will be really happy."

Horikita agreed, albeit reluctantly, to deliver the love letter to Nagumo. In a situation like this, you normally would have

asked who the letter was from, but Horikita must not have been interested, because she didn't press the matter too deeply.

## 4.2

**A**FTER GETTING this unexpected request, my footsteps felt a little... No, actually, they felt *very* heavy.

"Why didn't she just deliver it herself...? Good grief," I huffed.

Accepting this request was a mistake. This had nothing to do with me... *Maybe I ought to turn back and tell Ichihashi-san to tell her friend that she should deliver it herself...*

"That would be the correct thing to do," I told myself.

Just then, as the desire to run away from this flashed through my mind, I suddenly recalled the time I tried to give my older brother a letter when his high school enrollment was finalized. The old me was an idiot—I didn't even realize by then that my brother was being cold to me, and I so desperately wanted to somehow go back to how things were in the old days, when we were close. I thought that if I couldn't talk to him face-to-face, then I could just put my feelings in a letter.

But the words didn't come out as smoothly from the pen in my hand as they did in my head. I thought about it for days and days, hesitating, writing, erasing, writing, and erasing. *How can I get my thoughts across?* I wondered. *How can I make my brother happy?* Even though I was writing a simple letter, that act alone felt like a desperate struggle. And in the end...I wasn't able to give it to him. My brother ended up heading off to this school, and I was no longer able to see or even contact him anymore.

"That reminds me, whatever happened with that letter? I wonder..."

As I dug through my memories, I seemed to recall putting it in my older brother's desk drawer...

"Wait, does that mean if my brother comes back home, he'll see it?" I asked myself.

I came to a stop in the hallway, suddenly feeling my heart rate speed up. If he saw that letter now, after all this time...he would laugh at me.

"Let's...just forget about that," I declared.

Even if I drove myself into a panic and tried to do something about it, there was no way to get rid of the letter or make it look like it was never there. Right now, all I could do was hope that my brother didn't find it. I remembered the sight of his back from my window, and then I brought my hands together.

"Right... Yes, that's right."

Writing a letter to a loved one wasn't easy. Giving it to the person directly was even more difficult. If you asked me right now if I could give my brother another letter expressing my feelings for him, it would be hard for me to give you an immediate answer. I didn't know who this letter was from, but the intended receiver was Student Council President Nagumo. I supposed I might have to take the sender's feelings of hesitancy into account.

By the time I arrived at my destination, the student council office, I somehow managed to come up with an excuse to hand over the letter. When I opened the door, I saw that all of the members of the student council were already there, with the exception of President Nagumo. Not counting him, there were three boys on the student council—Yagami-kun, a first-year student; Aga-kun, also a first-year student; and then Vice President Kiriyama-senpai, a third-year student. However, asking just any boy wouldn't do. I couldn't casually entrust them with a love letter, something that wasn't even routine student council business.

Out of all of the boys here, Yagami-kun was the only one that I was on relatively friendly terms with and could talk to normally. I knew I was taking advantage of my position as his senpai, but as they say, you can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs.

Yagami-kun was seated and engaging in friendly chit-chat with Ichinose-san. Hoping to take care of this bothersome affair quickly, I reached into my bag for the love letter.

But just then, President Nagumo appeared.

"Let's get this meeting started immediately. Take your seats," said President Nagumo, his voice low and dispirited as he came into the student council office.

I felt the air instantly turn tense, like we were on pins and needles. I pulled my hand back out of my bag—there was no way that I could come out and say that I was asked to deliver a love letter under these circumstances.

"Ichinose, if you have anything to report, let's hear it," said President Nagumo.

"Yes," she replied. "It looks as though all classes have decided that they will be participating in the trial run on the day before the Cultural Festival."

"They decided that in just about half a day, huh? It seems like the President's decision was correct, then. However, since this was a decision made at the President's own discretion as part of the student council, I wish we would've been notified about it a little sooner," remarked Vice President Kiriyama-senpai icily.

"It was a whim. I thought getting this festival thing started a little earlier would make our kouhai happy," said President Nagumo, replying without giving much of an apology.

What I was seeing was becoming something of an established custom for student council meetings. Basically, student council initiatives began with an idea from Student Council President Nagumo. Sometimes they were born from comments made during meetings, and other times they came from things we had no knowledge of.

Then, there was a period of silence, and President Nagumo crossed his arms and closed his eyes. He was clearly holding back his anger. Or that's what it looked like, anyway.

"Um, excuse me, Nagumo-senpai... Is something the matter?" asked Ichinose-san fearfully, unable to bear it any longer.

"I heard a strange rumor today," said President Nagumo.

"A...rumor?" she asked.

"It's groundless, but anyway, people are saying that I was apparently putting up a lot of money on a bet to get a specific student expelled, or something like that."

"Huh? What does that mean?"

It wasn't any wonder that Ichinose-san had asked that question. After all, I too was keen to know more about what President Nagumo just said.

"Who did you hear such a ridiculous story from?" asked Vice President Kiriyma-senpai.

"Someone from *your* class," President Nagumo said. His eyes were still shut, but he directed his words at Vice President Kiriyma-senpai. "Kishi."

"...From Kishi?"

"I figured it was just gossip among friends, but I thought it wouldn't have been strange if you had caught wind of it."

"Sorry, but this is the first I'm hearing of it," Vice President Kiriyma-senpai replied. "Anyway, I don't understand the point in risking so much money in trying to get someone expelled in the first place."

Normally, if someone was using a lot of money, it was to bring a specific person into Class A. If that was the sort of discussion they were having, then not even I would find that unreasonable. The third-year students in particular were concerned about their outcomes, and if they were called to come to President Nagumo's class, then that was practically a guarantee that they would be graduating from Class A. Putting it less delicately, it was possible that Private Points were secretly being offered to those President Nagumo was friendly with, giving them the right to transfer classes.

"Sure, it's just a rumor. But even so, I'm not willing to just sit idly by and let this misinformation go unchallenged," announced President Nagumo.

It was certainly true that, as student council president, such rumors could damage him one way or another. I could see why he was in such a bad mood.

"So," he began, "the student council is going to be suspending activities for a while."

"Suspending...?" Ichinose-san was shocked by President Nagumo's unexpected proposal.

The student council had been coming together once a week like this to discuss a variety of topics. The only exceptions to this were testing periods and some special exams—it was unprecedented to flat-out suspend our activities.

"We're done discussing the Cultural Festival," President Nagumo said. "There shouldn't be any problems."

"Are you planning to look for the people behind the rumor?" asked Vice President Kiriyma-senpai.

"Of course. I'm going to conduct a thorough investigation. Anyway, our next meeting will be held sometime after the Cultural Festival."

Then, we discussed what would happen on the day prior to the Cultural Festival, and shortly after that, the meeting was adjourned. To my relief, most of the other students left the student council office.

Now that Yagami-kun and I were alone, I decided to talk to him. I got up from my seat and walked over. Perhaps he sensed that I was approaching—he looked up from his notebook, his hands stopped moving, and he closed his book. As the secretary of the student council, he had been keeping meeting minutes.

"Do you have a moment?" I asked.

Yagami-kun seemed slightly surprised, but then he turned to face me without a word.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Were you still in the middle of taking down notes?"

"Oh, no, I just finished. Please don't worry." Placing his hands gently over his closed notebook, Yagami-kun looked at me with a smile. "What's going on, Horikita-senpai?"

"Yagami-kun. I was wondering if I might ask a somewhat bothersome favor of you."

"What is it?"

"I want you to deliver this to President Nagumo. It's a love letter."

I took the letter out of my bag and presented it to Yagami-kun.

"It's unusual to see this kind of thing these days," he mused as he accepted the letter. "I've heard people normally do this over chat or with a phone call..."

When I saw the surprised look on his face, I quickly appended my statement. "For the record, it's not from me."

"I see. I thought for sure it was a letter from you, Horikita-senpai... Or are you saying that it is, but you just want me to present like it's not?"

"No. A girl from my class asked me to deliver it."

"The sender's name isn't on it. Who wrote this? I can let President Nagumo who it's from."

"I can't say. She wishes to remain anonymous."

"An...anonymous love letter?" asked Yagami-kun.

"I was asked to deliver it since I'm a member of the student council, but there's the issue of anonymity," I explained. "If I were to hand over the letter, President Nagumo might get the wrong idea. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, I suppose there's a good chance of that happening. To be honest, even now, a small part of me suspects that you were the one who wrote the letter after all, Horikita-senpai," said Yagami-kun with a smirk.

It looked like he found this all a little amusing, but this absolutely was not a laughing matter to me.

"I'm joking," he added. "I can tell from the look of displeasure on your face that it's not really from you, senpai."

*If so, then, good...* I thought to myself.

"This whole thing would've gone by more smoothly if I could have given you this letter before President Nagumo came into the

office, but..."

"Even if I had received the letter from you then, I don't think I would've been able to give it to him," Yagami-kun said. "It really didn't seem like the kind of moment where I could've handed him a letter."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. It wasn't the right time."

Under those circumstances, no one would have been able to talk to Student Council President Nagumo.

"I'm sorry to ask you to do this, but could you please deliver this to him as soon as possible? I'm sure that the sender is hoping that it will be received today."

"In that case, I'll stop by his dormitory later," said Yagami-kun. He stared at the envelope with a somewhat puzzled look on his face. "Is this really a love letter?"

"Probably," I replied. "Supposedly the girl poured her heart into it, but we can't really be sure."

It wasn't like we could peel off the sticker and check the contents, after all.

"I was just thinking... If I presented this to Student Council President Nagumo as a love letter, but it actually turned out to be something else, it could be disrespectful to him," said Yagami-kun.

"I suppose that's possible, yes."

"I'll downplay it a bit and say that I had been asked to hand over a letter from someone, then."

"Okay. I think that's a good idea. Thank you." I expressed my sincere gratitude for accepting the letter. "At any rate, being the secretary must be tough work, having to keep meeting minutes by hand even in this day and age."

I was sure that it wouldn't be an issue even if we were to use computers for our work nowadays, anyway.

"Tradition is important too," Yagami-kun said. "Meeting minutes have always been kept as physical records, ever since this school was established. Suddenly transitioning to digital would cause a sense of discomfort."

He turned and stared at the bookshelves. It was certainly true that the bookshelves were filled with lots of lots of meeting minute records, which told the accumulated history of everything the student council had done up until now. It wouldn't be a bad thing if we were to change our file storage methods during our time here, like to store things digitally or something, but Yagami-kun had a point. If we wanted to honor tradition, then perhaps this was exactly the sort of thing we should continue doing.

"I've also heard that it's best to endure hardships while we're students. If we're used to things being easy at an early age, we might suffer later on." Yagami-kun showed a slightly more mature attitude than one would expect from a first-year high school student. "In that sense, I suppose that this love letter might be something similar."

It was true that it was more common for a person to tell another how they felt over the phone nowadays. But even I understood that there was a certain degree of meaning in conveying your thoughts in writing instead.

"Anyway, I have to say, Student Council President Nagumo really didn't seem very composed today, did he?" I said.

"Yes, you're right," said Yagami-kun. "All that business about him supposedly putting up a lot of money and trying to get a student expelled. And if I remember correctly... What was that name again...?"

As though he just remembered something, Yagami-kun opened the meeting minutes notebook and showed it to me. The first page that he opened was from sometime in the middle of last year and seemed to have been written by someone who was now a third-year student, back when they were in their second year. Then, as he flipped through, I saw where the handwriting changed and matched that of the most recent meeting minutes. I spotted the change instantly because the minutes kept by Yagami-kun were written perfectly, in a tidy, methodical fashion, being well-spaced and coherent. Actually, his handwriting was so refined that it was hard to believe that it was done by hand.

"Here we are. If I remember correctly, he said Kishi-senpai might have been spreading this rumor. Do you happen to know what class Kishi-senpai is in?" he asked me. His expression as he did was no different from usual as he showed me the meeting minutes.

However, my brain had suddenly been yanked into a different direction. *This handwriting...* What I was looking at was strikingly similar to the handwriting that I had been investigating a little while ago, which had almost slipped from my memory.

The person who sent me that letter during the Uninhabited Island Special Exam.

I felt so shaken that my vision threatened to blur, but I fixed my gaze on the notebook and eventually found the minutes for today's meeting. As Yagami-kun was looking at me calmly, with that same smile he always had, I tried to step back and look at the first-year from a broader perspective.

*It couldn't be...*

*But... No, he... It's not possible.*

Amidst a whirlwind of emotions, I tried to think. I kept up my act, keeping my eyes lowered and focusing on the meeting minutes.

"Horikita-senpai?" he asked.

"...I'm sorry, I don't know," I said. "If we check OAA, we should find out immediately, though."

"Yes, that's a good point. I'll look into it right away."

"I'm sorry, but I just remembered that I have a little something I need to take care of. I'll be going now," I said.

"Oh, is that so? I understand."

I averted my eyes from him and quickly turned away, trying to escape. "Well then, I'm terribly sorry about the bother, but thank you for handling giving that letter to the president."

"Yes. Thank you for all of your hard work, as always, Horikita-senpai," Yagami-kun replied.

If he were to look at me right now, I would probably end up asking him about his handwriting. I intuitively felt that I needed to stop that from happening. I exited the student council office and slowly closed the door behind me. But just before it closed, there was a split second when I could see Yagami-kun through the gap between the door and the frame, looking at me with a smile.

It was almost as if he was testing me.

Almost as if he were provoking me, asking me the question, "*Did you notice?*" Otherwise, he wouldn't have gone through the trouble of opening the meeting minutes notebook and deliberately showing me his handwriting.

The door shut with a *ka-chak*.

I couldn't deny the possibility that his handwriting only just so happened to be the same through sheer coincidence. A good deal of time had passed since I had seen that letter, and my memory of it had gotten fuzzy. Yet, for some reason, his handwriting was so strikingly similar that it made me feel certain.

If I were to assume he really was the person who wrote that letter to me, then... That meant that he had to have been acting entirely normal, completely unbothered, even though we'd been near each other for a long time now.

At the same time, though, I couldn't help but think that this assumption seemed very, very realistic.

## **Chapter 5: Meeting the Day Before the Cultural Festival**

**T**HE DAYS FLEW BY quickly, and it was now Friday, November 12<sup>th</sup>. The day before the Cultural Festival had come, and school had ended for the day. Every class was solemnly preparing for what was to come. Today after school was our trial run for the Cultural Festival, an initiative spearheaded by the student council. It was going to be an important test to determine how things would go tomorrow. All of our classmates, with a few exceptions, had begun moving about to start getting ready.

Horikita's class had a total of four offerings. The first was the maid café, which, suffice to say, was already well known. The focus of the café's sales would be drinks like tea, coffee, and so on. Then, there were going to be photoshoots with the maids. The latter was particularly time-efficient and the set price per photo was high, so if there were a large number of customers who wanted to take part in that, we could take in a great deal of income.

The second and third offerings were going to be food stalls set up outside. One featured flour-based foods (such as takoyaki and okonomiyaki), and the other offered Western-style pasta and bread. These food stalls would generate sales on their own, but they would also accept orders made from the maid café. When an order was placed, a student tasked with transporting the food would fetch it from the stall and deliver it to the customer. In order to capitalize on the originality of the maid café, it also had a limited food menu, which was a slight variation on the existing menus already offered at the food stalls.

Then, the fourth and final offering, something we had hastily thrown together with what we had left in our budget, was a quiz game aimed at children. That would be held outside.

"Are you sure it's okay to let Hasebe-san and Akito-kun go like that?" said Maezono, just as Haruka and Akito had exited the classroom, their backs to everyone else.

"We can't force them to stay," Horikita replied. "Let's consider this an opportunity to test if we can run this smoothly with just thirty-five people—excluding Kouenji-kun, Hasebe-san, and Akito-kun."

However, those three weren't the only students who appeared unwilling to cooperate. Kushida had hardly said a word regarding the Cultural Festival over the past few weeks, and she had also been heading back to the dorms immediately after class ended, without offering help. She was aware that she was going to be handling customer service duties as a maid during the festival, and she had gone to Horikita several times with ideas. Some of her ideas had been adopted, although they were minor things. However, Kushida hadn't participated in any of the practice sessions with her fellow maids to see if they could keep in sync with each other.

Satou went over to Kushida, mustering up a fair amount of courage, trying as hard as she could not to let Kushida know that she was on alert.

"I'd like to do some final checks for the festival tomorrow, and also to practice some of the moves that we'll be doing... Do you think you might have some time today?" asked Satou.

"I'm sorry, Satou-san. There's something I have to do after class today that I can't miss," said Kushida.

This actually wasn't the first time that Kushida had used that exact wording.

"You know, you've been turning me down like this for a long time now... Are you really going to help out?" Satou asked.

There was tension in the air, and just as Horikita was about to get up from her seat, Yousuke was beside her and stopped her, almost as though he had anticipated her actions. I didn't know what the correct decision was, but I also knew it was impossible to create a harmonious class if you meddled in every little incident. Sometimes, things had to be resolved by the relevant parties involved. You could say that this was uncharacteristic behavior from Yousuke instead, as he normally spared a caring word for his classmates more than anyone else, but...

Perhaps it was because he felt that Horikita making an unnecessary display of special treatment toward Kushida in view of their fellow classmates would be a bad move. Horikita understood that too, of course. However, she also was faced with a dilemma: She just couldn't let things be.

"Don't worry," Kushida said. "I've been keeping the festival in mind and I'm not planning on dragging anyone down."

"But, Kushida-san, you haven't practiced even one bit, have you?" Satou protested. "I'm sorry, but I don't know if I can trust you with the important role of being a maid."

Today was the trial run, and thus the perfect time to practice. It seemed that Satou, who had accepted Kushida's unwillingness to participate up until now, wasn't going to back down today. However, Kushida wasn't going to either.

"In that case, why don't you try removing me from the roster? Even though I can't really think of any other good replacements."

It was a brutal statement, but she was correct. Even based on her physical appearance alone, there wasn't anyone who could serve as Kushida's substitute who wasn't already assigned to the role of maid.

"Well then, I'll see you at the Cultural Festival tomorrow," Kushida said. "Bye-bye."

Although she spoke in the same tone of voice as the gentle Kushida from before, there was no denying the fact that her behavior was cold. She stubbornly refused Satou's proposal and left the classroom. Did she simply not want to spend time with her classmates who now knew her true nature? Or did she really have something to do that she couldn't miss? The mood in the classroom was clearly getting worse, but even so, there was nothing anyone could do.

Matsushita, unable to bear the sight of Satou looking so frustrated and down, turned to Horikita directly for advice.

"Hey, Horikita-san, I know the show is tomorrow...but don't you think that maybe we should remove Kushida-san after all?"

"I understand what you're trying to say. But I don't intend to remove her at this time," said Horikita.

"But she's always saying that she has something to do, every single day. She's obviously lying," countered Matsushita.

It was certainly true that Kushida's recent behavior was puzzling in many respects. The fact that she kept her distance from a lot of people ever since the Unanimous Special Exam was understandable, but even so, her especially uncooperative behavior was quite conspicuous.

"You might be right," Horikita acknowledged. "I don't know why she isn't taking part in practice either."

"Okay then, in that case—"

"But don't worry. She's thinking about the Cultural Festival and the maid café in her own way."

"You believe in Kushida-san, then."

"Well, I suppose you could say that if we don't believe in her, nothing is going to change..." said Horikita.

Though Matsushita wasn't entirely convinced, she nodded and then turned to Satou. She had been doing a lot for this, perhaps because Matsushita herself was one of the original proponents of the maid café. Although Kushida's refusal to participate in practice sessions was certainly a cause for concern, Horikita's demeanor showed that she wasn't feeling flustered about it. In fact, she was exuding confidence, which must have been backed by something. That was probably why Matsushita decided to follow Horikita's lead and bet on that confidence.

They didn't seem like they would be asking me for my help, so I figured I'd just keep an eye on things.

## 5.1

**O**N THE FIRST FLOOR of the special building was the stall designated as "Special 02." This location was normally just a spare classroom. Now, it was being decorated by students. The girls were doing most of the work. As for the boys, if I had to say anything...they were assisting. It was interesting to note that the girls were overwhelmingly better at this sort of decorating than any of the boys were. It was probably safe to leave the setup to them, with Horikita supervising.

Up on the second floor of the special building, in a classroom in the back, preparations for another concept café were steadily underway. Unlike our maid café, the concept Ryuuuen's class were using for their café was "Japanese-style clothing." Even the food and beverages served were completely different from what we offered, including things such as Japanese sweets, tea, and the like. In the midst of their preparations, I happened to come across a particularly conspicuous certain someone. Even though she was dressed in a Japanese kimono in line with the concept of the café, she was sitting by herself in a chair, reading a book.

When Hiyori noticed me standing there, she lifted her book up, and for some reason, hid everything below her eyes.

"...Hello."



"It's been a while," I said. "I hear you haven't been to the library much lately?"

"No, that's not true. I've just, well, I've been going at a slightly different time."

I had thought it was strange that a bookworm would've stopped visiting the library, but from the sound of it, she just started going at a different time of day.

"I see you're working too, as a salesperson."

"I'm handling checkout," she said. "I'm not very good at interacting with people, so... Well, I'm not very good at moving about either. I tried practicing by carrying food around on a tray, but that didn't go so well."

So, in short, she wasn't very good at any of this in general. But as long as she could smoothly handle whatever came her way at the register, I supposed that was all that mattered.

"By the way, Ibuki-san is part of the staff too," added Hiyori.

"Ibuki is? I was under the impression she would never, ever wear that kind of outfit."

"She and Ryuu-en-kun had a contest, with the stipulation that she'd be completely exempt from helping out in the Cultural Festival if she won."

"And she lost," I surmised.

Hiyori had a somewhat amused smile on her face, perhaps because she was remembering what happened then.

"So, where is this Ibuki who lost?" I asked.

"She isn't participating today, apparently," Hiyori replied. "She said that she absolutely hates the idea of wearing the outfit outside of the Cultural Festival."

It wasn't as though I didn't understand how Ibuki felt on that point, but I just hoped she'd be able to serve the customers well when the Cultural Festival came, and she had to perform without rehearsing. Well, I supposed Ryuu-en would probably deal with any issues related to that as they arose.

I wanted to check on Ryuuuen as the owner of this café, but he was nowhere to be seen. I wondered if he left preparations for the day prior to the festival to the other students.

"It seems like Ryuuuen-kun went to see how Class A is doing," said Hiyori.

"Class A?"

"It's because their class still hasn't disclosed what they'll be doing for the festival."

That was true—even though the Cultural Festival was tomorrow, there were no details about what Sakayanagi's class was doing. It wasn't strange, then, to want to know what their class was going to do. As long as every class was participating in this pre-opening event, it was a given that they'd be getting their things ready by some point today.

"I'll head out too then," I said.

Now that my conversation with Hiyori was finished, I decided to go search for Sakayanagi's class.

"Um, excuse me, Ayanokouji-kun..."

"Hm?"

"Ryuuuen-kun and the others went up to the third floor," Hiyori said, "so Sakayanagi-san is probably there."

"I see. Thanks, that saves me some time."

It seemed like she wanted to say something else, but then she immediately shook her head. Did this mean that three of the second-year classes were concentrated in the special building, albeit on different floors?

"I'll be going to the library again soon," Hiyori added. "You should too, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Yeah, sure."

After giving her a light wave to say goodbye, I headed up to the third floor.

The third floor of the special building was the area furthest from the school gate and was thought to be the most difficult for

people to reach on foot. There were three classrooms on this floor available as stall locations, but until recently, they hadn't been rented out because they weren't popular spaces.

"I didn't expect Sakayanagi's class to have rented out *all* of the rooms here," I remarked.

Because Class 2-A had exclusive control over the floor, students from their class roamed about the hallway as they pleased. It was difficult to imagine what they were offering from a single glance. There were several cardboard boxes scattered about, but their contents weren't visible, and the students were still dressed in their school uniforms with no indication that they were going to change into something else. It wasn't possible to cook using heating implements indoors, so that idea had to be tossed out too.

"Surprised that it's not something you expected?" Hashimoto called out to me as he approached. He must've been keeping an eye out for students who came up the stairs.

"What's this all about?" I asked.

"You can't tell by looking? You, of all people?" Hashimoto chuckled silently, perhaps because he was amused that I didn't understand. "Well, I guess it's understandable. But I can't just answer your question all nicely, can I?" he added with a smirk.

Apparently, they were intending to finish setting things up today, but they didn't want to make what they were doing public. Almost as if to symbolize this, a piece of paper was put up in the stairway leading up to this floor. It read, "*Due to an issue, Class 2-A will not be hosting its offering(s) today.*"

"So, there you have it," Hashimoto said. "Sorry you had to trek all the way up here, but I'm going to have to ask you to head on back."

Even if I persisted, I likely wouldn't find out what they were doing, anyway.

"I think Ryuu'en's going to be headed back any minute now too," he added.

As if on cue, Ryuuen emerged from the rear classroom and walked toward the two of us with both of his hands in his pockets. After shooting a quick glance over at Hashimoto and me, he walked straight past us and headed down the stairs.

"Or are you going to do the same thing he did and take a closer look, even though you know it's pointless?" asked Hashimoto.

"I'll just head back," I replied.

"Good luck, dude. Hope you're looking forward to seeing it, once we unveil it."

Hashimoto remained where he stood and watched me leave. Ultimately, I went back down the stairs and started heading back to our maid café without having achieved anything.

When I reached the second floor, I noticed Ryuuen had stopped moving and had his back to me. He didn't turn all the way around to look at me and only turned his head to shoot a look in my direction. In response, I looked away, back to the upper floor.

When Ryuuen saw this, the corner of his mouth curved up slightly. "Tell Suzune that our class is gonna win tomorrow."

"The Japanese-style outfits must have cost more than the maid outfits, am I right?" I replied. "If you were going to go with a concept café anyway, it would've been nice if you could worked together with Horikita on it."

"These are simply what my tastes are."

Leaving me with a parting shot that could have been taken seriously or interpreted as a joke, Ryuuen walked away. I also started moving, going back to my own maid café. I paid no attention to Hashimoto's presence, which I could still sense on the floor above.

## 5.2

**S**URPRISINGLY ENOUGH, many boys from the other classes rushed to our café as soon as it opened for business. There seemed to be more curious onlookers who were interested in catching a glimpse of the girls in cosplay than there were people actually coming to eat, but I didn't mind. It would be a valuable learning experience for the maids, since they weren't used to being the center of attention. Even the normally calm and collected Matsushita was looking a little stiff and nervous.

Satou and Mii-chan, though, were looking noticeably worse than they were during practice sessions. Almost immediately, the sound of plastic hitting the floor could be heard throughout the classroom. A cup of water slipped and fell off the tray Mii-chan was carrying. It was a serious mistake and seemed to kill the atmosphere inside, and Mii-chan, the cause of it, froze on the spot.

In the midst of this, though, Matsushita immediately took action. "I am terribly sorry for the disruption," she announced humbly.

Then, after gently patting Mii-chan on the shoulder and urging her to calm down in a quiet, calm tone, she instructed her to get a fresh cup of water. Then, Matsushita retrieved a rag and began wiping up the spill on the floor.

Horikita, standing by and watching everything from the sidelines, was deeply impressed by Matsushita's outstanding performance. "Matsushita-san is quite good," she said. "It's hard to imagine this is her first time doing something like this."

"Yeah," I agreed. "You're going to participate as a maid tomorrow too, right?"

"I'm basically serving as our publicist. I will also serve customers if the situation calls for it, but... To be honest, I don't have much confidence in myself, not in that arena." Horikita answered somewhat timidly. It was unusual for her.

"Well, I guess nobody thinks that you're good at putting on a smile anyway," I said.

I was sure that she wasn't anxious about the act of serving itself, but rather, she wasn't feeling confident because it was probably difficult for her to offer a smile.

"You seem awfully relaxed," she said.

"I figure that work on my end is almost done for today."

My job seemed to be 90 percent prep work, with the other 10 percent spent on the day of the festival. Essentially, all I had to do tomorrow was administrative tasks.

"Maybe I should put you to work in the food stalls too," said Horikita.

"Don't reassign people just because of your personal grievances."

Horikita said something pretty nasty, but since she didn't really intend to act on it after all, she quickly backed down.

"Anyway, things seem like they'll be fine as long as Matsushita-san is here, so I think I'll step out myself," she said.

"Going on a tour?" I asked.

"I'd like to see with my own eyes what kind of exhibits there are."

"Take your time and enjoy."

As for me, in the meantime, I thought I'd go ahead and get to work on creating the space to be used as the waiting area tomorrow.

About an hour later, Horikita returned to the maid café.

"Welcome back. How did things look with our people?" I asked.

"There were a few small mistakes here and there, but everything has calmed down a lot now, and everyone seems to be getting into the swing of things."

"Thank goodness for this pre-opening, eh?"

"It might've been dicey if we had to go straight to the Cultural Festival without this trial run," Horikita agreed.

We understood that practicing on our own, without any customers or people around, was completely different from actually running the operation with real customers who weren't from our class. Matsushita, who had been working at full throttle ever since we opened for business, finished up what she was doing and then went off shift.

"Great work, Matsushita-san," Horikita told her. "You were absolutely splendid."

"Thanks. Everyone's been getting better, and I think we should be in good shape for tomorrow." After saying that, though, Matsushita's expression stiffened slightly.

"What's the matter?" asked Horikita.

"Well, it's just... I thought that there'd be more attempts at sabotage. I've been a little concerned."

"Sabotage?" repeated Horikita.

"Well, we know that Ryuu-en-kun's class is doing a concept café too, right? I was afraid that he might bring Ishizaki-kun and some other guys with him and start saying things like there are bugs in the cups we use or something..."

Horikita and I exchanged looks for a moment, but then we quickly turned our attention back to Matsushita.

"I don't think you need to worry about that," Horikita told her. "There'd be little benefit for them in sabotaging us at this stage when we're having our trial run. Besides, since the rules state that students can't be customers during the Cultural Festival proper, they wouldn't be able to do what you described."

"Plus, there will be lots of people watching during the Cultural Festival, so Ryuu-en can't just carelessly use his usual tricks," I added, supplementing Horikita's response. "You don't have to worry."

A smile returned to Matsushita's face after the two of us reassured her, at almost the exact same time, that there was nothing to worry about.

"For some reason, it's more calming when you two say it." She patted her chest and let out a sigh of relief. Matsushita must have been feeling mentally worn out.

"You should go on break," said Horikita.

"All right, I'll do just that, then." Matsushita then walked off, staggering somewhat as she exited the classroom.

"Did you notice that?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

Perhaps it was because I had only sensed something *slightly* off, but Horikita hadn't noticed anything, even though she was standing nearby. I hoped it was nothing more than my imagination.

"So, how did things look for the other classes?" I asked.

"I don't know if we'll be having another Cultural Festival next year, but I learned a lot," said Horikita.

Seeing the waiting area that I had worked on, she checked it out by touching the walls.

"Seems fine to me," she decided. "We'll begin clean-up in another hour, so I think that you should take another look around too."

"All right, guess I'll do that."

With Horikita's permission, I decided to take a stroll around the school. As though she had been waiting for this moment, Kei showed up and grabbed hold of my arm.

"Let's go together!" she exclaimed.

"It doesn't seem like you'd leave me alone even if I said no."

"Nope!"

"You two are free to walk around together, but don't forget that it's strictly for reconnaissance purposes," said Horikita.

"I got it!" said Kei happily.

While Horikita was very serious, Kei's demeanor was rather happy-go-lucky. Well, to be fair, I supposed it wasn't every day that you had an opportunity like this. In fact, even just from looking at our own maid café, most of the other people seemed to be enjoying the festival like normal.

## 5.3

THE FIRST-YEARS and some of the third-year classes were putting on a number of exhibits that resembled those you saw at festivals. Some of the more technically challenging ones included things like target shooting and ring toss games, and there was another where you had to drop a marble onto handmade platforms with multiple goal markers that awarded different prizes. The assembly of stalls and exhibits created a scene that looked a bit like a typical festival somewhere else.

"Oh, hey, it's Yukimura-kun and the others."

Kei was quick to point out Keisei, Sotomura, and some other guys. They seemed to be busily preparing for the event themselves. Perhaps they had been practicing making food in the dormitories or elsewhere, but they seemed to be handling their duties fairly dexterously. I decided that we shouldn't bother them with pointless conversation.

"Want to try the ring toss or something?" I asked.

"Yeah! Oh, wow, that plushie is pretty cute. I think I kinda want it." Kei pointed toward an item as we stood behind another student who was playing the game.

It was an adorable prize, and quite colorful too. However, unfortunately, the ring toss prizes were just for display purposes. Even if I won the ring toss game now, I apparently wouldn't receive a prize. While the student council did provide a budget for this event, the number of prizes was limited. If students took prizes today, it would probably be difficult to replenish them. On the other hand though, there was a target shooting game hosted by Class 1-B across the way, and they were apparently offering desserts as prizes. If you won, you would actually get something.

The prizes you could win were things as cheap as ten points on the low end to things worth as much as two hundred points on the high end. I was sure that there would be more than just food available as prizes when tomorrow came, but this would allow for a good test run and would be just like the real thing.

"Give it a try, Kiyotaka!" exclaimed Kei.

I went up to the table where five guns were all lined up in a row for the target shooting game, and Kei was gently pushing me from behind. I was simply interested in the game itself, so I was willing to give it a try. We were allowed five shots per play. Apparently, the guns used were a type of toy called a cork gun—a cork was stuffed into them and could be fired.

The individual guns lined upon the table seemed to be more solidly built than I was expecting. The bullets, however, were somewhat distorted in shape. I had doubts about whether I'd be able to shoot them with any precision. I had never even held a gun in my hands, not once in my entire life. I had a vague idea of what it would be like from movies and TV and such, but I wasn't sure if those depictions were accurate. And because I hadn't seen any other students playing the game, I hadn't seen any examples. So, deciding that there was no way around it, I went with what my imagination told me and grabbed the gun in the middle.

"Go for the most expensive one!" Kei shouted.

I'd need to knock down a heavy target if I was going to win the most expensive prize. Now then, how much power was I going to need in order to achieve that...? Well, for the time being, I figured I'd just give it a try. I fired my first shot while Kei cheered me on in a shrill, high-pitched voice.

With a light "pop" sound, the cork bullet went sailing toward its intended target, the heaviest one. However, the bullet traveled a few centimeters to the left of the target without so much as grazing it. I had figured that I wouldn't have hit it with pinpoint accuracy or anything given that I was aiming by the feel of things, but the bullet's trajectory was completely different than I was expecting. In that case, I decided to shift the muzzle a few centimeters to the right before I fired my second shot. I thought I had corrected the trajectory perfectly, but this time, the bullet curved off to the right, missing the target.

"This is tough..." I muttered aloud.

As I readied my third shot, other students began to queue up and play too, one after another. I decided to watch how the other

students did in order to further improve my aim. However, when they tried to shoot, the other students struggled to hit their targets just as I did. One of the students amongst the group, though, scored a direct hit on one of the weights on the very first shot. The weight didn't fall over, but they had succeeded in pushing the target back slightly. As I continued to observe the other students closely, wondering if there was some kind of trick to this, I realized that the differences in results were not due to differences in skill, but rather because each gun actually had a different level of performance even though they all looked the same.

There were single-millimeter discrepancies in the manufacturing process for the guns, and then there was the quality of the cork bullets themselves. The combination of those various factors led to unexpected trajectories every time you fired. It was an extremely interesting issue, but at the same time, I could understand the difficulty in knocking the target down in general.

Ultimately, even though I hit my original intended target with my final shot, the target wasn't something that could be knocked down all that easily, and my first target-shooting game ended in overwhelming failure. However, I came to understand the quirks of the guns themselves.

*Okay, so if I try the game again, and this time I predict the trajectory of the bullet based on the shape of the cork, then...*

But just as I was thinking about that, I noticed a sign nearby.

*"Only one game per person today."*

And so, I gave up.

"Hah! Even the great and magnificent Ayanokouji-paisen sucks at shooting, huh?"

Housen came out from behind the stall as I put the gun back on the table, smiling like he found my failure amusing. The main theme of Housen's class, Class 1-D's offerings was "play."

"What a surprise. I hadn't imagined you'd be doing an exhibit like this," I said.

By that, I meant the sort of games in which adults would think back on their childhood memories and get all fired up trying to win trivial prizes in things like shooting and ring toss.

"When I was a kid, I used to join the grown-ups runnin' these kinds of stalls to make some easy money," said Housen.

*What kind of childhood did he have...?*

"Anyway, I wanted to do an actual, full-blown gambling den type thing," he went on, "but the school turned me down hard on that one. But hey, even if we're doin' target shooting or whatever, it's practically the same as gambling. This kind of game is designed so that the house wins. This Cultural Festival thing is a one-time deal, so ain't no way people are gonna be too wary about gettin' ripped off."

Housen took out a lighter and put it on the shelf with the targets, and then went over to the players' side of the exhibit and picked up the second gun from the left. The bullet he fired from the gun in his hands flew much straighter than I expected, and he landed a direct hit on the lighter. It wobbled, but it showed no sign of falling over.

"As long as they can't get the limited prizes, then it don't matter," he said.

"But won't that keep people from playing for very long?" I asked.

"Nah. Not if we add a little value to the crummy participation prizes and just hand 'em out."

If the participation prizes weren't appealing, then even the adults might end up keeping their distance from this game, but... apparently Housen had a plan. The participation prizes in question were peeking out of a basket. He had used a printing press to produce a large number of photographs of both male and female students, which were then laminated and presented as prizes in various ways.

"Figured that for adults, it'd be a good way to show that they were here if we gave 'em something that reminded them of participatin' in the Cultural Festival," said Housen.

The fact that many people related to the world of politics would be participating in this Cultural Festival event also meant that some of them would be telling others about their experience, framing it as an act of charity or a community service activity. If they announced that they had received pictures of students, that would also give a favorable impression. Surprisingly enough, Housen had really thought this through.

After parting ways with him, I returned to Kei, who had been waiting for me.

"It was hopeless," I declared.

Despite that, Kei was grinning happily. She poked me in the waist with her elbow.

"You seem awfully happy even though I didn't win a prize," I observed.

"That's 'cause I got to see your cute side, Kiyotaka. As far as I'm concerned, I'm super satisfied. Y'know?"

"What? Cute side?" I repeated. *Nothing good happened at all, though. I didn't get anything.*

"I guess I'm just happy that it wasn't like the sort of thing you might see in a manga, where the guy wins big with just one shot, or something," she said. "I was reminded that you really can't do everything."

That was true. My way of doing things was based on experience. There was no way I could have done well on my first shot, regardless of whether it had been a toy or otherwise, unless I had some kind of reference from past experience to draw from.

"Is that cute?" I asked. "I get the feeling that people would usually want their boyfriends to look cool, though."

"I've already seen plenty of that," replied Kei.

She was criticizing me by saying that; actually, Kei seemed to be genuinely happy over the fact that I *didn't* win the prize.

As we strolled about looking for other things of interest, I happened to spot Ishizaki.

"Yo, Ayanokouji!" he exclaimed.

"Looks like you guys are doing something a little different for the festival," I observed.

"I know, right? It was me and Albert's idea, actually," he answered.

Kei stared hard at Ishizaki, eyeing him up suspiciously. "Oh, I see. Now how did a lackey like you get permission from Ryuuuen? Even though you couldn't even put together a birthday party?" she snapped.

"Uh... Well, I wanted to make it happen, really... I gave him the offer, telling him what you told me about your conditions and all, and then he gave me a good kick..."

Ishizaki clutched his abdomen as he spoke, perhaps because he was remembering what happened in that moment. October 20 was, coincidentally, both my and Ryuuuen's birthday. Ishizaki wanted to put together a combo birthday party for us. However, in order to make that a reality, he needed to persuade Kei, and the condition that she gave was that Ryuuuen needed to apologize to her directly for what he did on the rooftop and bow his head to her. Naturally, Ryuuuen didn't accept Kei's strict conditions.

"But I'm gonna try again next year and I'm gonna make it happen! Just you wait!" Ishizaki insisted.

"No one's waiting for that... So, anyway, what kind of thing are you doing for the festival?" asked Kei.

"You curious? You're curious, right? You two can go ahead and try it out!" said Ishizaki.

All I could see was a desk and some cardboard boxes. The fact that there were some disposable chopsticks and cups laid out on the desk gave me the impression that there was something to eat and drink, but I wasn't so sure.

"What is this?" I asked.

"You just gotta wait and see," said Ishizaki, beaming.

Ishizaki instructed Albert to take some items out from the cardboard boxes. He brought out a bag of protein powder and a bag of citric acid powder. Both were things that were commonly

taken when people were engaging in strength training, to build muscle.

"This is chocolate-flavored protein," Ishizaki said, putting a little bit of the protein shake he'd made into two small paper cups. "Go ahead, give it a little taste."

Ishizaki put a little bit of the chocolate protein shake he made into two small paper cups.

"I don't want that," said Kei, refusing to drink it when Ishizaki tried to hand it to her.

"C-come on, don't be like that," he whined. "It's just a protein shake, y'know?"

"I've never drunk protein shakes or anything before, and I don't want to. I'm not planning on getting beefy. Okay?"

Albert took a step forward and muttered something in English. "You can't build muscle just by drinking protein shakes."

"Huh? What?" asked Kei, unable to understand him.

"Don't worry about that," Ishizaki cut in. "You can't build muscles just from drinking protein shakes. That's what Albert said, I think. Anyway, since you guys are here, won't you give it a try?"

To be honest, I was a little curious to see what Ishizaki had come up with. I decided to take the initiative, so I accepted the paper cup and drank some of the shake. It was probably made by a different manufacturer than whoever made what I used to drink, but the taste did remind me of the old days a little.

"Well, in that case, I guess I'll take a sip... Blech! Gross!!!" sputtered Kei.

For Kei, on the other hand, this was the first time she ever tried a protein shake. She made a face that implied she didn't find it quite so delicious.

"Gross? But I mean, like, it's not like it's *undrinkable*, right?" Ishizaki asked.

"I can drink it, sure, but I probably wouldn't want to," I answered.

"Okey dokey, well, lemme give ya a palate cleanser then," said Ishizaki.

He handed us some water, perhaps so we could wash out the insides of our mouths. By the time we finished drinking our water, Ishizaki was ready to move on to the next part of his spiel.

"This one's next," said Ishizaki.

This time, he handed us different paper cups filled with a citric acid drink. Both Kei and I mumbled our thoughts after taking a sip.

"Well, it's citric acid, for sure..." I muttered.

"I guess I like this one better," said Kei.

"All right, now onto the last one. The one you guys just drank now wasn't that gross or nothin', right?" asked Ishizaki.

"The protein shake was disgusting," said Kei.

"Yeah, yeah, I know, Karuizawa. What about you, Ayanokouji?" asked Ishizaki.

"It wasn't horrible or anything."

Ishizaki smiled happily at my answer.

"So, hey, get this," he said. "If you add the citric acid to the chocolate protein shake, it totally turns into a mystery flavor."

We were handed cups filled with the mixture, and we brought them to our mouths. Since ingesting protein wasn't a bad thing, and ingesting citric acid wasn't a bad thing either, I figured it would be like killing two birds with one stone, but...

"Okay you two, take a drink at the same time," said Ishizaki.

"I'm kind of scared," said Kei.

"Let's just give it a taste," I replied.

Kei and I, almost totally in sync, both brought the cups to our lips. I poured the mixture down the back of my throat. But the moment the drink entered my mouth, the taste that hit the surface of my tongue made me stiffen involuntarily.

"Blech!"

Kei sputtered next to me and let out a yelp. She reflexively spat the drink out right on the spot. She then made an even stronger show of how she felt about it by gesturing like she was going to throw up.

"This was... What even, I just... What?! *That's* the flavor it's supposed to be?! Ewwww!!!"

As for me, this was a taste I remembered. Once, when I was learning martial arts and had a fist driven into my abdomen, stomach acid and partially digested food shot up from my stomach and I threw up. I remembered the smell and the taste that lingered in my mouth after that. What I just tasted was something close to that.

"Ah ha ha ha! That's it! It's so funny, isn't it?" bellowed Ishizaki.

"It's NOT funny! Water!!!"

Kei shoved Ishizaki as he laughed boisterously and clutched his stomach. She then proceeded to down water straight from the bottle.

"That was... How can I put it? It certainly was a mystery flavor, that's for sure," I remarked.

"Heh, I knew it. Even *you* were a little surprised by it, Ayanokouji," said Ishizaki.

That wasn't just because it wasn't good, though. It was because, honestly, it didn't even taste like food at all. My merriment had taken a sudden nosedive.

"I was thinkin' we'd surprise the people who come visit tomorrow," Ishizaki said. "I'm gonna offer them a chance to experience the mystery flavor for themselves, just 500 points a drink."

But what really surprised me was... "How could Ryuuken allow this?" I asked.

"He said we can do whatever we want with our own points. I'm just doing something separate from the class tomorrow here."

*I see.* That meant that the class rented a space for what they were doing, and Ishizaki booked an extra space to do something on his own. In that case, the expenditure would be minimal. And, well, I supposed that it wouldn't be surprising if ten or so guests were curious about the experience.

"Ugh," muttered Kei, "I came out here to have a fun date, but I'm just feeling like I'm under attack right now..."

She continued to shoot Ishizaki resentful glares right up until we left. Kei and Ishizaki's relationship, which had seemingly improved a little bit, might have gone back to square one.

During my investigation of the stalls, I genuinely enjoyed some of the offerings I saw. After we were finished, I returned to the maid café with Kei. The classroom was filled with students who seemed to be leisurely enjoying themselves, having fun chatting with the maids.

Whenever a student deviated from what was morally acceptable and annoyed a particular maid, Sudou would intervene. He would forcefully put a stop to it and insist that they leave the room. He had the necessary role of dealing with troublemakers, and to be honest, he was really suited for it. Whether you were his junior or his senior, unless you were exceptionally strong, you would have no other choice but to leave quietly if Sudou told you it was time to go.

The roughly two-hour Cultural Festival test run would soon come to an end. When it was done, we were going to discuss with Horikita if we would need to make any personnel changes or additions for the real thing. However, just as I, Sudou, and the other guys started cleaning, Onodera showed up. She had been sent to work at the outdoor stalls and sounded disappointed when she returned.

"Oh, they're all done in here too? I kind of wanted to see everyone in maid outfits."

"You wanted to see the maids?" asked Sudou.

"Well, why wouldn't I? I like cute things too. Besides, I don't think I'd look good in a maid outfit or anything... I have thick legs."

"You won't know if you look good in it unless you try it on yourself, right?" Sudou said.

"With the limited number of outfits, I don't think there'd be anything in my size..." She said that with a wry, self-deprecating smile, implying to Sudou that it was an impossibility for her.

Because of her commitment to swimming, Onodera had a well-trained body, including wider, more developed shoulders and legs than most girls. There was no getting around the fact that if Onodera were to be provided with a maid outfit that fit her, it would have to be made exclusively for her.

Sudou suddenly crouched down, his eyes on Onodera's thighs.

"H-hey, what are you doing, Sudou-kun?!" she cried out.

"You've got the legs of a well-trained athlete," said Sudou, his finger on his chin as he said exactly what was on his mind. "I mean, sure, it's probably a bit of a different vibe from what you'd expect from a maid, but still..."

"Oh my god, I'm so embarrassed!" Onodera's face went bright red, and she bolted out of the classroom as quick as a hare.

"What's up with her?" asked Sudou, "She didn't have to run away, sheesh..."

As I watched the two of them interact, I was able to feel an obvious change in Onodera from up close. Onodera seemed to have taken a liking to Sudou in the time between the Sports Festival and today. However, it didn't seem like he noticed at all. Perhaps it was because he simply hadn't had anyone take an interest in him like that before, or perhaps because he just hadn't picked up on any of the signs. It would've been nice if it was mutual and the two of them were on the same page in terms of romantic attraction, but at this point in time, they were both going their own way.

I wasn't exactly the most knowledgeable when it came to love, but I did know that the best thing to do in situations like this was to just step back, watch, and hope for the best. That was all there was to be done. However, that was exactly why that feeling

of curiosity welled up within me. There was a desire to see another result. If I went against the established norm and interfered, would they make it as a couple? Or would they not?

"You don't get it?" I asked. "Why Onodera acted like that, I mean?"

"What, you mean you do?" said Sudou.

"You know the feelings you have for Horikita? Onodera has the same kind of feelings for you," I explained.

He blinked back at me. "Huh?"

Sudou didn't immediately understand what I meant by that because I had worded it in a slightly roundabout way. However, Sudou as he was now wasn't so dense that he'd fail to grasp the meaning forever.

"Huh? Wait... Onodera, she's... With me?"

"Yep," I answered.

"No. No, no way. There's jus' no way."

It seemed like Sudou had tried to give the idea serious thought, but then he denied it, saying that it couldn't be true. I supposed that was a natural reaction too. No one could look into the heart of another person and see what the truth was.

"Sure, Onodera might not have been interested in you at first, but you've shown remarkable growth lately, Sudou," I said. "It wouldn't be too surprising if she started to think of you as a potential romantic partner, would it?"

Little by little, Sudou's face started to harden as he sorted out his thoughts.

"But I mean... Her? With a guy like *me*?" he said.

"There's no guarantee, of course. If you want to know the truth, then the important thing for you to do might be to observe and understand Onodera."

"But I... I..."

I already knew what was going to come next without Sudou having to finish his sentence. Right now, Sudou had strong feelings

for Horikita. That was exactly why I wanted to see what kind of change those unprompted comments I made might cause in him. Would he move closer to Horikita? Or would he be swayed toward Onodera? Or could he end up with a third party that I hadn't even factored in?

"Ugh, I can't wrap my head around this," he said. "I'm feelin' kinda out of sorts. I think I'll go check out the stalls now. Try to cool my head a bit."

I supposed he'd just have to think it over and come up with an answer.

"Kiyotaka-kun... Was that...a good idea?" asked Yousuke, standing beside me. He must have overheard our conversation. "I think you should've just left it alone."

"You think so? I don't really understand this kind of thing myself, so if what I said to Sudou was careless, I'm sorry," I said, making a face like I had no idea what the issue was.

A short while later, it was the end of the trial run.

"Good work, everyone," Horikita said. "That's it for today. If there are any reassessments for positions for the Cultural Festival tomorrow, I'll contact you via my phone sometime before 9 p.m. tonight."

Once we finished cleaning up and putting things away, all our preparations for tomorrow were complete. The students headed back to the dorms, ready for the festival tomorrow, and eventually, Horikita and I were the only two people left in the classroom.

"You know, when I really think about it, I can't help but feel like there's something not right about you being a maid, Horikita," I remarked.

"It's not like I'm doing it because I want to," she said, "but there's nothing wrong with having more help, right? It would've been a lot easier if your girlfriend had pitched in too, though."

"Sorry, but that's out of my jurisdiction. I'm leaving it to Kei's discretion."

Satou and others, me included, had approached Kei and asked, but she refused to be a maid. I didn't hear the reasons she

gave, but honestly, it was probably more because she didn't want to do anything that would require her to change clothes in front of others, rather than thinking it was a bother or not being good at dealing with customers. Only people who knew about Kei's past and her body would understand that, however.

"I'm only joking," said Horikita. "I wouldn't force her to put on a uniform. Besides, if she wore it and looked unhappy, it would give our guests tomorrow a bad impression."

"Here, take a look at this," I said, handing Horikita a notebook so she could look it over. "I made a few adjustments after seeing the trial run today."

"Thanks. There don't seem to be any problems with the schedule that you've put together," Horikita said, looking up from the notebook.

Participants in the Cultural Festival were required to take a one-hour break at some point before the end of the festival, and they had to notify their homeroom instructor before doing so. During this break period, students were forbidden from helping with any festival stalls or exhibits, and their work had to be coordinated accordingly, regardless of whether things were busy or not.

## 5.4

A BOY AND A GIRL stood facing one another on the roadside path leading to Keyaki Mall. The Cultural Festival test run had already begun by this point, and there were no other students in sight.

"We can finally talk, Yagami-kun," said Kushida.

"I never would have imagined that you'd just barge in while we were preparing for the festival," he replied.

"I wouldn't have been able to catch you if I hadn't. It's like you've been avoiding me."

After she had made contact with Yagami back in a classroom, he forced her to move locations because he didn't want to discuss matters at that time or place.

"The fact that we haven't been able to meet up was just a coincidence," he said. "Come to think of it, it seems you came by my room a number of times. I apologize for being out when you dropped by."

Both of them were smiling as they spoke. If someone were to see the two of them talking, it would look like a friendly chat.

"Were you really out? Or were you just pretending to be out to mess with me?"

"Pretending to be out? Why on earth would I do something like that?" replied Yagami. "There seems to be some kind of misunderstanding here."

"There's no misunderstanding."

Yagami's refusal to give her a straight answer made Kushida feel like she was trying to grab at a cloud. Frustrated, she took a step forward.

"You threw me away because I'm no longer of any use to you. That's all it is, isn't it?" she demanded.

Yagami had expected Kushida to get Horikita and Ayanokouji expelled in the Unanimous Special Exam. Since she had failed to

carry out his wishes, and he had cut contact with her, it wasn't surprising that she believed he had discarded her.

"Do you remember when I contacted you on the night of the Unanimous Special Exam, after the exam ended?" asked Yagami.

"Yes. Of course I do."

When Yagami called her that night, he learned that Horikita and Ayanokouji had not been expelled at all. Kushida told him that directly. He hung up on her immediately, and Kushida hadn't talked to him since.

"I'll be honest with you," Yagami said. "I thought that you hated me, Kushida-senpai. That's why I haven't had the courage to face you directly, and I might have been unconsciously trying to avoid you lately."

"Stop it," she snapped. "There's really no point in trying to lie to me like that anymore."

Listening to him pretending to act like a junior who liked her only sent shivers down her spine now that she'd seen a glimpse of his true nature.

"My apologies. Well then, could you please tell me about what you went through that day?"

Kushida had already begun to understand that this first-year student she was talking to simply enjoyed toying with her. He already knew everything that happened during the Unanimous Special Exam; he was simply trying to play with her further.

"I'm not going to answer that," she said.

"Why not? I know, at the very least, that you tried to get those two students expelled, Kushida-senpai. But the end result was that Sakura-senpai was expelled instead of you. What I would like to know are the *details* of how that happened."

"I didn't do anything in that special exam. Sakura-san had the lowest score in OAA and was inevitably thrown out. That's all."

Details of what happened during the Unanimous Special Exam hadn't been shared with anyone outside of the class, and that was why Yagami wanted to know exactly what happened.

Kushida tried to push the narrative that Sakura Airi was chosen on the basis of her lack of ability and nothing more.

Yagami, still smiling, placed his hand gently on Kushida's shoulder. "You mustn't lie," he said.

"Lie...?"

"Your routine has changed dramatically ever since the Unanimous Special Exam. You appear to be getting along with students from the other classes as usual, but I've done some investigating, and I know that you've become distant from your own classmates. In other words, a certain degree of your true nature must have been exposed during the Unanimous Special Exam."

On the surface, Kushida still smiled at her classmates, just like she always did. But there were limits now, as there was more distance between her and her classmates than ever before. She used to hang out with a small group of girls twice or three times a week, but now that number had gone down to zero.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kushida insisted. "I get along with my classmates like I always have."

Kushida tried to frame it like he might have gotten the wrong impression from what he'd seen, or that he was spouting off nonsense without any proof, but Yagami just kept smiling.

"It's no use trying to hide it," he said. "Your classmates found out everything about your past, Kushida-senpai. And it was most definitely Ayanokouji-senpai who drove you into that corner. Am I right?"

Yagami spoke eloquently, as though he had been watching Kushida and the others fighting in class firsthand. The fact that he deliberately mentioned Ayanokouji's name and not Horikita's was also surprising.

"That's simply your imagination. It's not really what happened," said Kushida.

"You're free to try to dodge the truth, but, well... Anyway, what do you want from me if there's nothing to say? I have to help

with the Cultural Festival, so I'd like to get back as soon as possible."

"I'm tired of spending time with you, Yagami-kun."

"You're...tired of it?" he asked.

"Don't bother me ever again. That's all I wanted to say to you today."

Kushida was suddenly telling Yagami that she wanted to end this.

"So, you want to end our relationship," he said. "I can understand your feelings on the matter. Now that your past and your true nature are known to your class, I suppose that it'd be pointless to try to drive Horikita-senpai and Ayanokouji-senpai to expulsion, wouldn't it, Kushida-senpai?"

"I'm not going to correct you on every little thing," she huffed. "If you want to selfishly interpret the situation however you want, then go ahead."

"You're an interesting person, Kushida-senpai. What you said just now was the truth. And what's more, you yourself are beginning to think that you can throw yourself into this environment. Which is why you want to end this uneasy relationship with me and look forward."

*Look forward.* That phrase that came out of Yagami's mouth stuck in her mind.

"Ayanokouji-senpai aside, have you reconciled with Horikita-senpai?" he asked.

"I'm not going to answer that either."

"From the sound of it, you were completely won over, huh? I'm a little disappointed, Kushida-senpai."

Kushida resisted the urge to throw his words back in his face, but anger welled up within her. She hated Horikita as much as ever.

"I—!" she began.

"Oh, it's all right. Don't say anything further. I can tell just by looking at you, you know," Yagami said. His dismissive attitude

lacked some of the politeness from earlier.

Kushida couldn't help but find that unsettling, but she couldn't afford to show any weakness here.

If anything, Kushida was clearly able to tolerate more than the average student, perhaps because of her repeated run-ins with unusual people such as Ayanokouji, Ryuuen, and Amasawa. While she was surprised that she came to that realization herself, she continued to be tough.

"We're done, Yagami-kun. We won't have anything to do with each other anymore. Okay?" she said.

"Please relax. You're worried that I might go around exposing your past, aren't you, Kushida-senpai? That's why you came to check on me, to remind me not to try anything. Right?"

"That's right. If you were to expose me, Yagami-kun, then word would get around the school."

"In that case, would you please listen to what I have to say first?"

"You have something over me, but I have something over you too. I'll tell them everything about you, Yagami-kun. I'll tell everyone that you tried to use me to get Ayanokouji and Horikita expelled, and that despite the polite face you wear, you do fiendish things."

Kushida didn't know if that would be enough of a threat. Even so, this was the only weapon at her disposal that she could use to defend herself.

"So you're threatening me in return..." said Yagami. "I'll keep what you said in mind. Well then, are we finished here?" Whether what Kushida said worked or not, Yagami stopped the conversation there and started walking away. "I'm the leader of Class 1-B, so I'm rather busy with all sorts of things for the Cultural Festival," he said. "If you'll please excuse me."

"Don't forget, Yagami-kun. As long as you keep your word, I'll keep mine."

Yagami eventually disappeared from view, still smiling all the while, his footsteps light and nimble.

"...I really hope this is the end of it..." muttered Kushida.

But at the same time, she sensed that this wasn't over yet. *In that case, what should I do?* she wondered. *Should I just leave things as they are, and wait, and do nothing? Or should I make the first strike?*

"It's no use. I can't stop Yagami."

Kushida had challenged and lost to various opponents up until this point, including Horikita. She had to abandon naïve lines of thinking, like the idea that she could handle him on her own, but she was painfully aware that she was all alone. Even so, the situation had changed dramatically. Her opponent was definitely looking down on her. He wasn't just underestimating her on the surface either. Deep down, in his heart of hearts, he was putting her down. Kushida prided herself on being good at reading into that kind of thing.

"There are things I need to do before I fight him," she decided.

Kushida knew that Yagami wasn't the only problem that needed solving. She had no intention whatsoever of going back to being that kind, gentle honor student, but she had to make solid contributions in order to maintain a stable position in her class.

Kushida Kikyou knew very well how to survive.

## 5.5

I RECEIVED A PHONE CALL in the middle of the night.

"It's unusual of you to call me, Sakayanagi," I said.

I could hear her chuckle softly on the other end of the line.

*"You might be right about that, certainly. Would you happen to have a few moments for a chat?"*

"I wouldn't have answered if it was an inconvenience."

*"I see. In that case, allow me to get straight to business. I'm sure that you're participating in the Cultural Festival, of course, Ayanokouji-kun. My father seems to be doing a great deal of fretting about the possibility that someone from the outside might try to take you back with them."*

"The Chancellor called me a little while ago, actually. He said that I should consider being absent from the festival too, but I had politely declined."

I probably would have been a part of the Sports Festival in the end, if not for the fact that my own absence ensured Sakayanagi wouldn't attend.

*"Aren't you afraid? ...No, that was a foolish question. Let me rephrase. Are you assuming that the people involved will not try to capture you?"*

She was basically saying that, if I wasn't making that assumption, she didn't see the point of deliberately putting myself in harm's way.

"It's a simple matter of comparing actual harm versus potential harm," I replied. "If I could resolve everything by simply bowing out of both the Sports Festival and Cultural Festival, then that would be fine. But there's also a school trip coming up as well. And there's no guarantee that next year's Sports Festival or Cultural Festival events won't also have visitors. It would be simple enough for me to remain hidden in my shell, but I think losing opportunities because of that would be more of a problem."

*"So essentially, you would like to enjoy the time you have remaining at this school and experience it as a normal student would, as much as possible."*

She must have understood what I was trying to say because she more or less summed up my position.

*"Besides, I have other objectives as well,"* I said. *"I don't want to waste my opportunities."*

*"In that case, I have nothing further to add. I think it would be best for you to do what you wish, Ayanokouji-kun."*

I was curious about what she was doing for the Cultural Festival, but I was forbidden from asking her about it. Was she simply trying to win with whatever her class put on, or was she going to abandon the competition? Did she have some other goal in mind? It was possible that she *would* answer me if I asked, but that was another issue. Whatever choice she made was up to Class A to decide; a third party had no authority to determine what was right or wrong.

*"However, you never know when unforeseen situations may arise. Even if the Cultural Festival is safe, we don't know what will come next. If you have any trouble, please come talk to me at any time."*

"That's really kind of you."

*"We can't have you disappearing before our rematch after all, Ayanokouji-kun."*

"I'll be careful."

*"Well then, I'll talk to you again soon. Goodnight."*

Sakayanagi ended the call right there, avoiding any pointless chatter.

## **Chapter 6: The Cultural Festival**

**A**FTER A LONG PERIOD of preparation, the Cultural Festival was finally here. The festival proper began at nine in the morning and students were required to arrive at school by eight thirty. Furthermore, the school gates were actually open starting at six in the morning, so, if necessary, we could make early morning preparations as well.

Horikita and I met up in the dormitory lobby bright and early at 6 a.m. so we could head to school together. We were planning to do some final checks before the festival started so there wouldn't be any issues during the day. As soon as Horikita and I met up, she turned her attention to a box that I was holding in my hands.

"Morning. Could that be the cardboard box that you told me about before?" she asked.

"Sorry that I made you work out a budget for something you hadn't planned for," I said.

"It wasn't a large sum, so there wasn't much of an impact. Besides, each second-year student was originally entitled to 5,000 points anyway, so we should be able to use those points freely."

We passed by other students who had the same idea to come early. They ranged from first-years to third-years, though there weren't that many people overall. We briefly stopped by the classroom to drop off the box I was carrying, and from there, we went over to the maid café.

"Did you see the message from Matsushita-san?" asked Horikita.

"Yeah, I did," I replied. "I'm sure it's got to be especially hard for her, since she was one of the people who worked the hardest getting the maid café up and running to this point."

Early that morning, Matsushita sent us a message and reported that she had to take the day off due to illness.

"Even so, it was the right decision on her part," Horikita said.

If she only had a slight fever, she might have been able to push through it and force herself to work, but it sounded like she had developed other symptoms, like a cough. Being in that condition, she couldn't be entrusted with a job that would require her to interact with customers. Even if we tried to reassign Matsushita now, she wasn't feeling well, so she couldn't be entrusted with a heavy workload. And on top of that, if her illness spread, it could affect the class even beyond the Cultural Festival.

"Besides, we made preparations ahead of time for such situations," Horikita added.

It wasn't enough just to reassign personnel; you needed to understand where to pull people from to fill in the gaps.

"That reminds me," Horikita said. "Have you heard that rumor going around that it was Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun who let information slip about the maid café?"

"Yeah, more or less. But I suppose we could have predicted from an early stage that something like that might happen."

Kei had frequent interactions with the other girls, so I already heard about that from her.

"Yes, I suppose so... I wonder if I made the right choice in leaving them alone."

"Rumors are just rumors," I told Horikita. "In truth, Haruka and Akito didn't actually do it."

Horikita's feelings of self-loathing over not being able to help Haruka and Akito were clear in her expression.

"You shouldn't show weakness on your face so easily," I told her. "It'll only give your opponents an opening to take advantage of you."

"Even at times like this, you're so calm. You talk like this is someone else's issue, even though you're involved too."

I noticed that Horikita was looking at me, as though she were examining my own face. This period of observation continued for about five or ten seconds, and then I noticed that her

expression changed. She now looked puzzled and had a crease between her eyebrows.

"There's something I want to ask you," she said. "Do you interact with any first-year students regularly?"

"First-years? No, not really. I talk to Nanase and Amasawa every once in a while, but that's about it." Since I technically hardly ever approached them myself, I didn't think it was right to say I interacted with them much. "That's all you wanted to ask?"

"Yeah, I guess..." said Horikita.

"Speaking of, what about you? You talk with some first-years on the student council, right?"

"Well... Yes, I do. I've gotten more chances to interact with my juniors now and then."

About three people had been brought onto the student council this year. For a long time, the only second-year student on the council had been Ichinose. The quality of the members aside, there weren't enough people serving. The most recent addition to the student council was Horikita, but that was likely a measure to make up for the small number of members. Though there was no limit to the number of people who could be on the student council, generally, there were anywhere from eight to twelve students at any time. Currently, there were three third-year students, two second-year students, and three first-year students. So, I suppose you could say that they were in keeping with how the council had been structured in the past.

"At first, I thought it was a waste of time," Horikita went on. "With the kind of work I was doing on the student council, I felt like I would rather be in my room, studying, for my own sake. To be honest, even now, that feeling hasn't changed."

It wasn't just student council work that could be thought of like that. Whether you were talking about club activities or a social life, those kinds of things were, fundamentally, a waste of time. While some people might go from being a club member to a professional, and others might turn their social connections into job opportunities, for many people, those kinds of things would become nothing more than memories of bygone days. On the

other hand, though, if you dedicated yourself to your studies, that was likely to lead you to a great future. It was the safest and most reliable option that a student could take.

"But even when it comes to things like that, there are lots of things that you can learn," she said. "I'm beginning to understand that."

"Your older brother was the student council president too," I said.

"My brother's situation was different from mine though. He was able to perform his student council duties flawlessly, while getting impeccable grades in school at the same time. I don't think that he ever felt that the student council was a burden, nor did he ever agonize over whether he was lacking in his studies."

While I didn't know what the truth was, Horikita Manabu certainly was calm and composed at all times. I had to assume he must have put a significant amount of effort into what he did, but he didn't let it show.

"I suppose I am grateful to you, though, if we just consider the outcome," Horikita said. "Joining the student council has helped me to see things that I couldn't before."

I had thought that she was going to thank me for it, but then she continued.

"I've once again been reminded of my brother's greatness. I have a lot of extra work to do if I want to catch up to that."

"It would've been nice if you just honestly said thank you," I answered.

"You need to accept at least *some* grumbling from me."

"I agree and sympathize with you, though, that it must be a challenge to follow in Manabu's footsteps."

I knew I was in no way inferior to Manabu in terms of pure academic and physical ability. It was just a hypothetical situation, of course, but if Manabu were in my same grade, taking into consideration the rules here at this school, then there was no telling what kind of fight there might've been between us. His abilities certainly gave me that impression.

## 6.1

**A**S NINE O'CLOCK rolled around in the maid café in the special building, an announcement was made to all of the students throughout the school: the guests had entered through the main gate and the Cultural Festival was officially beginning.

I overheard a conversation between Shinohara and Ike, who were standing shoulder-to-shoulder.

"Oh jeez," Shinohara said, "I'm so nervous..."

"Yeah, this is the first time we've had any contact with people outside the school since we started here," said Ike.

I suppose that the longer you spent in a closed-off environment, the more tense you might feel about it being opened up. As for Satou and the other maids, they were still discussing the shift changes needed due to Matsushita's absence. Although each of the girls was going to have more responsibilities now, they made the appropriate adjustments to their schedules.

Dressed in her maid outfit, Satou held her hands together anxiously, but then proceeded to smack both of her cheeks with her palms to regain her confidence.

"Let's give it our best... You can do it, me!" she told herself.

Kei, who was going to be helping out behind the scenes, encouraged her cheerfully. "You'll be fine, Maya-chan. I'll be sure to back you up too."

"Yeah, I'll give it my best!" replied Satou.

Ever since that big turning point, Kei and Satou really had gotten much closer. Nothing in the coming days was likely to challenge their relationship as best friends.

The other people I needed to worry about, though, were...

I looked around to observe some of the other students. Sudou and some of the guys on the boys' team were having their final meeting with Yousuke and weren't really bothering to listen to the announcements. They needed to all be on the same page

about what to do in the event that the café got too crowded, or if there was trouble.

After Horikita gave out some general instructions to the class, we noticed that we were short two people. Immediately after she finished talking, the two of us exchanged looks. We were likely thinking the same thing.

She came up to me and whispered in a hushed voice.  
“Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun don’t seem to be here.”

“I doubt they just went to the bathroom either,” I said.

Perhaps it was because the other students were too preoccupied with what they were doing themselves, but no one else seemed to have noticed yet.

“I expected something would happen today,” Horikita said, “but...”

“If they’re just skipping, then that actually might be something to be grateful for,” I told her.

Horikita hadn’t counted on them being involved from the very beginning. So, from where she sat, there was no need for her to get worked up about those two simply not helping out. However, if they were going to try to sabotage us, that would be a different story.

“Them being absent will add fuel to the fire of that rumor...” she said.

“Sure, if they leaked that information and then skipped out on the Cultural Festival afterward, I suppose they’d take a fair amount of heat for it,” I agreed.

“I’ve been keeping an eye on the situation so far, thinking that time would tell, but...I still think I should take action sooner rather than later. We should at least dispel the rumor.”

“I understand what you’re trying to say, but you should focus on the Cultural Festival today.”

“Will that really be okay?” she asked me in return.

“Even if you did make that rumor go away, that doesn’t change the fact that those two aren’t here. Besides, there’s still the

possibility they could embarrass the class in some other way during the festival."

If Horikita carelessly acted and tried to rush to their defense while there were still causes for concern, she'd risk stirring up more animosity. Taking Haruka's side would only be possible when it could be clearly determined that she and Akito weren't enemies.

"...I suppose you're right," Horikita conceded, with a look of painful reluctance on her face. She cleared her throat, as though trying to dispel her concerns. "I'm going to trust that you'll be able to handle the matter of Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun."

I answered her with a silent glance before turning to greet our guests.

## 6.2

**“W**ELCOME!” shouted Satou cheerfully, her energetic voice carrying throughout the classroom—or rather, the maid café.

Our first visitor had arrived. It was a male guest who appeared to be in his forties. A total of six maids, who were all waiting on standby, responded in unison with a bow as they had trained to do.

“Let me show you to your seat,” Satou said.

Her voice was full of pep, but her movements were stiff and mechanical, as if she were overcome with nervousness. Even so, she didn’t make any major mistakes thanks to the rehearsal the day before. After showing the guest to his seat, she brought a menu and a cold glass of water to his table. The only way for her to get back to how she was during rehearsal would be to keep interacting with customers until she got used to it.

Slowly but surely, the number of guests gradually began increasing. We were mostly getting visitors from a similar age range, but occasionally, teenage boys or girls would shyly pop in along with them. Maybe they were family members.

“Guess we’re off to a good start,” I remarked.

It wasn’t like we suddenly had a full house or anything, but it was nice to see that there weren’t too many empty seats. Meanwhile, I was constantly getting calls and texts from my classmates scattered about the school. Which exhibits were people flocking to? What places were empty? Since we wouldn’t know the sales figures for each class until after the festival ended, our only choice was to gather information ourselves, on foot.

Fortunately, each student was required to take a one-hour break, so there were always a number of people on hand who weren’t on shift. Which was why, of course, even our class was conducting thorough reconnaissance. After keeping an eye on what was going on inside the classroom for a while, I decided to go out and take a look in the hallway. It seemed that quite a few

guests had already made their way to the special building, and from what I could tell, the number of visitors outnumbered the number of enrolled students present.

If that man had sent agents here, it was possible that they were among the people I could see. I didn't imagine he would've come looking for me during this event, simply wandering this way and that around the school without having done his homework. But at any rate, I didn't see anyone suspicious for now. Besides, with so many people here—adults, students, and children—it wouldn't be easy to make direct contact anyway. I decided that for the time being, I should focus on the students rather than the visitors.

I saw that Yoshida, from Sakayanagi's class, was peeking into our maid café without even trying to hide it. There hadn't been any visitors from Ryuu'en's class so far, but they would probably be coming to check things out before long too.

Just then, the classroom door forcefully slid open, and out came Ike and Hondou in a hurry.

"We got a food order!" exclaimed Ike proudly. "We're gonna head on over to the stall and pick it up right away!"

"That's great, but I'd appreciate it if you'd dial it down a bit," I told him.

Some of the guests appeared surprised by their actions, thinking that there was something strange going on.

"Oh, I see whatcha mean... Sorry 'bout that!" said Ike.

It wasn't a good idea to let customers—or potential customers—see our workers making a mad dash out of the café as they scrambled to grab orders. After I gave Ike and Hondou that warning, they exchanged looks with one another, nodded, and then set off on their way at a brisk pace. To be fair, we couldn't afford to be late with the very first food delivery either. This process was going to be repeated over and over every time an order was placed today.

"Ayanokouji."

I turned to see Kanzaki approaching me. "Looks like business is booming right out of the gate," he remarked.

I hadn't checked on their class during the trial run, but if I recalled correctly, Ichinose's class was focusing on desserts. They were selling things like crepes and chocolate-covered bananas.

"How about you?" I asked him.

"We're a big hit with the kids, but the adults aren't as enthusiastic as we expected. It's doubtful we'll reach the top of the sales charts."

"You're looking pretty good for someone who is struggling so hard though."

"Yes... I suppose you might be right."

It seemed like the first steps he and Himeno had taken together might have gone well.

"I'm heading to the gym now," he said. "I want to learn from the third-years now and use that information in the future."

"All right. Well, see you later."

After watching Kanzaki turn and leave, I decided to return to the maid café and start working myself. That being said, I wouldn't have very much to do until noon. There was a small break area partitioned off in the corner of the classroom, and I was on standby there so I could respond to any emergencies if they arose. I was also assigned to be in control of photography whenever a guest wanted to have pictures taken. Just a few minutes after my first photography session concluded, other guests who noticed it began to line up, wanting to get pictures taken too.

I wouldn't say there *weren't* any adults here who wanted to make memories together with high school students, but I figured it was safe to assume that the guests were mostly spending money to help the school achieve its mission. More than a few of the guests seemed willing to consider that a kind of job, in a sense. Even so, conversation and laughter spread throughout the maid café, and it began to feel like the lively sort of café that you'd find outside the school's campus.

"We have a new customer. Someone please show them to their seat," said Horikita. Her cold, almost robotic voice stood out among the laughter that filled the room.

Satou immediately approached the customer and began guiding them toward an empty seat.

"Guest number one, this way, please!"

"Well, then... I'll go get more customers," said Horikita.

Horikita, as someone who wasn't exactly good at being sociable, was in charge of advertising outside the café. Though she was dressed as a maid in order to attract potential customers' attention, she didn't smile. I had a feeling that if this were a real maid café, even if she passed the interview, she would have been fired during training. Of course, I had to admit that the idea of Horikita interviewing at a maid café at all was an extremely unlikely scenario...

## 6.3

LESS THAN TWO HOURS after the Cultural Festival began, the maid café had a steady stream of clients, just as we planned. The important thing was how much of our stock we'd be able to sell, especially the film, since we purchased a large quantity of it at about seventy points per roll. So far, though, we seemed to be going through our supplies well. I, the photographer, was quite busy zipping about from place to place in the classroom, and so was my instant camera. The instant camera had cost almost 9,000 points, and since we had to get an additional camera to keep on hold as a spare in case the first stopped working, our photography equipment was quite an investment.

"Okay, we have a photo request!" announced the maids. Their voices carried throughout the café.

I came out from the waiting area, camera in hand, in response. Someone was requesting photographs of Mii-chan this time. Ichihashi, who was in charge of handling payments, immediately accepted the customer's points via her phone and finished processing the payment.

"All right, say cheese!"

After taking two shots of the customer with Mii-chan, a shy smile on her face, I checked the pictures that came out of the instant camera.

"I knew it..." I muttered to myself.

I had a feeling that something was off the moment I took the shots. Now that I looked at them, I saw that sure enough, Mii-chan had her eyes closed in the photos.

"Ugh. I'm sorry, Ayanokouji-kun..."

"Don't worry about it. I'll take another."

It was meant to be a souvenir photo. I wouldn't mind if there was something a bit wrong with the customer's facial expression, but there was no way I could hand over a picture where the maid didn't look right. It was an act of consideration for our guests, and

at the same time, it was an act of consideration for our maids, like Mii-chan. The girls wouldn't be satisfied if we were to provide customers with a bad picture.

That was why we sometimes needed to take two or three shots in a session, even though we only charged the customer 800 points for the one. Anyway, I managed to get a good shot on my second attempt, and I handed over the photo after it was developed. Once the photo session was over, I quickly retraced my steps and headed back to the waiting area. When I thought about it, I had basically been repeating that kind of process over and over ever since the morning.

Anyway... Considering the amount of people here at this festival who were involved in politics, it was the perfect opportunity for that man. No matter how many people were around, he'd be able to devise some kind of scheme to get at me. I was sure that Chancellor Sakayanagi must have figured as much too. However, even as noon drew nearer, there hadn't been any signs of change.

The conversations I had with Tsukishiro and the mysterious student who came to visit me during the Sports Festival both came to mind.

*"However, no matter how exceptional you may be, you are but a child, in the end. You should understand that he sent me in here with that strength of yours already taken into consideration."*

*"I'm sure you're thinking that once you've eliminated Tsukishiro and any students from the White Room, peace will return. I came here to advise you that such thinking is a mistake."*

If I were to force it a bit and connect those two comments, the natural conclusion to draw was that he was going to capture me via this Cultural Festival. And it would be through adults, not students. In fact, that man decided to use Tsukishiro to force this festival to happen, so that should have been the logical answer.

So, did this mean that I evaded him, and he missed this perfect opportunity?

No. Even before getting to the matter of if I evaded him or not, there was another problem—the very idea that he would *miss* an opportunity. Of course, it wasn't like the festival was over yet,

but what if he didn't try anything here at all? That wouldn't be mere carelessness. It would be—

"Ayanokouji-kun, what do we do? It looks like we've run out of Darjeeling tea!" Mii-chan shouted, interrupting my train of thought. I turned to see her dashing toward me with a panicked look on her face.

*Let's focus on the problem at hand for the moment then,* I thought to myself. We had several kinds of tea in stock, but the Darjeeling, which was made from high-quality tea leaves, apparently sold out rather quickly. We had discussed the matter beforehand and decided to get the minimum amount of stock possible because at 1,200 points, it was rather expensive. That tea sold unexpectedly well though, and conversely, sales of the inexpensive, easy-to-use tea bags were poor. Unfortunately, it was impossible for us to buy more on the day of the festival, and we couldn't replenish our stock now.

"Put 'Sold Out' stickers on all of the menus right away," I said. "I'll put notes on the signs we posted."

"O-okay," replied Mii-chan.

Magic marker in hand, I immediately walked over to the signboards just outside the entrance to the café that had the menu on them. They were made from cheap materials we bought at the discount store, but they were useful.

I wrote "*Sold Out Due to Popular Demand*" in bold letters where Darjeeling was listed on the menu. In simple terms, this just meant we were sold out of that item, but this phrasing would serve to highlight the popularity of the maid café.

"There we go..." I remarked.

Immediately after I finished writing that, an arm stretched out on my left side from behind me. What was curious was that instead of the sleeve of a school uniform, I saw suit fabric.

"Don't turn around," the person said. "Take this."

It was a white piece of paper, folded in half. It fluttered slightly in the slight breeze coming in from the window. Just when I thought no one would be coming into contact with me after all,

this happened. It would've been simple for me to ignore the instruction not to turn around, but I silently took the paper instead. The fact that this person managed to get up close to me without me noticing their presence until now showed that they weren't just your average nobody.

"May I ask your name?" I asked.

"That's an unnecessary question," the stranger said.

As soon as I grabbed the piece of paper, the arm disappeared from view. After staying still for a while longer, I sensed someone else coming near.

"What's up, Kiyotaka-kun?" asked Yousuke.

Apparently, he left the classroom to find me because he was concerned that I didn't return right away.

"Sorry. A guest who was a little lost came up to me and I had to help them," I said. "Is there some kind of trouble?"

"We're starting to have some trouble with fulfilling food orders, yeah. It looks like the food stalls are getting more business than we thought they would."

"I see... I'm guessing that means we're having a hard time keeping up with the flow of customers. I'll head there right away."

After I made sure that I was away from Yousuke, I unfolded the paper in my right hand.

*"I've come to collect you. Decide for yourself what you're going to do. I'll wait for you at the front gate."*

The author of the note had even been so thoughtful as to include their phone number. *So, I get to decide what to do?* If that man was seriously going to give me a choice, did he really think I would choose to leave voluntarily? It was unclear just how much meaning this note had. The only thing I could be sure of at the moment was that the person who handed me this note was, at the very least, connected to the White Room. Did this mean they determined they couldn't make a direct use of force, and so were going to leave the matter to my discretion?

Still, I supposed the note could have something to do with the fact that nothing had happened so far. In any case, there wasn't any point in worrying about it. I rolled the paper into a tiny ball, popped it into my mouth, and swallowed it. Paper originally comes from plants, and its primary component is cellulose. Since there weren't any enzymes in the paper that would cause it to break down over time, I couldn't just leave it be.

It wouldn't be a problem for me if a third party happened to pick up the note, but still, there could be some drawbacks if I carelessly kept it on my person. Since I was stuck here at the festival, and there was nothing for me to deal with after the fact, I thought it would be better to take care of it without delay.

## 6.4

THREE HOURS HAD PASSED since the festival had opened. It was now noon, and new guests were arriving to replace the families who visited the school first thing in the morning. Ike and some others had gone to do some reconnaissance, and I was near the school entrance when I received a report from them.

"There! Over there!" Ike said, pointing over to where several girls from Ryuu'en's class were standing around and shouting to passersby.

"We're from Class 2-C!" one of them yelled. "We're in a sales competition with Class 2-B right now, and we're both running concept cafés! If we lose, someone from our class might be held responsible for it and expelled!"

The vibe among that group was clearly different from the many students who were serving customers with bright smiles and cheerfulness. Many guests stopped to look at the distressed-looking girls from Ryuu'en's class as they appealed to customers.

"Please! We need your help, everyone! Please help us!"

The girls had flyers, which I assumed Ryuu'en's class had made, and they passed them out one after another. I approached a junior-high-aged boy who had received one and asked him to show it to me. The flyer mentioned that Ryuu'en's class was running a Japanese kimono concept café on the second floor of the special building, but it didn't provide any information about their menu or prices. Instead, the flyer prominently featured information about the showdown between our classes, strongly emphasizing the fact that this was a battle that they couldn't lose.

"Right? I mean, you get it, right? This is just horrible, isn't it?" said another one of the girls.

I couldn't imagine the girls' heartfelt appeals had nothing behind them. In all likelihood, Ryuu'en was making a big show of threatening his classmates with expulsion.

"Is that Ryuuen jerk seriously going to expel someone?" asked Ike.

"I'm not sure about that," I replied. "I'd say the chances are low. If expulsion were a penalty that the administration was doling out, that would be one thing, but it would be a problem if Ryuuen were threatening his classmates with that without first getting permission from the school... If he did something like that and the threatened students appealed to the school, it would not only jeopardize Ryuuen's position, but it would also inevitably lead to a sharp drop in Class Points for him too."

"That means they're totally lying!" Ike said. "Let's walk right over there and put a stop to it!"

"There's no point. His classmates are legitimately terrified of the one percent chance that Ryuuen actually will expel them. Besides, if you paid close attention to what they actually said, the girls claimed that they *might* get expelled."

Which meant, in other words, that they technically weren't lying to the guests. Ryuuen was always coming up with schemes, and it was typical of him to not want to settle this fairly. It was safe to say that he was striving to get first place instead of just aiming for somewhere in the top four.

"But if we lose, they're gonna take a million Private Points from us, right?" said Ike. "This is bad, dude!"

I would've liked to have told Ike, who seemed genuinely distressed, to not worry, but it was important that we showed the onlookers that he was seriously frightened by this. The importance of this confrontation was becoming even clearer.

"Wh-what do we do?" Ike wailed.

"If they're going to try something like this, that just means we'll have to fight back with a similar strategy."

"You mean you're gonna threaten somebody with expulsion?!"

"No, not that. We're going to show that we, Class 2-B, are also committed to this showdown. We're already prepared for it."

"Huh...? W-we are?"

"Open up those cardboard boxes I asked you to bring along and take a look inside," I told him.

Hondou and Sotomura put down the boxes that they had been holding and then proceeded to remove the packing tape holding them closed. They pulled bundles of flyers out of the boxes.

"Wait, hold on, what?!" said Hondou. "We have ads just like them?!"

"I'd also been planning to hand out flyers to guests to urge them to come to our café, if necessary," I said. "Their class beat us to it, but this should still be plenty effective."

The flyers that Horikita's class and Ryuu'en's class had made would quickly circulate throughout the school. Now, the entire school would know that Class 2-B and Class 2-C were engaged in a head-to-head contest. This way, people would inevitably assume that both sides were making significant wagers. If guests knew about the competition between us, they would also be under the illusion that both classes were facing similar risks. There wasn't any need for me to deliberately threaten my classmates with expulsion.

"Now, go ahead and call all the girls who aren't busy and have them pass these flyers out," I said.

"G-got it! We'll let them know!" said Hondou.

Now, the plan was that Hondou and the other guys would run over and pass the information on to our other classmates directly. Then, in addition to handing out flyers that I had arranged in advance, they were also to notify the boys running the food stalls so that they would know what was going on too.

"Hey, did you hear? They say that Horikita's class and Ryuu'en's class are having some kind of showdown, and they've playing for major points."

"I heard that the leader of the losing class will even get expelled, yeah?"

It seemed that news had even reached the ears of ordinary students who had nothing to do with this showdown. They were

starting to hear about this competition we had going on. Speculation led to rumors, and rumors led to speculation.

"I'm going to head back now," I declared. "Let me know if you hear anything else."

Ike and the other guys were in the sort of position where they could always keep an eye out for changes in the situation, since they were the ones delivering food. They nodded, a dependable air about them, and I left the matter in their hands as I headed back to the special building.

On my way there though, I spotted a girl clad in Japanese-style clothing standing in the corner of the mostly empty corridor, with a stack of flyers in hand.

"Come on over," she said flatly.

The way she passed out the flyers to adults that occasionally walked past her reminded me of the emotionally dead adults that I sometimes spotted at Keyaki Mall, mechanically handing out tissues to passersby. This girl was acting much the same way, simply handing out a predetermined number of flyers in a completely indifferent, uninterested manner.

"Can I have one?" I asked.

"Here," she answered.

I wondered if she even noticed that it was me. She muttered what I *thought* sounded like a quiet thank-you (perhaps?) as she handed me the flyer. But when I took it from her, she finally took a look at me.

"Ugh."

"I never imagined you'd be handing out flyers like this, Ibuki," I commented.

"Shut up. Go away." She shot me a glare and a disgusted look, as though she were being looked at by someone she absolutely did not want to see her.

"You know, I caught wind of the story, but wow, I guess you really are a woman of her word after all, huh."

I'd heard that she agreed to dress up in a traditional outfit after losing a bet with Ryuuen. It actually looked better on her than I had thought it would.

"I guess it's true what they say," I added. "You know, that one proverb about clothes on a horse?"

She glared at me furiously, but she didn't seem to actually understand what I meant by that, which was a relief.

"Never mind," I told her.

Trying to pass out all of your flyers wasn't going to be easy if you were doing it in a place where there weren't many people around.

"Maybe you ought to head somewhere else?" I suggested. "I saw Yamashita and the others handing out flyers over there."

"You must be joking," she replied. "Why should I have to work with *them*?"

I figured Ibuki would say as much. She immediately rejected my proposal.

"Can't you just take all these from me?" she asked.

"That's a pretty big ask," I replied.

"I'd rather just toss these damn things out, stuff 'em into a garbage bag or something..." Ibuki cursed as she stared down at the stack of flyers in her hands with clear disdain.

Despite saying that, she still wasn't throwing them out—probably because she wanted to accept the punishment that came with her loss. If Ibuki kept holding her opponents to things whenever she won a contest but ran away whenever she lost, then there was no way that she'd ever be able to compete with Ryuuen or any other opponent in the future.

"What kind of contest did you and Ryuuen have anyway?" I asked.

"I would've preferred a one-on-one fistfight, but he suggested we play a card game," said Ibuki.

"A card game? You mean like, poker or that sort of thing?"

"Yeah, something like that, I guess."

I didn't really care about the specifics of how they competed, but the fact that it was proposed by Ryuuen gave me pause. Maybe Ryuuen successfully managed to entrap Ibuki by making that challenge. At any rate, I figured it'd be poor form for me to bother her any further.

"I'll make sure to spread the word about you, that you're working hard to promote here," I told her.

"Do NOT spread the word. I'll kick your ass," she hissed, and quickly thrust her leg out with a sharp kick, causing her costume to flutter. I hurriedly dodged it.

She clicked her tongue. "Tch."

"That reminds me," I said, "I've heard that the proper greeting at these sorts of cafés is 'Welcome home, Master.' How about you try it out on me?"

"I'll say it if you let me kick you in the face," said Ibuki.

"Let's just drop it then," I conceded.

She raised her leg slightly to threaten to kick me, so I decided to leave, dejected. By the time that I returned to our maid café, the somewhat relaxed vibe from earlier was gone. Now, we were seeing the biggest crowd of the day. Customers had begun to crowd in and form a line. Horikita had also come inside to help with line management and was directing customers.

"It seems like flyer distribution has gone off without incident," she said to me.

"It has," I replied. "Starting now, this class and Ryuuen's class should be starting to leave the others in the dust."

"Everything is going as you've planned."

"I wasn't the one who added a unique flavor to this thing, though."

Horikita and I nodded to one another, and we each headed back to our respective posts.

## 6.5

MAID CAFÉS ARE A SURE BET, an easy, tried-and-true idea. The fact that Ryuuen had made our plans known to the school might have worked in our favor rather than against us as there were no classes, except for Ryuuen's—who opted to try that kind of thing. Also, we were able to attract customers in an effective manner. That in itself was a welcome development, but we were now seeing a problem that we hadn't encountered during the test run. Thanks to the news about our showdown with Ryuuen's class being spread, more and more people had been compelled to come here, and now we were finding that we had *too many* customers.

The space in the classroom was pushed to the limit. If we tried to cram any more seats into the room, it would only make the situation even more suffocating. Our only choice was to make customers wait, but due to their very nature, maid cafés didn't exactly have a fast turnover rate. It was fundamentally important that the adults leisurely enjoyed their conversations with students dressed as maids.

We could have considered handing out numbered tickets or something, and asked customers to come back later, but that kind of option wasn't necessarily a good idea for a festival like this. Suppose that you were a customer who had 3,000 points to spend. What would you do if you received a number and were asked to come back in an hour? While I'm sure that some guests would be conscientious and come back, I was also sure that most would just patronize another exhibit in the time they had.

Before they knew it, they'd likely end up spending close to all of their points, and since they wouldn't have enough to spend at the maid café in that case, they'd leave. That was an entirely plausible outcome and was precisely why we wanted customers waiting in line to stay there until they were able to come inside and spend. And, if at all possible, we wanted to be able to take in the points they were thinking of spending elsewhere too.

"This isn't good," I said. "Some people have gotten tired of waiting and are starting to leave the line."

A warning light was going off, metaphorically speaking. The prospect of taking a big risk and getting a big return for it was looking dicey. I figured that starting now, we had no other choice but to stop new people from joining the line. However, just as I was about to head to the end of the line, Kushida came over to talk to me.

"Ayanokouji-kun, can I step away from my waitressing duties for a little while?" she asked. "I have an idea."

She must have been concerned about the situation and came to check things out.

"What are you planning?" I asked.

"The customers waiting in line are bored, but they're really interested in the maid café. They're probably hungry too, so it makes sense that they'd leave."

"Yeah, I suppose it does."

It was just around lunchtime. It was obvious just from a cursory glance at the adults who were in the classroom right now that many of them were here for food and drink. Kushida picked up a bag filled with homemade cookies she'd made which we had been selling as gifts in the maid café and walked out into the hallway.

Kushida turned to the customers who were getting impatient and gave them a big smile. "I'm terribly sorry for the wait, everyone," she said warmly.



She then proceeded to pull cookies out of the bag, giving one to each of the customers waiting in line. One of her intentions here was likely to give the customers a little something to hold them over until they could eat properly, but that probably wasn't the only reason. Now that the customers had received something from us, they would feel guilty if they were to leave.

Now, if Kushida were to walk away from the customers after that, it probably wouldn't be too difficult for them to get out of line and leave while shouldering some small feelings of guilt. But she stayed and continued smiling and talking with the people in line. Between that and the cookies, it wouldn't be so easy for them to leave, even if they were feeling impatient.

There were some disadvantages in having Kushida stay in the hall, but the people who were already sitting in the café were definitely going to be spending at least some money already. For the time being, it was more important for us to keep the money flowing beyond this point.

Kushida could see what was going on better than anyone else, and she also knew how to make the most of her skills. What could she do to get as many people on her side as possible? Actions like being emotionally warm with adults of the opposite sex, carrying on conversations that made them feel happy, and at times, some degree of physical intimacy, like holding their hand. And she didn't show the slightest apprehension or revulsion over doing those kinds of things.

The other girls in the café had been giving it their best the whole day too, of course, but Kushida was the only one who perfectly embodied all of the necessary elements of being a maid. Even when she had to occasionally take over cashier duties, Kushida barely made any mistakes, not even stumbling over calculations. She hadn't taken part in any of the practice sessions, so I supposed this must have been what you could call natural talent.

"Kushida's really in her element here, huh," observed Yousuke. He nodded as he watched Kushida go, seemingly as a sign of respect. "I guess it's like this is a tailwind for her, since

she's been facing some serious headwinds for a while now. And it's a boon for Horikita too, since she defended Kushida."

With Kushida was doing so much today, her classmates had no other choice but to recognize her worth—at least to some extent.

"People tend to resent others easily," I said, "but on the other hand, they can accept others easily too. People's evaluations of each other swing back and forth all the time, especially when they're young. It's like they're two sides of the same coin, going from front to back and then back to front again. Still, the more someone flip-flops, the more exhausting it will feel."

"Even so, I'm okay with that," said Yousuke. "As long as Kushida-san can fight together with everyone in the class, then that's fine with me."

"I'm genuinely impressed by what I'm seeing. Don't you think it's incredible that she can do all of that perfectly, right on the spot?" I asked.

"I think that it's the cumulation of everything she's done. Apparently, Kushida-san visited Horikita-san's room rather late at night several times while we were preparing for the festival. I think they were practicing."

So, in addition to her own natural talents, she really had been hard at work practicing behind the scenes. If Yousuke's reading of the situation was correct, then this was another reminder of how valuable Kushida was. It would also serve as justification for Horikita's confidence in her.

I headed back to the waiting area, and then I proceeded to drag the camera around for about thirty minutes.

"Excuse me, um, Ayanokouji-kun? Where is Kushida-san?" asked Mii-chan. She looked like she was in a bit of a hurry.

"Kushida?" I replied. "She should still be out in the hallway, helping with line management."

I knew I told the maids that before, but...

"There's a customer who wants to take photos with Kushida-san, but we can't find her."

Wait. Kushida was helping with managing the line, but now she'd disappeared? Yousuke and I immediately took a look in the hallway, and sure enough, Kushida wasn't there anymore.

Yousuke called out to one of the guests in line. "Excuse me, but did you happen to see the girl who was helping manage the line?"

"Oh, you mean the girl who handed out cookies?" the guest replied. "Some other student came up to talk to her, and then she followed after her. That was about five minutes ago."

"What did she look like?" I asked, interrupting the conversation.

"Um, lemme think... She had her hair done up like this. Pigtails, I think."

It didn't seem like Yousuke knew who the person was describing off the top of his head, but I had a pretty good idea.

"I'm sorry, but I'll need you to handle things here for a little while," I told Yousuke. "Ask another maid to take over what Kushida was doing earlier."

The girl the person described was exactly the sort of trouble that no one had expected would occur, and that was why I understood right away it was a problem that I needed to deal with.

## 6.6

**I**T WAS A DIFFICULT TASK to find a specific person at the Cultural Festival, a place where many people of all ages and genders were present. And it was even more difficult to find someone when you couldn't predict where they might have gone. As I tapped at my phone, I let out a sigh of admiration at the overwhelming information network I had access to through it. Its speed and precision filled me with awe; I had been able to find out their location within minutes of making the request.

Kushida and the other girl weren't in some corner of Keyaki Mall, nor were they by the dormitories. Instead, they were in the back of the indoor pool. When I arrived, I saw Kushida standing there, looking rather out of place dressed in her maid outfit. It seemed like she was having a heated conversation with the other girl.

Kushida walked right up to her and raised her voice in anger, albeit in hushed tones. "Look, stop making me repeat mys—"

"Oh!"

When the other person noticed me standing there, she gestured to Kushida to stop talking.

"Huh...? Why... Why are *you* here, Ayanokouji-kun...?" asked Kushida.

"What do you mean, why?" I replied. "The star player in our line management program went missing, so I'd obviously come looking for you."

Although I assigned a substitute maid to take over line management duties following the example Kushida set, I didn't know how well she would be able to keep customers interested.

"I thought I managed to slip away undetected pretty well. Good work on finding us here, senpai," said the other girl—Amasawa.

From the way she phrased that, it sounded as though Amasawa had been waiting for the moment when she wouldn't be

under my surveillance.

"Unfortunately for you, I'm working with someone rather dependable right now," I told her. "No matter where you go, I'll find you."

Not even Amasawa seemed to have any idea who I was talking about, but she wasn't asking me who it was either.

"I was going to give her right back to you. Isn't that right?" said Amasawa, turning to Kushida.

"Yes," said Kushida. "She's exactly right. I feel bad for sneaking out without saying anything, but I wanted to talk to Amasawa-san for a minute too."

"In that case, you could have just stood there and chatted," I said. "There was no reason for you to be gone for ten or twenty minutes," I answered.

"But—"

Kushida knew full well that our top priority was managing the line and making sure customers went to our café. That was exactly why she was the one handling those duties, giving up her waitressing role to do so. She wouldn't have left her position if it wasn't something serious.

"Whatever the story is between you two, we're really busy with the Cultural Festival. Can't you do this another time?" I asked.

There was no need for them to choose today as the day for this conversation.

"You don't seem even the slightest bit surprised to see me with Kushida-senpai," Amasawa observed. "Did you know?"

"No," I replied. I really hadn't known that they'd been in close contact with one another before now. "But now I understand everything, after seeing that you got in touch today."

I couldn't help but come to a certain conclusion from what was happening here. Even the information in my head that felt unnecessary was pointing me in that direction. Why had Kushida been so stubbornly persistent in trying to get me expelled in the Unanimous Exam? Why had she taken such a reckless gamble? But

if there was a student from the White Room behind it, forcing her to take that gamble, then it wouldn't be so strange. It would also make sense that they were meeting like this now, since people could be traced rather easily during the festival. Kushida's behavior, rejecting invitations from her classmates after class and heading off somewhere on her own, was also consistent with this theory of mine.

"I'll make sure to give Kushida-senpai back to you after," Amasawa promised. "Can you please give us just a little time? Pretty please?"

She still didn't seem to realize that I already made up my mind.

"I'm sorry, Ayanokouji-kun, but could you please let me stay for a bit?" Kushida said. "I really will come back as soon as I can. I need to talk to Amasawa-san."

"I understand what you're saying, but I can't," I replied. "This is as far as it goes, Amasawa."

"You have such a naughty look in your eyes, senpai. It's like you're completely undressing me with your eyes." Amasawa pressed the tip of her index finger against her lips in a seductive manner, but I knew she didn't truly have anything sexual on her mind. It was an act to hide her wariness, to hide that she was on her guard now that I had seen through her.

"Kushida," I said. "Amasawa and some other person found out about your past and were holding it over you. That was why you caused that incident during the Unanimous Special Exam and forced the whole class into it, just so you could get Horikita or me expelled. Or maybe you had been trying even before that."

"Wh...?"

Kushida couldn't confirm nor deny what I just said, but judging by the look of shock on her face, I was right on target.

"Let's not do this now, senpai," Amasawa said. "This time is for me and Kushida-senpai, after all."

"Sorry, but no. Even apart from her work as a maid, Kushida is necessary for the class."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Amasawa. "It's not like I'm really doing anything bad."

"You might be right about that. But I'm not so sure about the other person."

At that, Amasawa's demeanor changed for the first time in our conversation. An unsettling grin came to her face, and she went to Kushida and grabbed her wrist.

"Hey?!"

Then, with her right hand on Kushida's wrist, Amasawa pulled her in close, stood behind her back, and covered Kushida's mouth with her left hand.

"Perhaps you have some idea of who this *other* person is, senpai?" she asked.

Kushida knew very well who the other White Room student was, of course. That was exactly why Amasawa had covered her mouth. It was a precaution to prevent her from interrupting and revealing it unexpectedly.

"I think that you know, Kushida-senpai," Amasawa added. "If you say anything, I'll make sure you're expelled, okay?"

Kushida's face twisted in pain. Amasawa must have been holding onto her arm pretty tightly.

"This isn't like you, Amasawa," I remarked. "It seems to me like you've really been pushed into a corner."

"Hold on, senpai. I didn't say anything yet, did I?"

"Your every action speaks for itself," I answered.

Kushida, who was enduring a lot of pain right now, probably wasn't going to understand the true nature of our conversation. Amasawa herself didn't know how much I understood either.

"Anyway, why don't we have a little conversation ourselves, hm? Just the two of us, another time?" offered Amasawa. "Please just pretend that you didn't see anything and go away for now, Ayanokouji-senpai. We'll be heading back in about ten minutes."

"And if I don't say yes?"

"Then I might make Kushida-senpai unable to carry out her duties," said Amasawa, tightening her grip on Kushida's right arm.

"Ngh?!"

"I'm a cute little girl, but I can easily break an arm or two," said Amasawa.

"Okay then, let's put it to the test," I said. "Let's see if you can break Kushida's arm first, or if I can stop you."

The distance between me and her was roughly five meters.

"Are you serious?" asked Amasawa.

"Well, are you serious about breaking her arm? Or do you think that I can't stop you?" I asked in return.

"Yes to both."

"In that case, you're wrong about both. Let's do this."

Amasawa, smiling, loosened her grip on Kushida, albeit only ever so slightly. At that exact moment, I kicked off the ground and dove toward her. Just as she was about to adjust her grip again and start trying to break Kushida's arm, I slipped in between them. My right hand slid down Kushida's arm to her wrist, and then, as Amasawa pulled her left hand back from Kushida's mouth and was bringing it behind her back, I grabbed hold of Amasawa's right arm.

"No wa—"

Her defensive instincts must have kicked in. In a split second, she gave up on Kushida's arm, shifted her attention to me, and clenched her left hand into a fist. However, I didn't give her the chance to do anything. I quickly moved behind Amasawa and pinned her against the ground, holding her down the way Amasawa had been doing to Kushida moments earlier.

"Gah!" she spat.

The momentum from being shoved down to the ground knocked the air out of Amasawa for a moment and she started gasping. Her labored breathing caused some dust particles to float in the air.

"Oh... Wow... That was a little unexpected..." she managed to say.

"Did you think there wasn't much of a difference between you and me?" I asked.

I could tell that she thought that just by looking at her. Amasawa normally acted nonchalantly, like she didn't care about anything. But now, her pride had been deeply wounded.

"You're saying that I miscalculated...?" she asked.

"Maybe so."

Amasawa's fighting abilities, which she had learned in the White Room, were the real deal. Even up against people with formal training like Horikita and Ibuki, or people who learned how to fight on their own out in the real world like Ryuuken, Amasawa would be the clear victor. However, as for the question of whether she could compete with me on equal terms, that wasn't even up for discussion. If my opponent's skill level jumped from five to twenty, or even to thirty, they still weren't anywhere close to a hundred.

"When did you first figure you could beat me?" asked Amasawa.

"Since the moment I met you," I replied.

"If that came from anyone other than you, Ayanokouji-senpai, I would throw it back in their face and tell them that was a lame joke."

"I'll tell you this right now: you and this other person seem to be thinking you might be able to drive me into a corner and get me expelled, but didn't you ever wonder why I never once asked for that other person's name?"

The smile slowly faded from Amasawa's face. Up until this point, I had never gone out searching for the White Room student myself.

"That's because I never thought it'd even be a fight, Not from the very beginning," I explained.

"You... You're serious, aren't you, senpai?" she asked.

"You of all people understand, don't you, Amasawa?"

If Amasawa were someone who only casually dabbled in hand-to-hand combat, then she probably wouldn't have gotten a sense of it yet. But Amasawa wasn't like that. From the movements she witnessed me make in a period of time that measured less than ten seconds, my victory had been decided by a wide margin.

"You and that other person should have challenged me earlier," I went on. "And you shouldn't have done things in such a roundabout way, involving other people in this business for your own amusement."

"You...knew why I contacted Kushida-senpai, don't you?" asked Amasawa.

"I only connected all of the dots a few moments ago. And now, something that you didn't foresee is about to happen."

"Something I...didn't foresee?"

"Just stand watch by the student council office after three o'clock today. But don't let anyone see you. Do that, and you'll have all the answers."

Amasawa gradually relaxed and went slack, so I released my grip on her. There probably wasn't any further need for force.

"We wasted a lot of time here," I said, turning to Kushida. "Let's head back to the maid café."

"Is that a good idea, with the way things are?" asked Kushida.

Amasawa wasn't injured, but she didn't seem like she was going to do anything. She now stood there, dazed.

"Don't worry," I told Kushida. "You don't have to worry about her exposing your past."

I started walking away, and Kushida hurried to catch up to me.

"How did you know all of that stuff, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

"Who knows? But you can trust me."

"...Who *are* you, Ayanokouji-kun? Really?"

I supposed her question was inevitable since she heard my conversation with Amasawa and witnessed our fight.

"I don't really know anything about fighting," Kushida continued, "but...I know that what I saw just now wasn't normal."

"It's not unusual for people in our grade to study martial arts," I replied. "Horikita and Ibuki are trained martial artists, and even people who've picked up how to fight on their own like Ryuuuen and Akito are good in a fight too. It's just that there's no real contest between a boy and girl."

I tried explaining to Kushida that the only reason I had won the fight was just because of the overwhelming difference between sexes. Whether she would accept that or not was a different matter, however.

"We need to hurry on back and have you help manage the line again," I added. "We're counting on you."

"O-oh, okay, yeah..." After saying that, Kushida looked like she had made up her mind to do something. She bowed to me. "Thank you for saving me..."

An unexpected gesture of gratitude. Of course, when Kushida was using her public persona, it was much easier for her to behave politely and modestly than the average person. She was the type of person who could express feelings of gratitude extremely easily.

"I'm sure you probably don't think I'm sincerely grateful to you, and that's fine," she said. "It's just...I wanted to tell you that, even if you thought it was a lie."

"It's no big deal. If anything, it was just the natural thing to do, as classmates."

"Then it's okay for me to assume this *isn't* a favor I have to pay you back for?"

She strongly emphasized that part of it. I thought about it for a moment, but I couldn't back out now.

"Of course it's okay," I told her.

Besides, even if I did make this into something I wanted her to pay me back for, it wasn't the kind of thing that Kushida would ever be able to repay.

## **Chapter 7:** **What Airi Left Behind**

**K**USHIDA HAD BEEN temporarily pulled away, but now that she was back, she performed her duties magnificently. Her efforts managing the crowd outside the café successfully ensured that the long line remained unbroken, even now. However, we were now finding ourselves short-staffed because there were just too many people. We had clearly been over the admission capacity for an extended period of time.

The maids were still exhausted even after their hour break, and the girls' movements had slowed considerably. There were some free hands among the boys, but it was still a difficult battle for us. While the boys could help out behind the scenes, they couldn't help out as much as needed. We had a total of eight maid costumes. Two of them were essentially considered spares though, and we always had up to six maids on shift at any given time.

Satou and Mii-chan were the stars of our lineup, and they were constantly giving it their absolute best—except for when they had to go on break, of course. Even Horikita, who hadn't planned on being in charge of the hall, started approaching visitors who were out and about, trying to get them to come over. The remaining three were Kushida, Ishikura (substituting for Matsushita), and Inogashira (who was focusing on passing out flyers).

Kushida was out in the hallway working on keeping people in line still, so in essence, there were four people working as maids. Normally, we would have brought in additional staff to help, but we didn't have anyone else willing to come onboard. It wasn't like we could just have any girl help either. It wasn't really an issue of looks or charm—a large part of it was getting girls to consent to it.

I had approached several people like Sonoda about helping, but they weren't comfortable because of both the embarrassment that went with wearing the maid outfit and the intense work.

During a spare moment, Kushida peeked into the classroom from the hallway and called out to me.

"Ayanokouji-kun? I think that the customers are really getting tired of waiting... I don't think we'll be able to ask them to keep holding on like this," she said.

Horikita had been working to serve customers during emergencies (although her primary task was just selecting the food), but when she spotted Kushida, she approached her.

"How are things looking at the tail end of the line?" she asked.

"We've told them that they're going to have to wait a long time, and while some people are going to wait, most of them look like they're going to up and leave," replied Kushida.

If customers came and saw a long line, they weren't going to feel like waiting, and there was nothing we could do about it. The guests who remained in line now weren't merely *our* visitors; they were people who came here for the Cultural Festival, first and foremost. We couldn't expect them to keep sticking around here just because they might feel like it would be a waste to leave now after waiting for so long. That was exactly why we were having Kushida do her thing, to act as a stopgap to prevent them from going, but things seemed to be on the verge of collapsing.

"We have two extra maid outfits, right?" I asked.

Maybe the time had come for us to take out the spares that we had prepared for emergency situations like this.

"Yes, but it's pointless if we don't have anyone who can do the job," said Horikita.

"You're right about that. Can't we have Karuizawa-san do it though?" Kushida suggested.

Kushida probably figured that since Kei was my girlfriend, she would go along with it if I told her to. It was true that it wasn't impossible if I forced the issue, but...

"If I remember correctly, though, she started her break at two," said Horikita.

"Yeah. She's in the middle of her break right now," I said.  
"I'm not so sure how much help she's going to be even if we ask her to put on the maid outfit when she gets back at three."

Furthermore, though Kushida and Horikita weren't aware of it, Kei wouldn't be able to simply get into the maid outfit in the changing room. In the worst-case scenario, she would have to go back to the dormitory to change and come back, which would take another twenty or thirty minutes.

Just then, Ike, after bringing food over to the café who knows how many times today, came over and called out to me.

"Hey, you got a second?" asked Ike.

"What's up? Something wrong?" I asked.

"Oh, no, nothing like that. I just heard what you were saying right now, about being short-staffed and all, so... Um, what do you think about asking Satsuki for help?"

"Shinohara-san?" said Horikita. "But would she really say yes if we asked her?"

"I think she would, yeah. Besides, she's actually been practicing the maid routine stuff, even though just a little bit here and there."

Shinohara had been working with the group cooking the food at the stalls, and this was the first time I had heard of that. Horikita, Kushida, and I all exchanged looks.

"Can you go call her right away?" asked Horikita.

"Yeah! On it!" said Ike happily.

I was just grateful that there was someone who was willing to put on the maid uniform right now. Afterward, with a recommendation from Shinohara, we managed to persuade Azuma to help out as well. That was two more people on staff.

"Ayanokouji-kun, I'm sure you're aware of this, but I have to go on break starting at three," Horikita said. "We're going to need someone to take over when I leave."

"Don't worry about it," I told her. "I've already thought it through, so it's no big deal."

Fifteen minutes later, Shinohara was sent to work out in the café, and Azuma was working beside Kushida to help keep customers entertained enough to stay in line. However, when I noticed Kushida out in the hallway, she still had a grim expression on her face. It didn't seem like she was at all pleased by this development.

"It's hard for me to say that Shinohara-san is the right person for the job," she said. "In terms of appearance, she doesn't make much of an impact, and she's not very good at customer service."

"It's an emergency situation," I said. "We don't really have any other options."

"Can we really not make Hasebe-san take the job after all?"

"Well, before even getting to the question of whether or not she *can*, I have to tell you she's been missing ever since this morning. Officially speaking, she's participating in the Cultural Festival, but she might have already headed back to the dormitory."

"So, you're saying this is her way of paying us back for Sakura-san's expulsion? But she took part in the preliminary discussions, didn't she?"

"Well, sure, she took part in them, in a loose sense. She was observing, more or less."

"Even so, that still means she knows more about the job than Shinohara-san and Azuma-san, right?"

"That's exactly why it's an effective form of payback on her part. Haruka and Akito, who we can assume is going along with her, were factored in as people we could use in the festival, so we made plans accordingly."

"I see... I thought that if you knew all that, Ayanokouji-kun, then you would have considered that those two wouldn't help out in the festival and planned accordingly."

"Even though I knew, it's not like I could increase the number of people we have in the class. Besides, the two of them would've suspected something was up right away if I tried another

strategy. I decided it would've been a bigger detriment if they were to unexpectedly engage in some form of sabotage because they saw I was planning for this."

"Well, being down two people is a bother, but that's all it is. It wouldn't be effective enough for me to actually call it revenge."

"If that was all it was, then sure," I answered.

"What do you mean?"

"Haruka and Airi were both looking forward to the Cultural Festival," I explained. "So that's probably why Haruka decided to stick it out here until the end of the festival. Once it's over, there won't be any reason for her to stay at this school anymore."

"You're saying that she'll drop out...?" asked Kushida.

"Most likely. If two students were to voluntarily drop out, a significant drop in Class Points would be inevitable, in addition to the simple disadvantage of losing people. The class would take a significant hit."

"How much of a hit do you mean?"

"The estimate would be 600 Class Points, for the two of them."

"Th-that many?!"

"Nothing surprising about that. Expulsion, under the rules of this school, has traditionally carried a penalty of that magnitude."

You could say that was the natural response from the school, save for certain extenuating circumstances, such as in a rigorous special exam where the risk of expulsion was high.

"If those two really do drop out, then...my path to Class A will be doomed," Kushida said.

The fact that Kushida said "my" path was typical of her, but she was exactly right.

"It'd be almost impossible for the class to get back on track to A after that," I agreed.

"Are you just going to wait and see what happens?"

"Well, I had been planning on putting together some kind of a plan, but..." I looked down at my phone, but unfortunately, I still hadn't received the notification I was hoping for. "I guess there must have been some unexpected trouble or something, because my trump card hasn't arrived yet."

Haruka's strategy to sabotage the festival—well, her strategy of voluntarily dropping out of school, rather—was, essentially, an unstoppable finishing move. No matter what countermeasures I came up with, there was no way to be able to completely stop something like that.

If Haruka *did* decide to stay at this school and repeatedly tried to sabotage the class out of desperation, like Kushida had done before, then we could have used a special exam's rules to force her out and get her expelled. It wouldn't have been an issue at all to have come up with a strategy to counter her if Haruka went ahead and tried some cheap, petty nonsense. However, she hadn't opted to enact a strategy like that—one that was beyond her means. She knew that her skills were no match for mine, so she had chosen to go with the most efficient option.

"Are you okay with leaving things as they are?" asked Kushida.

"It's not up to me," I replied. "It's up to Haruka and Akito to decide. If they don't want to participate in the Cultural Festival, then there's nothing we can do about it."

"To be honest, I really don't think you actually believe that, Ayanokouji-kun."

"You can tell?" I asked.

"I can," she said. "You reached out to someone like me. You're not going to just abandon Hasebe-san and Akito-kun like this, are you?" It looked like Kushida might have figured out what I was about to do. "The reason you didn't try to persuade them before now was because you were testing them, right?" she asked.

"I didn't know what they were after," I said. "Did they want to ruin the festival? But judging from the fact that they haven't done anything so far, I can more or less guess the answer. I'm going to get in touch with them now."

"Do you have any idea where they are?"

"I've got some things in motion that'll help me with that."

I showed her my phone's screen and a message from a certain someone that detailed Haruka's current location.

"Looks like you've got a reliable ally," she said. "I suppose it's thanks to them that you found out where I was earlier too."

"Yeah. The perfect person to help with finding people and keeping watch."

Thanks to them, I would always know where Haruka and Akito were, no matter where they went.

"But still, at the end of the day, I'm limited in what I can do," I said. "Whether or not I can reach into their hearts is another matter. Anyway, I'm heading out."

And with that, I headed off to find Haruka, leaving Kushida and the other girls to handle their work.

## 7.1

AFTER BRIEFLY STOPPING by the classroom and grabbing the cardboard box that I dropped off there in the morning, I walked through the school building and took the path leading to Keyaki Mall. Eventually, I came across an area with benches that students typically used when they wanted to take a little rest. There were no stalls or anything in this area, which of course meant that there were no students or guests either.

As I approached, I was naturally spotted by a certain two people.

"Good job finding us, Kiyopon," said Haruka. She was sitting down on a bench, and Akito stood near her, staring at me.

"It's because I knew that you and Airi used to chat here after class," I said.

I had received reports that Haruka and Akito were walking all over campus throughout the day today. And after all that walking around, it seemed like they chose this spot as their final stop.

"Just as I'd expect from someone who used to be in the Ayanokouji Group. You're exactly right." There was no smile on Haruka's face as she said this, and she immediately continued. "What did you come here for? I wasn't really getting in the way of the festival or anything, was I?"

"No, you haven't been getting in the way, that's true," I said. "But you haven't been helping either."

"Yeah, I suppose so," Haruka said.

"Look, I do feel bad for y—I mean, for the class." Akito, who hadn't shown his face to the class since this morning, apologized to me.

"It's all right," I told him. "I know what you're thinking when you're standing by Haruka's side."

"Enough about that," Haruka cut in. "I'd rather you answer my question."

"You mean about why I came here? The maid café is much more popular than we imagined it'd be, and we don't have enough people."

"Hmph. So *that's* it," Haruka scoffed. "Well, maybe the situation would've been a little different if Airi were still here. I would have probably participated too. So now, you're short *two* people."

"But if Airi was here, we wouldn't have Kushida," I returned. "That would've been a much more disastrous situation."

"A snide remark for a snide remark, huh," said Haruka.

"I was just stating a fact."

With Haruka's contentious attitude, she tended to trade verbal barbs with people. It was obvious that she was doing that to try to irritate me.

"Can't we get you to help out for just the final hour at least?" I asked.

"You already know the answer to that question. Trying to persuade me is pointless."

"I suppose you're right. I guessed that if you stated a condition for your help, it would probably be to bring Airi back," I said. And that was impossible, of course. "Anyway, just at least hear what I have to say. I'm sure you must be wondering what this is all about."

"This" referred to the cardboard box I'd brought, which I now set down on the ground.

"I'd like you to open this box," I told Haruka.

She cocked an eyebrow in suspicion. "You're telling me that you want to do something now, after all this time? Sorry, but I don't feel like getting involved in anything weird."

With that, Haruka took a single white envelope out from her pocket.

Handwritten on it were two words: *Withdrawal Notice*.

"You don't seem surprised," she said.

"I knew that there was a good chance that you would drop out after the Cultural Festival," I said. "And I'm sure you're planning on going with her, Akito."

"...Yeah." Akito presented an envelope of his own in similar fashion, also with "*Withdrawal Notice*" written on it.

"You sure are amazing, huh, Kiyopon? I guess that's how you were able to get Airi expelled so calmly." Even though she was speaking to me, Haruka wasn't looking my way. She just stared out into space. It was as though she were talking to me from some other dimension, like she had separated herself from the world.

"Airi was looking forward to the Cultural Festival. It was supposed to be her time to shine. An opportunity to change herself and to take that big step forward." Haruka squeezed her eyes shut in frustration and slammed her fist down near where she had been sitting. "I decided I'd stay here until the end of the festival," she said. "I'd stay here through the whole thing, on her behalf."

"It's true that I got Airi expelled," I said. "I also took advantage of her feelings for me, as someone of the opposite sex. I am not planning on saying that I'm not at fault there."

"She needed me. And she needed *you*, Kiyopon. And she needed the Ayanokouji Group. How do you think she feels right now, after being expelled by the person she loves? Have you ever thought about *that*?" Haruka shot back.

"How does she feel? What is she thinking about?" I asked.  
"Tell me, specifically."

Perhaps she had taken offense over my lack of understanding, but Haruka's emotions welled up and poured out.

"I'm sure she's been crying all this time, obviously. I'm sure she's frustrated, depressed, and in pain, sitting in a corner of her room, thinking back on the fun times she had at school. Don't you get that?!" she snapped.

"Isn't that just the version of Airi you picture in your mind?" I asked.

"It's *not* just the Airi in my mind. That's what she's like! Why don't you understand that?!" She wasn't raising her voice enough

for it to be considered shouting, but she was clearly really angry. "I bet you really think so too, don't you, Kiyopon?! But you just don't want to face reality. You don't want to think about how Airi is *miserable* because you got her kicked out of school!!!"

Haruka had clearly decided that I was simply running away.

"Sorry, but I don't think that way at all," I said. "It's none of my business what happens to students after they've been expelled. It's just a waste of mental resources even trying to imagine it."

I simply stated the truth, knowing full well that it would send Haruka flying into a rage.

Naturally, Haruka was deeply shaken by what I said. "You're the worst. Seriously, you are the worst." With that, she got up from the bench. "I guess that Airi didn't have an eye for men, not if she fell for one as coldhearted as you."

Haruka slowly walked over to me. She came close enough that if I reached out with my hand, I could touch her.

"I can't stand talking about this anymore," she said. "Won't you just hurry up and die together with me?"

With that, she thrust her withdrawal notice at me. By asking me to "die," I guessed she was asking me, in other words, to drop out of school together with her. A devilish invitation. Her words seemed to evoke feelings of *déjà vu*, and at the same time, brought back fond memories.

"You're getting a lot of attention over getting Airi expelled, Kiyopon. In a bad way. Aren't you? And besides, you don't exactly have a strong desire to graduate from Class A either, right? In that case, why don't you just quit?" Haruka asked.

Relationships could fall apart quite easily, even from just one single incident. Before today, no one could have imagined Haruka and I having a conversation like this.

"I don't mind you pressuring me into dropping out of school, but something about this doesn't add up," I said. "I can't help but be bothered over the fact that Airi has to go along with your selfish, delusional fantasies,"

"Huh? What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that, from where I'm standing, you don't seem to understand how Airi actually feels."

"I understand her better than anyone. *You're* the one who doesn't want to admit the truth!"

"Don't act so full of yourself, Haruka," I snapped.

"Wh...?!"

In response to my words, which were filled with intimidation, Haruka fell silent. Akito seemed to have misunderstood the situation, reflexively thinking that I was about to physically attack her, and he quickly jumped out in front of her, holding out his left arm as if to shield her from harm.

"It's all right, Akito," she said. "I was just a little surprised, that's all. Move out of the way."

Haruka probably hadn't been able to sense the danger that Akito had picked up on through instinct. Though he was still wary of me, Akito lowered his arm and stepped back.

"What do you mean, don't be so full of myself?" she said. "What about *you*, Kiyopon? Where do you get off talking like that, huh?"

"I mean don't selfishly speculate about what Airi's feelings without her and just say whatever's convenient for you, claiming you're speaking on her behalf. Airi is the only one who truly knows what she thinks and feels deep down."

"No. What I don't understand is you, Kiyopon. Do you seriously think she's fine with getting expelled?"

"It's true that she probably felt miserable in that moment, sure," I conceded. "But how could you know how she feels now?"

"Well, that's... You can guess if you just think about it a little, can't you?"

"No, you're wrong. The Airi that exists in your mind who has been feeling miserable—before, and now too. She *has* to feel that way, according to you."

"...Huh?"

"You're suffering so much, but it's not because Airi was expelled," I said. "It's because someone that was so convenient for you to have around is gone. You wanted Airi, someone inferior to you, to be by your side. You selfishly wanted to play the role of her protector. You loved the sense of superiority and feeling of satisfaction from that. You couldn't get enough of it."

"That's not true at all! You don't even remember what she was *like!*" shouted Haruka. She vehemently denied it, but I could see a faint flicker of something in her eyes. "I'm... I'm thinking about how she feels right now!"

"Are you, really?" I asked.

"I am! All the time!!!"

During the course of this conversation, which I could only describe as something akin to parallel lines that never intersected, Haruka's heart was wearing down.

"You don't know the truth," I told her.

"Well, I... There's no way we *could* know. There isn't any way we can question her about it directly under these circumstances!"

"It's true that there's no way for us to ask her directly," I agreed. "But we have a hint: this box here. There's a good chance that this is what you need right now."

"Huh? I don't get it. That's not what I need," she replied curtly.

"Even if it's the last message that Airi left?"

"...What?"

Haruka had been totally standoffish up until that moment, but just then, both she and Akito, standing behind her, opened their eyes wide.

"There's no... What kind of joke is this? *You're* the one who brought that box anyway. Right, Kiyopon?"

"On the day that Airi's expulsion was decided, she went through the process of having this package forwarded to me. I think it was because she realized what she had to do in the limited time she had left."

Haruka lowered her gaze, looking down at the cardboard box that I had placed near her feet.

"You can tell from looking at the sender's name that this isn't something I arranged, right?" I said.

Haruka crouched down and looked at the packing slip affixed to the box. I was listed as the recipient, and the name of an online store was listed as the sender. I myself first learned about the sender after I received the box and looked at it.

Before I knew it, Haruka reached for the box and started frantically trying to peel off the packing tape with her fingers. After fumbling with it a bit, she finally succeeded in removing the tape.

The box was open at last, and inside was a single maid uniform.

"Th-this is..."

Haruka should have understood what this meant.

"I was supposed to wear this..." she began. "I was supposed to wear it together with Airi... Why'd..."

"She considered the possibility that you would drop everything and wouldn't participate in the festival. Isn't that exactly why she had this delivered to you? To prevent that from happening?"

"Ai...ri..."

"At the very least, you can sense Airi's strong feelings in this message. It doesn't seem to me that it's completely wrapped in misery... What do you think, Haruka?" I asked.

"Airi... Airi...!" she cried out. Haruka took the maid outfit out of the box and clutched it to her chest, hugging it tightly. She sobbed deeply, tears flowing down her cheeks. "I wanted to be at the Cultural Festival together with her... I wanted to give her a little push from behind, since she tends to get embarrassed, and I wanted to show her off to you, Kiyopon...!"



It wasn't like she had excessive demands or expectations or anything. Haruka was just lamenting over the things that she was supposed to have done in the future. I hoped that Haruka would show that she understood now, and that she'd be able to look forward. But...

"This is...wrong..." muttered Haruka. She wiped her tears on the sleeve of her school uniform, stood up, and rejected the message.

"Wrong?" I repeated.

"She didn't get this for me because she wanted me to participate in the festival..."

*I suppose that things aren't going to change that easily.*

"She was just frustrated. That's all," Haruka continued. "She sent this to you, Kiyopon, with resentment in her heart, because *she* was the one who was supposed to wear it originally... That's what this is supposed to mean."

It was up to the individual how to interpret what exactly this maid outfit meant. Since Airi hadn't left a specific message, it meant that the convenient explanation might not necessarily be the truthful one.

"I'm right, aren't I? Because if I really was supposed to wear it, then she should have sent it to me. But the fact she addressed it to you, Kiyopon, must mean that there's some other reason behind it, no?" she argued.

The difference in viewpoint was interesting, and it was certainly true that I couldn't rule out the possibility she was raising. *The chance that she did this to harass the person who got her expelled...* What an interesting thought.

"Wait, Haruka." Akito interjected for the first time in the course of this conversation. "I feel like there's something not quite right about that..."

"Eh? I am right... Y-yeah, that's it! Kiyopon bringing this package here, setting this up... This whole thing might be some act he put together...!" argued Haruka.

"Don't you think that maybe the reason why she sent this final present to Kiyotaka and not you was because she wanted you two to have a chance to come together like this? To make up and be friends again?" asked Akito.

It was true that if Airi sent the package to Haruka directly, and if she honestly accepted it, Haruka and I probably wouldn't have come into contact like this.

"You're wrong," Haruka insisted. "You're completely wrong...!"

"Hey, I was a part of the Ayanokouji Group too," Akito protested. "Knowing Airi, this is the kind of thing that Airi would think of."

"I told you that you're wrong!!!" Haruka turned and stormed up to Akito, grabbing him by the collar. "Don't interpret this so selfishly! Don't you *dare* twist this into something so convenient so you can try to forgive Kiyopon!"

"I wasn't trying to..."

"And besides, even if...even *if* that were really the case, Airi had her place stolen from her!" she argued. "It was precious to her, and it was taken away! That fact will never change, and I will *not* accept a friendship built on sacrifice!"

"But whatever one's fantasies about this situation might be," I said, "they won't have any impact on the person in question here: Airi. The important thing is where she is right now, what she's doing. Isn't it?"

"I know that," Haruka wailed. "That's why I'm going to drop out of school and find out for myself. I'm going to be by her side!"

So, as soon as she finished taking her revenge against the class, she was going to go see Airi herself. Which meant that voluntarily dropping out of school was also something Haruka was doing for her own convenience.

"You're being awfully loud," said a new voice. Her words were calm and cold. "You do realize that if you're not careful, people will still notice you, even way out here, right?"

The newcomer was none other than Kushida—someone not even I expected to see here. She was still dressed in her maid outfit, which made her seem quite out of place in this tense environment. She slowly walked over to us.

"Is everything okay at the café?" I asked.

"We just got a new round of customers seated, so I have a little time before I need to get back," she said.

I didn't know if that was the truth or a lie, but I didn't imagine that she slipped away without permission. The look Kushida gave me, which seemed to say, "*Really, it's okay,*" told me as much.

"What are *you* doing here?" asked Haruka.

She wasn't the only one who was suspicious about why Kushida suddenly showed up here. I was curious too.

"What am I doing here? To get the truth, I guess. Hasebe-san, Ayanokouji-kun told me that you and Akito-kun might drop out of school after all."

Haruka shot me a look for a moment, but she quickly directed her gaze back at Kushida. "Well, if you want to know the reason why we're doing that, it's because of *you*, Kushida-san. If only you voted opposed to expelling someone from the beginning, we—"

"Sorry, but I still don't regret the choice I made back then, not even now," Kushida said. "It's true that incident disgraced me, but at the same time, it was an opportunity to open up a new path for me."

"...I'm going to teach everyone in class that keeping you around was a mistake, Kushida-san," said Haruka.

"If you want to drop out, go ahead and do whatever you want," replied Kushida.

"Don't pretend. Besides, you said it yourself, didn't you, Kushida-san? You said that the only path left to you was to graduate from Class A. That's the only reason why you continue to put up with being in such an uncomfortable environment with

classmates you don't get along with. That's why I'm going to take it *all* away from you," threatened Haruka.

"Your act of revenge against me might work, sure. But is that what's really important here? I can't think that's what Sakura-san would want," replied Kushida.

"Don't say the same things as Kiyopon. Sheesh, both of you... What do you even know about Airi, anyway?"

"Not much," Kushida said. "But I can at least tell that she's not as wishy-washy as you are."

Haruka blinked. "Huh?"

It seemed like Kushida was simply pulling things out of thin air, but...I wondered if there was any basis for what she was saying. The fact that Kushida even showed up here raised another question too.

"Sakura-san was weak," said Kushida. "That's why she was expelled."

"You, of all people, are saying that? You were completely humiliated too... You lost, didn't you?" argued Haruka.

"Yes, it's true that I lost too. I admit that I was weak. But it's also true that it was the same for Sakura-san. Actually, no—she was weaker than me, which is why she got expelled."

The fact of the matter was, Horikita decided that Kushida was a better, more useful ally than Airi. And at the Cultural Festival, Kushida lived up to the expectations placed on her and she played an active role.

Of course, if Airi participated in the festival too, there was no doubt that she would've been popular. But even so, excellent customer service skills and the sort of people skills needed to chat well with adults you didn't know weren't the sort of thing you could pick up overnight. Airi couldn't have compensated for that. And even before getting into that discussion, there was the fact that Kushida got excellent grades, including placing high on the second semester midterm exam. With that in mind, you could definitely say Kushida had made solid contributions to the class.

"Yeah, she was weak, that's for sure... But that's exactly why I wanted to protect her, and..."

"You wanted to protect her?" Kushida scoffed. "You sound so arrogant right now. You're the only one who thinks she would always be weak."

"Shut the hell up."

"I won't," Kushida said firmly.

Kushida didn't care about a little bit of verbal abuse from Haruka. Perhaps it was because of her past experiences, but she was clearly tougher than your average student.

"Ayanokouji-kun, can you take a look at this?" Kushida looked away from Haruka and over at me. "I used to go looking for other people's secrets every day. I was hungry for them. That's because I believed that they would make me more valuable. And Sakura-san was no exception to that."

No matter who they were, if there was a possibility that Kushida could use their secrets, she would go for it. It was easy for people to pay attention to the things that interested them, but it was difficult for them to care about the things that didn't. It wouldn't be possible to continue paying attention to those sorts of things for a long period of time with just an ordinary level of mental fortitude.

"I was wondering if there was any use for her secrets now that she's been expelled," Kushida went on. "However, I found this."

With that, she took out her phone and handed it over to me, showing me the screen. I scrolled down and read the information there.

"This is..." I began.

"It seems like you didn't know this before either, Ayanokouji-kun. Knowing you, I thought you might have been aware of it," said Kushida.

"All I can say is wow, I'm impressed. How did you find this?"

"I did some digging for you in the past, remember? That's probably how."

Kushida was talking about what happened a year ago, before we had formed the Ayanokouji Group. Haruka was looking at us incredibly anxiously because we were talking about Airi.

"You're wondering what we're talking about, right? Since it's about your beloved Sakura-san,"

Kushida said, waving her phone at Haruka in a provocative manner, having clearly seen right through her.

"What is it?" snapped Haruka.

Kushida turned her phone screen off and walked up to Haruka, with her phone still in her hand.

"Generally speaking, I'm a bad person," Kushida said. "But you seem like you're the same way, Hasebe-san. You simply take pleasure in finding someone weaker than you and helping them, right? Essentially, you're not worried about Sakura-san. You're just sad about the fact you no longer have someone to take care of. Am I wrong?"

Strangely enough, Kushida told her the same thing that I did, even though Kushida and I hadn't talked about this beforehand or anything. Hearing the same sentiment from both of us made Haruka squirm uncomfortably, her eyes darting around.

"So, it's just like with your family after all, huh?" said Kushida.

*Family?* I hadn't expected to hear that. However, that word gave Haruka pause, and she stopped dead in her tracks.

"Stop it," said Haruka sternly. "Don't talk about that."

"Why? If you're planning on dropping out of school soon anyway, what does it matter to you if I tell someone what you told me? There's no need for you to protect your secrets anymore."

It sounded as if Kushida knew much more about Haruka than I did.

"I didn't do anything wrong," Haruka said. "I wanted to protect Airi. I wanted to be by her side. Even if I was doing it for

my own purposes, still, I..."

"I can understand how you feel, but I can't accept your way of thinking as correct, Hasebe-san," Kushida told her. "That's why you haven't been able to make even a single proper friend since getting into high school. Or am I wrong about that?"

"I—" began Haruka, before being interrupted again.

"Never mind, just forget it. If I keep wasting time talking to you about it it's going to cause problems for the maid café, anyway. Why don't you just drop out of school without learning anything about it? Besides, it's no use to you now, even if you find out the truth, right?"

With that, Kushida stopped there and turned her back to Haruka.

"Wait!" Haruka demanded. "What about Airi?!"

"You want to know?" asked Kushida.

Perhaps it was because Haruka was annoyed that Kushida had gotten the edge on her, but she aggressively rushed over to Kushida and grabbed her by the shoulder.

"She can't do anything without me," Haruka insisted. "She needed help."

"I don't know about that," Kushida said. "She's much, much more mature than you think she is, Hasebe-san."

Haruka frantically reached for Kushida's phone and practically snatched it out of her hands. She then proceeded to tap the screen with a fingertip. The phone was connected to the Internet and showed a certain person's social media page. It was a rather convenient app which allowed you to share your thoughts with the whole world by posting messages.

There were heavy restrictions at this school to prevent students' identities from being revealed, so hardly any of the students here used this particular app. However, there obviously wouldn't be any issues using an app like that for someone who wasn't enrolled in this school, no matter how much they used it.

The account name was listed as "Shizuku." It was a pseudonym of Sakura Airi's, back when she was secretly active as a gravure idol in the past. Back when a certain incident happened, Airi had deleted the account. However, it was recently recreated, and Kushida found it. Although this new account had only been active for a few days, it already had over a thousand followers.

"No way..." Haruka muttered. "This is Airi's...?"

I had to say, finding that was quite an achievement. It was just the kind of thing I expected from Kushida, since she had a single-minded focus when it came to collecting information on her classmates.

"No, this sort of thing is... There's *no proof* that Airi is the one who made this. Kushida-san, this is obviously a fake account fabricated by you two, along with Ayanokouji-kun..."

"Will you still think that after reading what she posted?" I asked.

*"I've decided to resume my idol stuff after a long hiatus."*

That was her very first post on this new account. Since then, Airi posted about how she had been focusing on her studies, and how she'd been enjoying spending time with her friends. And about how she had given up on her idol activities a while back. The things that had been posted on the account could only have been written by Airi, the person in question.

*"I've made up my mind. I'm determined to try and do what I can. So that I can be unashamed of myself when I see my best friend again, who is so dear to me. So I won't be ashamed of myself after my best friend graduates and sees me."*

"It's true what I said then, about you just acting like her protector," I said. "Sure, Airi might have had her troubles, but she's been maturing at an unbelievable rate after being expelled from school."

*"I finally got an audition yesterday! I was super nervous, but I'm so happy!!"*

"This is..." Haruka gasped as she saw the comments that Airi posted after a breakthrough in a third-round audition.

*"The reason I decided to pursue a career in entertainment is because I want to make my voice heard."*

*"There are hard times, and there are sad times too... But I want to face forward. I'm going to keep facing forward. So, you too—don't give up!"*

Of course, it was possible that someone could have used the name Shizuku and created a fake account. However, it would've been difficult for someone to keep up the masquerade in all areas, when you considered the types of content in her posts. She was even being followed by a talent agency. Haruka had to understand that Airi was the real owner of the account.

"From what I've read, I can't picture the miserable Airi you've been describing," I added.

"You were overprotective of her, and you assumed that you were above her, didn't you?" Kushida said. "But she's made a new path for herself after being expelled. She hasn't just been standing still."

After Kushida snatched her phone back from Haruka's trembling grasp, she turned to me.

"Sorry for slipping out of the maid café again." She then flashed me her usual smile, which didn't really seem fitting for the occasion.

"I thought I was going to be the one doing the helping, but you saved me right away," I said.

"So, you owe me for this, huh?" she asked.

"I thought we weren't doing the whole paying back for favors thing anymore?"

"I don't like it when I owe other people favors, but I don't mind other people owing me."

Well, that was all right. With that, Kushida walked off, presumably to head back to the special building.

"She's a cunning one, all right..." I muttered to myself.

Even after her faults had been laid bare for others, Kushida was moving forward in her own way, trying her best, and was

clearly several steps ahead of the rest.

"...Haruka," said Akito. "I can't imagine that this account's fake either."

Akito must have been looking at Shizuku's social media page on his own phone. He offered it to Haruka so she could continue to read through the messages Airi had posted. Haruka scrolled through them frantically, practically devouring them.

"U-uh..." she sniffled.

As Haruka stared at the phone, her eyes boring a hole into its screen. Tears started pouring down her face. Haruka had believed Airi couldn't do anything without her, but here was proof that Airi started moving forward, all on her own, without Haruka even realizing it. Even now, Airi was trying her absolute hardest to continue on, even though she was surely heartbroken. She was doing all of this because she feared Haruka might have come to a complete stop herself.

Haruka must have been thinking something like "*What a fool I am!*" She realized she simply assumed Airi was miserable after being expelled and was selfishly pitying her.

"I've learned something new from this too," I said. "I always thought that when people were expelled, it meant they lost, that everything was over."

Haruka had assumed that this package she had sent was the last trace of Airi.

"But it's not," I added.

Those who lost could start over. There are people who can begin again from a place of defeat. That was a significant divide between the White Room and this world. But...perhaps even those who were expelled from the White Room could have a fresh start too, much like Airi did.

"Airi might very well become a big star in the future," I went on. "And yet you're going to willingly drop out of school to chase after her? Forget about being laughed at—Airi might not even want to have anything to do with you then."

It wasn't difficult to imagine what would happen if Airi met Haruka after she dropped out of school for the sake of revenge. Rather than greeting her friend with a smile on her face, Airi would likely be seriously upset with her.

"I... I don't know what to do..." sobbed Haruka.

"There's only one answer," I told her. "And that's simply to be yourself so that you can face Airi with your head held high. If you graduate from Class A, things will be different. You have to finish three full years of high school and step up to the plate so you can stand alongside Airi as someone who isn't ashamed of herself."

Airi wasn't chasing after Haruka. It was now time for Haruka to chase after Airi.

"And in case you're wondering, the cost of the item in this package was included in the budget for the Cultural Festival," I said.

We hadn't had any guarantee that we'd be able to use the item for the festival, but having it in place as a contingency plan was the correct choice. In other words, Haruka putting on this outfit and joining the maid café wouldn't cause any issues.

"I'm not going to ask you to do things as promptly and efficiently as the other maids," I went on. "But you should see the things that Airi wanted you to see. You were her best friend. You owe it to her."

Haruka offered a quiet apology to Akito, handed him the envelope with her withdrawal notice, and ran off, holding the maid outfit to her chest. There was only a little time left, but there was still enough for her to have the chance to take the stage.

"Kiyotaka... Will our classmates accept Haruka?" asked Akito.

"Kushida is there. So is Horikita, and Yousuke too. No matter what the situation might be, everything should go fine," I answered.

"I see..." Akito put his phone away, placed the two envelopes one on top of the other, and tore them in half, right down the middle. "Her reason for dropping out is gone. The same goes for me too. I want to stay here with Haruka, until the end."

"Even though she learned the truth, her heart will remain closed, isolated," I told him. "Support her."

Even though she wouldn't be able to smile and laugh with everyone right now, there was still more than a year of school left. The day when she could truly smile again might not be that far off.

"I'll probably get some grief from my classmates for a while too." Akito scratched his head bashfully at that, a small smile on his face. "I wonder what would've happened if Kushida hadn't shown up, though. What would you have done, Kiyotaka?"

"I might've given up," I replied.

I took out my phone and opened the web browser. I deleted all of my search history that led to Shizuku's social media profile. I had done some searching in advance, but Kushida showed it to them first, and effectively too, opening the path to success. The real credit belonged to her.

"Well then, let's head on back, Akito. There's still a little bit of the festival left."

"Yeah... Okay."

It was just around 2:20 in the afternoon, and Horikita's class had successfully regained its missing members.

## 7.2

**W**HEN I BROUGHT Akito over to the food stalls, the guys welcomed him with open arms, even if they did tease him a bit. His eyes looked a little bit red when he thanked them for the warm welcome. The fact that Akito wasn't really the central figure in this whole troublesome issue probably helped the situation. Unfortunately, Keisei, another former member of the Ayanokouji Group, wasn't around because he was on break at the time.

When I returned to the maid café in the special building, I saw that the line was still as long as ever. Kushida was walking by the customers, handing out fresh cookies and greeting them with a smile. A lot of them, both the older crowd and kids, seemed to exclusively have eyes for Kushida, perhaps because they were charmed by her. I felt bad for Azuma, who was also trying her best alongside her...but Kushida's contributions were in a class all their own.

"Welcome back, Master!" shouted Satou cheerfully, leading customers to the entrance.

Two female guests left the classroom, waving to the maids. Without delay, the next guest came in and was ushered to an empty seat. We had originally taken some of the chairs in the classroom out to help the ambience of the café, but now we were bringing chairs back in and rearranging them when we had time to compensate for the number of customers. Normally, we should have been trying to give the guests more space to relax, but we didn't really have any other choice since we needed to earn as much as we could with the remaining time we had.

"Looks like she came after all," said Kushida, popping in for a moment from the hallway.

I waited for the person in question to come through the door.

"Ah... Phew! It's hard to run!"

Haruka had arrived at last, her shoulders rising and falling violently as she gasped for breath. Even the maids were

temporarily taken aback when they saw who showed up, but they had other things to worry about at the moment. They immediately focused their attention back on what they needed to do. It wasn't like anyone was going to march up to Haruka and ask her why she had come here now.

"Where did you get changed, Hasebe-san?" asked Kushida.

"In the girls' bathroom... It was rough."

"I can imagine."

With all the people around right now, Kushida was in angel mode. She welcomed Haruka to the fold with a wry smile.

"...What's the situation?" asked Haruka.

"Ask Horikita-san," Kushida said. "I've got my hands full with line management."

Horikita, dressed in her maid outfit, called Haruka over to the waiting area.

"You finally came." Horikita started with a few brief words of welcome, and then gently patted Haruka on the back. Haruka had a stiff expression on her face all the while. "I thought you weren't going to show up today, but it looks like you've made up your mind. Haven't you?"

Although Haruka hadn't fully regained her composure yet, she managed to catch her breath, and nodded in response.

"You weren't originally going to be working as a maid," Horikita said. "You haven't practiced either. I don't expect that you'll be able to work as deftly as Satou-san and the other maids, but... Right now, I'm happy for any help we can get. We're extremely busy."

I supposed there was no getting around the fact that by joining us right now, Haruka was being suddenly tossed to the wolves, having to face the toughest part of the festival.

"Can I trust this to mean that you came here willing to contribute to our efforts?" asked Horikita.

"Don't worry," Haruka said. "I won't do anything to ruin everyone's hard work here... I figure you probably don't believe

me, though."

"No, I do believe you." Without any hesitation, Horikita expressed her trust in what Haruka told her.

"Why...?"

"Because I can tell when I look into your eyes. Ayanokouji-kun must have smooth-talked you into it. Am I right?" Horikita asked.

"Hey," I objected, taking issue with her choice of words.

"Kushida-san helped too," Haruka said. "I never would've imagined her coming after me in a maid outfit."

"Kushida-san did?" asked Horikita. "When did she even leave her post...?"

Perhaps Horikita hadn't noticed that Kushida was gone because it was so hectic out in the hall.

"Anyway, even if you don't like it, I'm going to ask you to forget about the resentment and hard feelings you have for me at least until the festival is over, okay?" said Horikita.

"...Fine," said Haruka.

"Then we're good. We'll have you pouring drinks for customers when they run low on water, and, if requested, you'll be available for photoshoots too. Is that okay?"

"I'll try my best."

Now that Haruka had come this far and agreed to this much, she was at Horikita's mercy and willing to do what it took to get through this situation. Indulgent demands like "I want to do this instead!" or "I don't want to do this!" would not be tolerated.

Horikita turned to me. "I have to take my mandatory break at three o'clock, so after that point, I'll have you keep an eye on her, Ayanokouji-kun. Take good care of her."

"All I can really do is take some good pictures, at best," I replied.

I had taken dozens of pictures today, after all, and I felt like I'd figured out the trick to it.

Haruka nodded, looked over at me, and took a deep breath. Then she left the waiting area, a pitcher of water with lemon in hand, and started walking around the café. She bowed politely to each person one by one as she went by and introduced herself.

I couldn't say that she did everything smoothly, of course, since she clearly was lacking in practice compared to the other maids. But the adults watched her warmly, with kindness in their eyes. Furthermore, Haruka had an attractive feminine side, and even if they couldn't see what she was like on the inside, they seemed to take a liking to her subconsciously.

"Well, before getting to the matter of whether we win or lose this festival, I suppose our class can finally breathe a sigh of relief now," observed Horikita.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Ayanokouji-kuuuun!" Satou's voice reached all the way to the waiting area. "We've got three photography requests for Hasebe-san! Please and thank you!"

I quickly got my camera ready. I figured Horikita was probably prepared for one final push in the little time she had left before her break.

"See ya later," I said.

Leaving Horikita in the waiting area, I focused my attention on the board that showed who had been requested the most for photoshoots. Kushida had the highest with a total of fifty-six requests, even including the time I was absent. Satou trailed far, far behind her in second place with twenty-four. Horikita had only eleven, perhaps because she was lacking in amicability. I thought that if we were to judge solely based on looks, Horikita wasn't inferior to Kushida at all, but I supposed that wasn't what was most important. First, one needed charm, and second, one needed, well...charm.

"Even if Haruka tried to catch up to the others right now, there's no way she'd be able to get her name on the board," I thought aloud.

As I stood in front of Haruka, camera in hand, I got more requests from someone out in the hallway. It was another customer who wanted a photograph with Kushida.

"Okay, Haruka. I'm taking the picture," I announced.

"O-okay..."

Her face looked stiff, probably because she still felt reluctant to face me. I tried to find a good shot, but...

"Should I switch with Yousuke?" I asked.

"Hold on. It's okay... I mean, I'm fine," muttered Haruka as she raised her hand, as though she were talking to herself.

She didn't have a full smile, but I figured it was still good enough for a picture, so I snapped one single picture. The other two customers had requested two pictures.



## 7.3

**I**T WAS ALMOST three o'clock in the afternoon at last. I left the maid café to make my final move. No one knew exactly how much we had to make in sales in order to take first place. Of course, if we could manage to take in more than half of the Private Points that were currently in circulation, then we would be able to take first place for sure, but that was almost impossible with how this festival was structured. In other words, it was just important for us to earn as much as possible until the Cultural Festival came to a close.

The student concept cafés were met with high praise, which applied to both Horikita's class and to Ryuu'en's class. Our one-on-one showdown astonished many of the guests, and we had successfully managed to draw them into the competition, getting them to support one side or the other in the fight.

I assumed that we were currently in a tight race for the top, as the situation stood. When I went over to Ryuu'en's Japanese-style café to check out the competition, I saw that there had been a new development: there was a long line of customers in front of their café waiting to enter too.

"They're just as popular as we are," I observed. "Business is booming."

They were even more prosperous than I imagined, and the students in Ryuu'en's class didn't even have the time to talk. I couldn't determine everything from just a momentary glance, but I suspected there was probably little difference between our two classes in terms of the number of points we were earning. It appeared to me that they were formidable enough to aim for the top spot, but of course, it wasn't like there were any guarantees to my assumptions.

"Sorry for asking you to come all the way over here, Chabashira-sensei," I said.

I had called Chabashira-sensei to come and meet me. Before now, she had just been spending her points on campus for the

festival on classes outside of our grade level.

"Have you finished spending your Private Points?" I asked.

"Hm? Oh, well, I have eighty left," she replied. "So I've pretty much used them all up. What of it?"

It sounded like she had finished making her contribution to the festival as required of her as a teacher, and there wasn't much time left now.

"That means you're free for now, right?" I asked.

"Yes, I am. All that's left for me now is to wait until the festival is over... What in the world is this all about?" she asked me again.

She looked completely puzzled, not understanding why she had been called here. The Japanese-style café stood before us and was the backdrop to this conversation—that was it. I wasn't going to say anything about how business was booming at their café, nor about the possibility that Horikita's class would lose. It would be better if Chabashira-sensei could see what I was doing and interpret what was behind it all on her own.

"To tell you the truth... For the next hour or so, I'd like to ask you for your help, Chabashira-sensei."

"Wait... Hold on, Ayanokouji. My help? I don't understand what you're talking about..."

Teachers were to contribute to the festival by spending their points on campus, and that was their only role required of them today.

"I want you to become a maid, Chabashira-sensei, so that you can contribute to our sales at the maid café."

It was a solid strategy to win this thing. I tried putting it into words and getting the message across, but...

"...Huh?"

This might have been the very first time I had ever heard a stupid, dazed sound like that come out of her mouth.

"Me? A maid? This is the first I've heard about this..." she replied. "What are you even talking about?"

"That's because I'm just telling you about it right now," I said. "It's just another step that we can take in order to win."

"But why do I have to be a maid? And besides, I'm a teacher. And I'm your class's homeroom instructor. There is no way that I'd be allowed to support my specific class."

"It's not like that," I told her. "Not exactly, anyway. As per the rules for this festival, the teachers are treated the same as guests. Homeroom instructors are not allowed to spend their points on classes in the grade level that they teach. However, those are the only two rules that apply. There are no rules that state that only students are allowed to participate in the offerings that the classes put on. Which means that, in extreme cases, teachers should have the freedom to serve guests as well. It's not the normal way of doing things, but technically, the only problem is whether a teacher is willing to do so. That's all it is. It's not something prohibited under the rules."

If she were to do something like hastily purchase goods for personal use at the convenience store or at Keyaki Mall today, or at any other place where you could spend points, that would have been a clear violation. However, from an HR perspective, there was no need for her to apply for the position of maid, and she was free to help her class.

Perhaps Chabashira-sensei hadn't completely wrapped her mind around this, though, because she seemed to be at a loss for words.

"Should I explain it more clearly, then?" I said. "Let's assume there is a student carrying a heavy load. The student wobbles as they walk past. A guest passing by offers to help and carries the item on the student's behalf, over to the student's intended destination. Would that be a violation of the rules?"

"No...it wouldn't," she answered.

"There you have it. Now, even if we substitute guests for students in this scenario, the reasoning still stands. Class 2-A asks Class 2-D for help, and Class 2-D readily agrees. Would there be a problem with those classes loaning students to each other?"

The reasons for lending personnel to another class varied. You could do it purely out of a desire to offer support. It could also be a ploy in order to cause trouble from the inside, or even as a form of exchange—trading labor in exchange for some other form of compensation. Whatever the reason, if it was permissible within the rules, the school was not going to condemn it. In fact, just from taking a stroll around the campus, I saw a smattering of students supporting other classes.

"There...wouldn't be a problem, no," said Chabashira-sensei.

"It's the same thing in this case. A teacher's willingness to cooperate is in itself not a violation of the rules."

"No, it's not okay. Regardless of technicality, it would still be seen as me helping the class that I'm in charge of."

"Yes, you're right about that. Even if something is technically allowed, that doesn't necessarily mean that people won't get that impression," I said.

And that was precisely why we needed to use clear rules to make what we were doing legitimate.

"We will pay the number of Private Points needed in order to rent a teacher," I explained. "I'm sure that the school has already considered that possibility in anticipation of the Cultural Festival, anyway."

"Impossible, you couldn't... I mean, but wait... Well, yes, it is possible..."

Judging from the look on her face, I'd hit the bullseye. Not only was Chabashira-sensei an instructor at this school, but she had also been in charge of other classes here in the past. It was only natural to assume that the school was taking all sorts of things into consideration, even if this was a kind of festival that hadn't been held before. In principle, Private Points were a powerful weapon here at this school. It would make sense if we could use points for staffing if needed, as well as for everyday items.

"There's nothing that you can't buy with Private Points here at this school," I said. "Or am I wrong about that?"

To deny that would be to deny the entire institution. And it would be like admitting she wasn't qualified, as a teacher. Even if it was far from her intentions, Chabashira-sensei had no right to refuse.

In a panic, she began poring over the Cultural Festival's rules on her phone. "...In the event a teacher is asked to help, he or she must be paid 100,000 Private Points per hour," she read out loud.

"It seems like you're well-prepared, quickly pulling up the rules that only people involved with the school would have," I said. "Yes, that option is what we're going with."

This was similar to what happened once, long ago, when we used Private Points to purchase points for a test.

"Again, it's 100,000 points per hour," she said. "That's not cheap... Are you really sure about this?"

"Of course."

Normally, even if you did ask a teacher to help, it wasn't like they'd be that useful. If you asked them to help with cooking or with serving, if they hadn't practiced beforehand, it'd just be a waste of Private Points to have them help for an hour or so. If a teacher came into a café and started serving, it would be difficult for them to jump right into it. However, if you could employ a teacher in a *different* way, you could get value out of that high number of Private Points you had to pay.

"Are you really, actually, *absolutely* sure?" she asked.

"You're drawing this out longer than necessary, Chabashira-sensei," I said. "Time is of the essence. Even if you don't like it, I'm going to have to ask you to help."

If it got later than three o'clock in the afternoon, then we wouldn't be able to get a full hour's worth of help, and it wouldn't be as effective.

"W-wait," she said. "Okay, I've got it—how about asking Chie? She can do this kind of thing much better than I can. I'm sure she'd fulfill her obligation too, even if it was for a rival class."

"Yes, I'm sure you're right about that. But right now, I'm not looking for someone who can handle the job skillfully. Quite the

opposite, actually—I'm looking for someone awkward. That's because I believe the more awkward and clumsy someone else is, and the more on the fringes they are and completely disconnected from this kind of thing, the more effective they can be."

"I don't get it... I do not understand your logic behind this at all, not even one iota."

I figured that she probably hated this idea from the bottom of her heart, and that she couldn't understand it at all. And it was *because* she couldn't understand it that Chabashira-sensei would work just as well as I had imagined.

"We can't waste any more time," I told her. "We're counting on you."

I thrust out my phone, paying Chabashira-sensei the Private Points.

"And now the contract is in place."

"Th-this is completely unfair, Ayanokouji. Using the school rules like this..."

*I don't think it's unfair at all, though...* I felt that it was a completely fair way of fighting.

"I have no idea how a maid café is supposed to work," she went on. "I don't know what's going to happen."

"That doesn't matter. We're not expecting anything from you."

One simple thing was going to guarantee our victory—Chabashira-sensei, dressed in a maid outfit, was going to be in the café.

## 7.4

**A**FTER PUSHING the reluctant Chabashira-sensei into the changing room, I copied and pasted the message that I wrote ahead of time on my phone and sent it out as a mass text to all of my classmates. I informed them that Chabashira-sensei was going to be working as a maid, just for the last hour. I was also notifying students who were free at the moment to go around the campus and advertise that fact.

News spread fast through word of mouth, just as I planned. The idea of having a teacher at our café made this big news—a truly limited-time event, the likes of which a student could never, ever pull off. The hallways were so abuzz that I knew that people were going to start freaking out any instant.

Chabashira-sensei, dressed in her maid outfit, sped through the hallway at a gallop. When she arrived, she was completely red in the face.

"I-I'm here...Ayanokouji," she panted. "H-hurry up and let me in the room...!"

"We've been expecting you," I said.

Since I couldn't just keep showing her off for free, I ushered her inside the classroom.

"Okay, so, what am I supposed to be doing here..?" she asked.

"You don't have to do anything," I told her. "Just stand still, please."

"Wh-what?"

"I believe I already explained it to you. I wasn't looking for someone skilled. Again, we're counting on you."

And so, I thrust Chabashira-sensei into the classroom and put her to work doing nothing but standing around. She didn't talk to anyone and instead stood shyly in a corner of the classroom. Even if she looked at someone in appeal, hoping that they would

help her, no one could. Well, actually, I would tell them not to. This was the ultimate in eroticism.

Starting now, we were going to have some big changes to our maid café policies. Our biggest concern was the large number of interested customers who we couldn't fit in the space. In order to eliminate this problem, albeit bluntly, we needed to have customers pay a reasonable fee of sorts. We were going to offer "standing room only admission" to accommodate more customers once we exceeded our maximum seated capacity. We were also going to add an additional rule that we would allow customers immediate entry into the classroom if they paid 1,000 points. We were going to suggest that potential customers take advantage of this option, starting with those waiting near the front of the line and moving on down. Only those who were willing to stand would be allowed in right away. While some of the people who were still waiting in line might grumble and complain, that was a risk we were prepared to take.

"Standing room only... I've never heard of a maid café with that kind of thing before," said one person in line.

"I guess they're calling it secondary space or something," said another.

We created a standing area on the side of the podium where we couldn't set up desks, and another in the area at the rear of the classroom. This would allow people to come into the café even if we couldn't fit any more desks and chairs inside.

We were also offering photography sessions with Chabashira-sensei for 2,000 points. That was more than double the price of photography sessions with a student. I quickly wrote the offering down on the board at the entrance to the café.

"Oh, wow, that's expensive... Are people really going to buy that, at that price?" Kushida wondered aloud.

"Take a look behind you," I replied.

Kushida had been staring intently at the board as I scribbled on it and turned around. When she did, she saw customers paying for standing room admission one after another, pouring into the café. It was like they were being sucked into the classroom. Even

the current teachers and staff were keenly interested, as this was the sort of thing they wouldn't see happening ever again. Although homeroom teachers were prohibited from spending Private Points on classes within the grade level that they taught in, there was still an overwhelmingly huge number of teachers employed at this school who were in charge of classes outside of our grade.

And on top of that, even the adults who worked at Keyaki Mall had a strong mental image of Chabashira-sensei as a straitlaced, hard-nosed teacher from what they saw of her in their everyday business. More and more and more adults came through the door, almost like a wave of people crashing into the room.

"Jeez, it kind of feels like this is completely overshadowing all the hard work the maids have put in... It's a little depressing," muttered Kushida.

Some of the adults from the outside world might not have fully understood the significance of this phenomenon, but if you consider the idea of "it doesn't hurt to just take a look," well... Even if someone didn't really understand what the big deal was, limited-time offers are tempting, and they'd be hit with an overwhelming urge to rush on over.

The maid café was now overflowing with standing-room customers—at first there were over ten people, and then more than twenty. The long line outside the café wasn't growing shorter though. Instead, even more people were coming.

"Th-there's an incredible number of people here, Ayanokouji-kun!" Kushida was visibly astonished by what she saw, pulling back from the swarm of people coming in.

"Yeah. To be honest, even I didn't think that we'd get this many."

"When did you come up with such an incredible idea, anyway?" she asked.

"About two weeks ago," I said. "I figured it could be the ace up our sleeve for the Cultural Festival."

"How do you think it would have gone if you did this earlier in the day...?"

"I think that if we did it earlier, it might've had a lasting effect, sure," I said. "We could have been able to keep it up for two or three hours, but there would've been a problem. If we did this for a longer period, other classes would have been able to try something similar."

"Oh, I see what you mean... Since there's less than an hour left, even if the others wanted to try something similar, they couldn't."

If other classes had also done something like this and used a faculty member, then the effect would've been diminished.

"If we were going to put this plan into action, we'd only be able to make it feel like a premium, limited experience by having it during the last hour of the festival," I reasoned.

Also, the fact that Kushida and the other maids had spread the good word about our maid café and people thought of us positively as a result had helped too.

"I see..." mused Kushida. "There's really no way I could win."

"Hm?"

"I'm just reminded again of how amazing you are, Ayanokouji-kun. You're incredibly nasty to go up against as an enemy."

"Your eyes aren't smiling, Kushida," I pointed out.

"Maybe that's because while half of me is glad that we're classmates, the other half of me is ticked off?"

She said half and half, but I had a hunch that the latter feeling was stronger than the former.

"No pushing, please!" Sudou shouted. "Line up here! Again, please, no pushing!"

Sudou and the other guys rushed to create a human wall, trying to get the customers to form an orderly line, but there were adults fumbling into the room like they were trying to desperately sneak a peek. It ended up looking more like a mob. Still, that was part of their job too.

The inside of the café was thoroughly concealed from view from the outside, and the interior windows were locked too. The only way for someone to sneak a peek inside would be to break a window. No adult would try such a thing, of course, so they were forced into an orderly line.

As we were doing this, however, there seemed to be no end to the number of people who wanted pictures of Chabashira-sensei. Both standing-room-only customers who recently came into the café and those who had already been here raised their hands one after another, hoping for a photoshoot.

"She might end up becoming the top earner in sales in just this one hour...even though she didn't do anything," said Kushida.

"Excuse me, but we can't fit any more people!" Mii-chan's agonized wails reached me and Kushida where we stood, informing me that the secondary spaces had been filled.

"I guess this is it, right? The number of people hasn't gone down at all and there doesn't seem to be any sign that anyone's going to leave. That's a shame for the people still waiting," said Kushida, adding that she wondered if we ought to be satisfied with the number of standing-room-only customers we were able to bring in.

"It's not over yet," I said. "The people who are waiting in line right now are there because they still have money. I'm not going to let them leave."

"But what are... You aren't thinking of bringing desks out into the hall, are you?" she asked. "There are dishes and stuff on the tables, so that would be really tough... And it would take a lot of time and effort to move things..."

Either way, it was obvious that there was no more room for guests in the classroom.

"We're going to start putting the tertiary space to use, starting now," I replied.

"Tertiary...?" Kushida repeated.

I turned to the customers waiting in line and called out to them.

"I'm terribly sorry, everyone, but the café is full, and we cannot admit any more customers," I announced.

Once I made that declaration, disappointment was clear in the eyes of adults all over.

"However, for those of you who have at least one single point left at this time, you may still view the café interior from this location by paying us all of the points you have on hand," I added.

By "this location," I was referring to the hallway where we stood, where customers were standing in line for the maid café. By opening the door, removing the coverings that we put up, and opening the windows, we could expand the classroom space in a sense, making it into a pseudo-open area.

"Y-you're using the hallway?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"That's right."

"B-but wait a minute, spend *all* of their points?" she said. "Okay, if someone only has a small number of points left in their total budget, that would be one thing...but what about people who can pay a lot? What about them?"

It seemed like not even Chabashira-sensei could imagine that many people would give us all of their points.

"There's no problem," I said. "I don't know if it would be worth a large number of points, but there isn't much time left in this event. Even if, hypothetically, someone had close to 10,000 points left, the big question would be *where* they could even spend those points."

"Ah, I see... If I remember correctly, any remaining points will be returned to the school after the festival is over," said Chabashira-sensei.

"That's right. That's why I'm notifying the customers like this, so they can use them all up if they want to. It's better for people to spend all of their points here rather than to not have anywhere else to go spend their points and ultimately end up losing them. It's not an exaggeration to say that to the adults here, one point and ten thousand points are of equal value."

If anything, the more points someone had, the more they might feel that they needed to spend them here and now. Furthermore, many of the adults who have been here for a long time were still waiting in line.

"We will process payments for anyone interested in order, so we ask that you please wait where you are," I told the people in line.

Once I announced that, I sent out a few people to go through the line and collect payments. Then, we lined up those adults in the hallway and guided them to a spot where they could see into the classroom.

"Now then, all we've got to do is open up the curtains that we've been using to hide the space until now," I thought aloud.

And by doing just that, the new tertiary space was ready. When we opened up all of the curtains all at once, Chabashira-sensei was shocked. I was sure that to her, this must have felt like some sort of public execution. But since we paid the school for this, there wasn't any need to feel bad for her.

"O-oh, I see..." said one of the teachers.

The teachers who had been gossiping about Chabashira's transformation just moments ago sounded deeply impressed. I was sure that seeing her dressed up this way—a single member of the opposite sex, someone that they were close to as colleagues, and who they had never seen like this before—must have been intensely stimulating.

And so, we continued publicly showing off Chabashira-sensei like this, using the hallway as extra space, until four o'clock in the afternoon.

In the end, Chabashira-sensei surpassed Kushida in photography session requests with a total of sixty-three, thereby taking the top spot.

## **Chapter 8: Unseen Characters**

**M**Y TURN AT THE CULTURAL FESTIVAL had come to an end at three o'clock in the afternoon. Now that our hidden gem had made its exciting appearance, I exited the classroom, leaving things to Ayanokouji-kun to handle.

"At any rate... I never imagined that we'd really, honestly turn Chabashira-sensei into a maid," I thought aloud.

Ayanokouji-kun and I had discussed all of the preparations for the festival in advance. He told me that Chabashira-sensei was going to be featured in the final hour, but I was only half-convinced that it would actually happen. But he had just shown me that it was actually playing out, and he was working to get incredible results out of it. When I walked out into the hallway, I clearly witnessed when talk about Chabashira-sensei dressed in a maid outfit began to spread like wildfire.

At any rate, Chabashira-sensei's involvement was a favorable event for me, personally. The large amount of attention that was drawing people to the special building would inevitably pull people away from other exhibits.

After sending a message to a certain someone on my phone and making sure that it had been read, I decided to head to the student council office. I wanted to check the meeting minutes once more. I could ask Yagami-kun to let me see on the day of the student council meeting, but he wouldn't just let me calmly observe him writing.

The culprit behind this was someone indirectly working at getting Ayanokouji-kun expelled. This person seemed to have some connection to Amasawa-san too. They also were extremely dangerous and had a very high level of physical ability. If Yagami-kun was the culprit, and if I asked him to show me the meeting minutes again, he'd realize that I was suspicious of him. Well, actually... If I was operating on the assumption that Yagami-kun

was the culprit, it would be best for me to also assume that he already realized as much.

Anyway, in order for me to make sure of things without him realizing it, it was necessary for me to choose a time when no one was around. The student council had been shut down for a while thanks to President Nagumo's circumstances, so while opportunities for me to sneak a peek at Yagami-kun taking meeting minutes were limited, I also didn't have to bother with clearing people out of the room. That had already been done for me, and I figured that my chance had come with the arrival of the Cultural Festival.

I had told Chabashira-sensei that I had most likely forgotten my notebook in the student council office this morning, and she gave me permission to go to the faculty office during my break to get the key and pick it up. Even if someone were to see me entering the student council office, I had a just cause for being there. After quickly changing out of the maid outfit and into my school uniform, I strode over to the faculty office, alone.

"About fifty minutes left..." I muttered to myself.

As I walked to the student council office, I looked up at the clock in the hallway and exhaled. At any rate, today had certainly been busy. It wasn't over quite yet, but I was finished with my role. Right now, I needed to take my hour-long break, but as soon as my break was over, the Cultural Festival would be over too. I had really been busy ever since I put on my maid outfit in the morning, and I worked without stopping since then. Now, dressed in my regular uniform, I walked up to the student council office and quietly inserted the key into the lock on the door.

Everyone was busy with the Cultural Festival, so no one was in the student council office. It wouldn't be difficult for me to review the meeting minutes again and to take pictures with my phone. Or that's what I had thought, anyway.

Just then, my phone started vibrating in my pocket, and I realized I was receiving a call. My heart practically jumped out of my chest when I saw the caller ID: Yagami Takuya.

*Why am I getting a call from him now...?*

Even though I felt like this was a terrifying coincidence, I answered the call anyway.

"Hello?" I asked.

*"Horikita-senpai."*

I was expecting to hear Yagami-kun's voice from over the phone, but the voice I heard also came from just a short distance away. He was right here. The very last person I wanted to see right now was facing me, waving to me with a smile on his face. I felt chills all throughout my body, as if someone had dumped ice cold water directly onto my heart.

"Did I startle you?" He hung up his phone and took a step toward me.

"Why are you here, Yagami-kun?"

"Why am I here...?" he repeated. "That's what you're asking? Are you not bothered by the fact I called you when I was standing nearby?"

I was so focused on other things that I completely forgot to point that out. It was as if Yagami-kun was trying to determine just how upset and panicked I was.

"By the way, why are *you* here, senpai? This is such a deserted place," Yagami-kun asked. "Isn't this the time to be making the final push for the Cultural Festival, as the event enters its climax?"

"I'm on my break now, so my role in the Cultural Festival is over," I responded. "I just wanted to be alone for a little while."

"You took your break starting at three in the afternoon? That's a rather unusual choice, isn't it?"

*Was it that unusual?* I didn't have any criteria to make a judgment like that because I had never experienced a festival like this before. However, since the rules stated that all participants were required to take an hour-long break, there must have been at least a certain percentage of students who chose to take their break starting at three like I did. But as soon as my train of thought led me to that answer, I fell silent for a few seconds. Then, I realized something.

What Yagami-kun had just said, about it being unusual, was neither the truth nor a lie. It was nothing more than a statement that he made to try to find out whether I simply chose three o'clock as my break time unintentionally, or if I had chosen this time with a specific purpose in mind.

The fact was, I wasn't able to answer him immediately because what he was doing was rattling me. No matter how I responded to him now, I might have already fallen into his trap. Since I was already late in commenting on what he said, I had the option of ignoring it and moving on. I had no other choice but to just let his off-putting choice of words slide off me for the time being.

"Why are you here, Yagami-kun?" I asked.

"I saw you with this rather grim look on your face, Horikita-senpai," he said. "I got curious, so I followed you."

"From when? Whatever your reason, following a girl around isn't very admirable behavior."

"Well, I tried to call out to you, but I suppose you didn't hear me over all of the hustle and bustle."

It was certainly true that I had been lost in thought as I was walking here, but that didn't mean that I wouldn't have noticed if he had called out to me. I couldn't help but feel that he was trying to fluster me, like before. But maybe there was some kind of real meaning to this sequence of events. Besides, he could have called out to me any number of times before I had gotten here. Or perhaps he hadn't been following me at all, but rather had been waiting in this area from the beginning...?

All of that was based on the assumption that Yagami-kun was indeed the person I had been trying to track down—the person with the neat handwriting. If he had nothing to do with that after all, then I supposed I was being suspicious of him enough to the point where I would need to earnestly and profusely apologize to him later.

"Is it okay for you to be away from the festival?" I asked.

"I'm in the same position as you," he said. "I've finished what I needed to do; my role is finished. It's not my 'break,' technically, but more like free time, I suppose. There is no rule that states that you cannot be on break for more than an hour."

So it was really a simple coincidence after all, then? *No, I shouldn't operate on that assumption now.* If I found out later that this was all a coincidence, then it wouldn't be a problem. But if it wasn't actually a coincidence, and I assumed it was, I'd be in trouble.

"Do you have business in the student council office? I believe it's locked, and I don't think anyone is in either," he added, looking over at the door, almost as though he anticipated what was going on.

"I'm looking for something," I replied. "I borrowed the key from the faculty office, so there isn't any problem."

"You're looking for something, hm? In that case, I'll give you a hand."

Feelings of calmness and impatience were fighting with one another in my mind, competing for dominance. I couldn't make a clear judgment as to whether his statement was made simply out of good intentions or if there was some malicious intent behind it.

"It's not something I really need help with though," I told him.

"But it's something important enough that you'd go through the trouble of searching for it while the Cultural Festival is going on, isn't it?" he asked.

With that remark, it was like he had stripped my thoughts bare and could see right through me. There wasn't any point in wasting any more time standing here. I figured I'd just go ahead and tell Yagami-kun the same lie that I told the teachers.

"It's my notebook," I said. "I bought it a little while ago, but I can't find it anywhere. I worry that someone might have picked it up and read it, which isn't good for my mental health. I was about to give up on finding it, but it was still bothering me. The student council office is pretty much the only place I haven't looked."

"In that case, I'll help you search. I'm sure that things will be hectic once the festival is over. And besides, simply put, it would be twice as efficient to search with two people rather than one."

"Y-yes, you're right," I replied.

I slowly unlocked the door and opened it. Yagami-kun was standing directly next to me. I took a step ahead of him, moving to enter the room, but I suddenly stopped.

"Horikita-senpai?"

"Do we really need two people to search for a missing item in the student council office?" I asked. "Or is there something else you're after?"

"Huh...?"

Under these circumstances, I made the deliberate choice to fight back.

"I refused your offer to help before because honestly, I felt a little scared," I said.

"You're scared of me...? Why?"

"You don't know?"

"Nothing comes to mind..." he said.

"There's no one in the student council room right now. You said that you called out to me, but I didn't notice you. From what you said, you followed me here, and now we'd be all alone, just the two of us. Do you know what that means for a girl?"

I was attacking him not from my personal position as Horikita Suzune, but instead, I was using the angle of gender differences in society. Regardless of whether his intentions were good or bad, this would surely get him to go away.

"I-I see. I'm sorry, I hadn't considered that at all... I see..."

And with that, he wouldn't be able to thoughtlessly come into the student council office. He would have no other choice but to wait outside in the hall. If he did come into the office now, then it would be considered creepy.

"I'm terribly sorry. I acted incorrectly." Yagami-kun bowed deeply. "However, might I ask you just one more thing, at the risk of sounding rude?"

"What is it?"

He still had his head down. I wondered what he was going to say to me now, at this stage.

He began talking, lifting his face up. "Horikita-senpai, is your real intention in coming to the student council office—"

In that same instant, he suddenly collapsed right in front of my eyes, as though his upper body suddenly broke and bent. A second later, I realized that someone else was responsible for that.

"Caught you!"

That voice belonged to none other than Ibuki-san, still dressed in her Japanese-style outfit.



"W-wait, what are you doing, Ibuki-san?!" I gasped.

"Don't just stand around like an idiot!" she hissed. "Quick, let us in, Horikita! It'll be bad news if someone sees!"

It certainly *would* be a big problem if we were seen, because what she was doing would appear to be an obvious act of violence to anyone. I opened the door to the student council office and Ibuki-san forcefully pushed Yagami-kun inside.

The first person to speak was, of course, Yagami-kun, the victim in this.

"Wh-what are you doing...?" he asked.

I could see Ibuki-san standing behind Yagami-kun. By detaining him, she was making a mess of the situation.

"Well, well, you've been saved again thanks to my handiwork, eh, Horikita?" she said.

"You saved me? He wasn't doing anything, though..."

"Hey, *you're* the one who told me to pay close attention to this guy. And besides, he was hounding you. Anyone would think that there was something going on."

She blurted out all sorts of things that didn't need to be said all at once. Her single-minded behavior rendered the entire conversation I had with Yagami-kun up until that point totally useless. Seriously, her declaring that outright in front of the person I had *told* her to be wary of was complete and utter nonsense.

"Um, excuse me, but why are you paying close attention to me, exactly?" asked Yagami-kun. It was an entirely natural question to ask as he remained in Ibuki-san's grasp, unable to move.

Now that things had come to this, I figured that I had no other choice but to just tell him everything.

"...I apologize for Ibuki-san assaulting you like this," I said. "However, there has been something bothering me about you. I wonder if you remember when you showed me your meeting minutes the other day."

"You're referring to the remarks that Student Council President made, yes?" he replied.

"Yes. I wanted to see what you wrote back then one more time."

"What I wrote? I don't quite understand, but are you saying that what you're *really* looking for is the meeting minutes notebook?" Yagami-kun looked puzzled, but he continued speaking. "You say that you wanted to see what I wrote, but what's your true purpose in doing so?"

Though I was still wondering what Yagami-kun was about to say before Ibuki-san appeared, I continued my own explanation. I told him how a piece of paper had been slipped inside my tent during the Uninhabited Island Special Exam, and about how I was trying to find out who the sender of that note was.

Yagami-kun, still restrained, listened silently for a while. "And that's because my handwriting, which you saw in the meeting minutes, is similar to the handwriting on that note, then? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, exactly."

"If what you say is true, then I can certainly understand your wariness of me," he said. "And I suppose that, yes, it might have been best that you elected to come here now, at this time of day, if you were trying to secretly confirm your suspicions."

In the days leading up to the festival, everyone had been busily preparing for it, so people were constantly coming and going on Saturdays and Sundays. Students were constantly walking all over campus looking for stall locations, so I couldn't come to the student council office to confirm my suspicions then.

"However, I'm not the one who sent you that letter," stated Yagami-kun. He denied it categorically. Part of me wanted to believe him...but I noticed that in his response, when he was unable to come out and admit that it was him, he started speaking a little more emphatically. "Do you have any reason to doubt me, perchance?" he asked.

"No, I'm afraid I don't have any grounds for doubting you," I said. "But I suppose it's not like I'd expect you'd honestly admit to it either."

"Would you mind letting me take a look at the piece of paper in question?" he asked. "That way, we could compare the writing on the paper to my meeting minutes, and I should be able to prove my innocence."

"I'm afraid that it's impossible, unfortunately. There was a little incident, and I ended up losing the paper."

It had actually been torn to shreds by Amasawa-san, whom Ibuki-san and I fought with on the island.

"Well, that's certainly a pickle," said Yagami-kun. "Does that mean that there's no way I can prove my innocence?"

"That's why I wanted to double-check the meeting minutes," I told him.

"But when you say that, you'd still just be seeing if it's consistent with what you picture in your memory, right? If anything, I'd say that you suspect me rather strongly right now, Horikita-senpai. That being the case, I would think that there's a not insignificant possibility of you misremembering it to better suit your case and deem me the culprit. This is clearly a very disadvantageous situation for me."

"...You might be right about that, yes," I admitted.

I didn't want Yagami-kun to be the one, but I had to admit that my desire to identify a culprit was very strong. I could understand why he'd be concerned about what was going to happen next.

"While it is upsetting and regrettable that you suspect me, could I at least ask that you let go of my arm for now?" he said. "In any case, I can't imagine that you two carrying on in this position would be a very welcome development. How would you excuse your behavior if Student Council President Nagumo saw this situation?"

As it stood, we were restraining a first-year boy for no reason. It was certainly true that this wouldn't look good for us at

all. It would've been a different matter had he assaulted me or something, but he truly hadn't done anything here.

"Ibuki-san, let go of his arm," I ordered.

Even so, her expression remained stern as she kept a firm grip on him. She didn't show any signs of relaxing her hold.

"Sorry, but I'm not gonna do that," she replied.

"Why not?" asked Yagami-kun.

"Because my intuition's telling me that harmless-looking guys like you are actually more dangerous."

That was something she had learned from dealing with Ayanokouji-kun in the past, but it was clear from Ibuki-san's behavior that her issue here wasn't simply a matter of Yagami-kun's physical appearance.

"Do you have some basis for thinking so?" he asked.

"I mean, yeah, at just a glance, most people will think you look like a thin, gangly little guy. There's just this whole crazy vibe coming off of you, though. You're not just some scrawny punk who does nothing but study all the time, are you?"

I wondered if that was something that wasn't conveyed visually, and instead something that Ibuki-san could sense because she was touching him directly. There was that part about the high possibility that the person we were looking for was very skilled. If Yagami-kun really was a talented fighter, that would naturally make him even more of a suspect.

"Your handwriting is exceptionally similar to the writing on the message I received, Yagami-kun," I said. "In addition to that, there are your hidden physical abilities. And on top of that, there's the fact that you suddenly appeared here and now."

"It's true that I'm not averse to working out. I do have some degree of confidence in my physicality, but..." He sighed in exasperation and then raised his gaze slightly, looking over at me. "I'm getting a little angry over here, you know? This situation is far too one-sided."

I wouldn't have been shocked if Yagami-kun did possess a high level of physical ability as Ibuki-san had surmised. His OAA score was originally C, which was average. It was possible that he wasn't a fast runner, and he wasn't good at sports, but he could still be skilled in martial arts.

So—was he innocent? Or was he guilty?

Just then, as I was being pressed to make a decision, the silence was broken in an unexpected manner. The door to the student council room opened without warning.

"Oh, hey... Now *this* is a pretty unusual situation."

President Nagumo entered the room that were all in, the student council room that should have been empty. Yagami-kun was the only one who didn't react when he showed up. Ibuki-san and I, however, were both terribly shocked, as we were doing something that made us look and feel rather guilty.

"Student Council President...why are you here...?" I stammered.

"I think the more important question is: What's going on here?" he said. He was mainly referring to the fact that Ibuki-san was restraining Yagami-kun, obviously. "If you two are bullying a younger student, you're going to have a big problem on your hands."

Ibuki-san obviously couldn't keep holding the first-year in place after hearing that, so she quickly released him and pulled both of her arms back.

"Thank you. You saved me, President Nagumo," said Yagami-kun. He appeared completely relaxed as he rubbed his arm where Ibuki-san had been gripping him.

*What's with this calm demeanor? It was almost as though he had expected the president to come...*

"Okay, so, let's hear what you're doing here—and without permission, I might add," said President Nagumo.

If I told him that I lost my notebook, Yagami-kun might point out that it was a lie. On the other hand, if I brought up the story

about the meeting minutes, that would mean telling President Nagumo about what was going on.

"Horikita-senpai lost her notebook," Yagami said, speaking up for me. "So, I thought I'd offer to help her search. However, Ibuki-senpai seemed to have misread the situation and thought that I was attacking Horikita-senpai, so she intervened with the intention of righting a wrong."

Instead of trying to drive me into a corner, Yagami-kun supported my lie.

"I see. So that's why she was holding you in a lock like that, huh?" said President Nagumo.

"I believe that we've cleared up any misunderstanding here," Yagami-kun added, "and I don't really intend on making an issue of this."

"Okay then. In that case, there's no need for us to talk about it any further," President Nagumo said. "So, did ya find the notebook?"

"No, I couldn't find it." If Yagami-kun was willing to go along with my narrative, then I was going to gratefully play along. "This was my last lead, too... It's possible that it was mistaken for trash and thrown away. I think I have to give up on it."

Although he asked, President Nagumo probably didn't actually care about the whereabouts of my notebook. The student council president looked away, disinterested, and then sat down in his usual seat.

"Whatever the reason, this isn't the sort of thing to be doing when we're in the middle of the Cultural Festival," he said. "Head on back immediately."

There was no point persisting in my quest for the meeting minutes now, so I didn't have any other choice but to quietly back off for the time being. That's what I was thinking, anyway, but just as I was about to leave the room together with Ibuki-san...

"How did you know that we were here, anyway, President Nagumo?" asked Yagami-kun as he stood beside Ibuki-san and me.

"Does that bother you?" asked President Nagumo.

"It's just that the door to the student council office was supposed to be locked. However, you came into the office without delay, so I was just a little curious."

It certainly was unnatural. I didn't know if the president had a spare key, but even if he did, he should have tried unlocking the door first before opening it. It was understandable that Yagami-kun would be suspicious when President Nagumo just walked naturally into the room. It was almost as though President Nagumo had known there was someone inside from the very beginning...

Were President Nagumo and Yagami-kun planning on meeting here? If so, it would make sense that Yagami-kun predicted the president would come. But...the conversation they were having right now seemed to suggest otherwise.

"I'd be more than happy to tell you, but actually, there's a little something I wanna ask you first, Yagami," said President Nagumo.

"Me?" he replied.

"You remember what we talked about in the student council office the other day, right? About those rumors that I put up a lot of money to get some students expelled?"

"Of course I do. I have been looking into the matter, but I haven't been able to ascertain the origin of the rumor."

They suddenly brought up the topic that we discussed the other day, but I wasn't able to keep up.

"You know the truth, though, don't you?" President Nagumo said. "About where that talk came from."

"...What are you saying?" asked Yagami-kun hesitantly.

President Nagumo lightly kicked the underside of his desk in irritation. "I'm saying that maybe you're the one who started those rumors."

"Please hold on a moment," Yagami-kun protested. "What in the world are you talking about all of a sudden? Why would I do

something like that?"

Ibuki-san and I suspected Yagami-kun of something, and now he was under suspicion by President Nagumo too. And it was regarding a completely different matter than the one we were focused on.

"Like hell you don't know. There was a special exam offered to first-year students where they were asked to get a certain student expelled in exchange for a big prize. And you were one of the few who participated."

Yagami-kun's expression darkened ever so slightly. It now contained traces of irritation, just like President Nagumo's. "What do you mean, President Nagumo? What on earth are you talking about?"

"I denied it at the student council meeting, but the rumors are based on some degree of truth," admitted President Nagumo.

"Wait," I cut in. "Does that mean you really...?"

"I didn't technically break any rules, you know. It was just school policy. I was in charge of helping maintain fairness as student council president, alongside Acting Director Tsukishiro." President Nagumo turned back to Yagami-kun. "Isn't that right, Yagami?"

There certainly had been some vicious special exams held at this school, but I had never imagined that there was one like *that*.

"I thought it was decided that we wouldn't talk about that special exam and would refrain from mentioning it to anyone not involved?" said Yagami-kun.

"You're the one who broke that rule first," said President Nagumo.

"It wasn't me. There's no benefit for me in causing trouble for you, President Nagumo. Besides, weren't there several other first-year students who received the same explanation I did?"

"Well, yeah, sure. But you showed up here. It makes me want to suspect you."

"But it's simply a coincidence," Yagami-kun insisted.

President Nagumo was facing Yagami-kun, but his eyes shifted over to Ibuki-san and me. "You two head on back. I'm going to be talking to Yagami for a while."

"I wasn't aware of this matter before, but I would like to ask for your permission to speak," I said.

"What do you intend to say, Horikita-senpai?" asked Yagami-kun, trying to keep me in check with a look. *Hey, you covered for me just minutes ago, I thought to myself. I'm going to ignore that kind of pressure from you, thank you very much.*

"Out with it," said President Nagumo.

"I don't know if Yagami-kun was the one who started the rumors about that special exam, but I can't imagine that it was a coincidence that he showed up here," I said. "Yagami-kun was following me. Or rather, I have a strong feeling that he's been waiting around the student council office and watching from the very beginning."

"You hear what Suzune said?" said President Nagumo, turning back to Yagami-kun.

Now that he was being hit from both sides, Yagami-kun's expression hardened. But then, he let out an exasperated sigh.

"...I see," he began. "I understand very clearly. So, you two have been working together from the beginning. You had already decided to join forces and back me into a corner when you had me hand over that thing before that was disguised to look like a love letter. Didn't you?"

"Wait...*disguised* to look like a love letter?" I asked.

"You mean this?" asked President Nagumo, taking something out from his pocket. It certainly was the love letter that I'd been given by Ichihashi.

*Actually, wait, hold on—what did he mean by disguised to look like a love letter?*

"I don't know what you're talking about. It's just a simple love letter from an unknown sender. They wrote their feelings for me on it," answered President Nagumo.

"No, that's not true," argued Yagami-kun. "It certainly looks like a love letter at first glance, but it has 'Cultural Festival, 3 p.m., Student Council Office,' written on it. Also, other words, such as *important*, *expulsion*, and *secret* can be found throughout. Or am I wrong?"

President Nagumo opened the once-sealed letter and was now looking it over. "Where's all that written? I have no idea what you're talking about."

He then proceeded to hand the love letter...I mean the letter...over to me.

"Thank you," I replied, taking it into my hands.

I took a look at the contents. However, the words Yagami-kun mentioned were nowhere to be found. Ibuki-san was curious too and took a peek, and her reaction was similar to mine. The letter basically read, "*I hope you'll forgive me for imparting my feelings to you but not giving you my name or anything, but I've had a crush on you for a long time. xo xo :3*"

"Please stop this farce," said Yagami-kun. "If you just parse out the anagram, you'll find the truth."

"Anagram... What?" asked Ibuki-san.

Ignoring Ibuki-san, who apparently didn't understand what an anagram even was—was Yagami-kun saying that the letter contained one? An anagram was a hidden message where letters had been rearranged to mean something else. A sort of word game. Even if you read it over several times and tried lots of different combinations, you wouldn't be able to find the answer right away. It might have been possible to find the answer with time, but it would've been impossible to figure it out in just a few short moments.

"You sure are clever, Yagami," President Nagumo said. "I guess neither Suzune nor I can analyze anagrams in a flash, eh?"

Yagami-kun was becoming increasingly wary of us as our suspicions of him deepened. "Could one of you two have written the message then?" he said. "Or was it written by someone that you both know?"

"Someone in common?" asked President Nagumo. "Who are you talking about?"

"Well...no, I suppose I don't know who. But please believe me when I say that I followed the anagram, and that's why I came here."

If what he was saying was true, then... Well, no, even if it wasn't true, he was spouting off crazy talk right now.

"I couldn't care less about whether there's an anagram in the message or not," President Nagumo said. "The issue here is how you knew what the letter said. You read it before you handed it to me, didn't you?"

That was right. There was no other way Yagami-kun could have known its contents.

"It was just by chance," he said. "When I dropped the letter, the sticker came off and the letter came out. I knew I shouldn't have taken a look, but I just couldn't help it."

"That's not what I'd consider morally acceptable behavior for a member of the student council," replied President Nagumo.

I could understand the temptation to take a peek, but normally, you would restrain yourself from doing so. And even more so if it was a letter between people who you had no connection to. Would Yagami-kun really take the risk of checking the contents of such a letter? While it was certainly true that not knowing the sender's name piqued my curiosity, whether I'd actually go through with reading the contents was another matter.

"You looked at the letter precisely because you're the sort of person who's usually up to no good, aren't you? I had a hunch that I was being set up for some kind of trap," added President Nagumo.

"Even if I were to say that's not true, I get the sense that you wouldn't believe me anyway," said Yagami-kun.

I felt a strange sense of unease in the repeated back-and-forth they were having right now. There was the world as I saw it, the world as Yagami-kun saw it, and the world as President Nagumo saw it. I couldn't help but feel like there were slight

differences in all three of our perspectives. While we seemed to be on the same wavelength, we actually weren't. There was a feeling of discomfort here, like when you had something stuck in your back teeth.

It was bad enough that Yagami-kun read the letter without permission. But there was still the matter of spreading that rumor about President Nagumo, as well as the issue of the meeting minutes, and those were still unclear at the moment. Nor could I clearly determine whether Yagami-kun's appearance outside of the student council office was intentional or coincidental. Nothing was going to come from accusing him any further right here, though...

Yagami-kun looked at me and President Nagumo in turn, and then flashed a small smile.

"Don't you think it's about time we sort out the answers here? You all know the truth already, don't you?" Perhaps Yagami-kun had been working out the situation in his mind, because there was a brief silence. Then he opened his mouth to speak once more. "Horikita-senpai, you saw the meeting minutes, and you associated the writing there with a piece of paper you saw during the Uninhabited Island Special Exam. That made you think that I was the culprit. Then, you gave a letter to Student Council President Nagumo that was disguised to look like a love letter to secretly deliver a message to him."

For some reason, Yagami-kun brought up the note and meeting minutes himself, although they hadn't been mentioned up until this point.

"Why would we have needed to go through all of that hassle?" answered President Nagumo. "A phone call or text message would've been faster."

"Wasn't that so you wouldn't leave any traces that suggested you suspected me?" Yagami-kun suggested. "With a message disguised to look like a love letter, you could talk yourselves out of the situation any number of ways. And furthermore, I was willing to review the meeting minutes of the day in question together with Horikita-senpai. That was to determine whether I was the person that Horikita-senpai was searching for."

"Wait a moment. The island? Meeting minutes? The person Suzune is searching for? What are you talking about?"

"Are you still intending to keep up this act, President Nagumo? I already know that both you and Horikita-senpai are acting under instructions given to you by a certain someone. Ayanokouji-senpai is the one giving all the orders, isn't he? He's the one who made the anagram in this letter. You're a bad person, aren't you? You didn't even need to show Horikita-senpai the meeting minutes—you already knew the answer, didn't you?" pressed Yagami-kun.

"Why are you bringing up Ayanokouji-kun...?" I asked.

"He's really doing things in such a roundabout way, isn't he?" Yagami-kun continued. "I figured he strongly disliked being in the public eye, but I never imagined that he would've made contact with me like this..."

He chuckled in amusement. Yagami-kun was clearly acting differently than he was before.

"So, what happens now? Am I finally going to come face-to-face with Ayanokouji-senpai?" He looked through the doorway excitedly, like a child who was just presented with a box full of toys as a gift. "Don't keep me in suspense. Could you please tell me what you've heard about me before he arrives? I'd especially love to hear it coming from your own mouth, Horikita-senpai."

"Wait, hold on," I said. "I really don't understand what you're talking about. Yes, I suspected that you were the one who came to my tent and slipped that paper in there, but Ibuki-san is the only one I've talked to about it."

Even though I was telling the truth, Yagami-kun didn't look like he believed me.

"Explain this to me in a way that I can understand, Yagami," President Nagumo said.

"Hmph. I'm really getting tired of this, President Nagumo. You were planning to meet up with Ayanokouji-senpai here, along with Horikita-senpai. That letter arranged it. And, you were going to talk with me. I'm sure that he must have felt it would've been

dangerous to meet me alone. Yes, that was a wise decision on his part..."

"Sorry to interrupt you when you're getting all carried away there by yourself, Yagami, but let me tell you *why* I'm here at the student council office," began President Nagumo. He took out his phone and held it so the screen was facing us. I figured that someone was calling him, because a number flashed on the screen.

"Seems like you've arrived. Come on in," said President Nagumo to the person on the other end of the line.

"Ah ha ha!" Yagami-kun let out an uproarious laugh, holding out his arms wide as if to welcome whoever came through the door as it opened slowly. "Ayanokouji-senpai has come after all! I'm so happy!"

"I'm here." A certain someone appeared in the doorway, and it was someone I absolutely did not expect at all.

But the first person to react to this arrival wasn't me or President Nagumo, nor was it even Yagami-kun. It was Ibuki-san.

"Huh? *Ryuuuen?*" she said. "What're *you* doing here?"

Ryuuuen-kun wasn't the only one who had come, actually. Two of his classmates were with him.

"Heh, that outfit looks pretty good on you after all, Ibuki. Don't ya think so, Kinoshita?" said Komiya-san.

"It really does. She's kinda tiny and cute," Kinoshita-san agreed.

"Huh? W-wait, Komiya? And you too, Kinoshita...?" wailed Ibuki-san.

And not only that, but Sakagami-sensei and Mashima-sensei joined us in the student council office shortly after.

"...What *is* this?" Yagami-kun was the most flabbergasted of any of us and blurted out that he didn't understand what was going on.

"I came to the student council office today to talk with Ryuuuen and these other folks." President Nagumo turned to

Ryuu-en-kun. "Isn't that right?"

"Yeah, that was the plan. But it looks like you're already in the middle o' something?"

Yagami-kun had a stern look on his face as he looked at the new arrivals, seemingly unable to understand what was happening. Student Council President Nagumo then stood back up and thrust the letter toward Yagami-kun's chest.

"All this talk about a message disguised to look like a love letter, anagrams, meeting minutes... It's not adding up, Yagami," he said.

"But it can't be..." whispered Yagami-kun, unable to hide his confusion. "What is this supposed to...?"

Ryuu-en-kun approached Yagami-kun and pointed at him. "This is the guy you were talkin' about, right?" he asked Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san.

The two of them stood behind Ryuu-en-kun meekly and nodded emphatically. They both had nervous looks on their faces.

"Yes. Without a doubt," said Kinoshita-san.

"Yeah, it's him all right," agreed Komiya-kun.

Upon hearing this, Ryuu-en-kun came even closer to Yagami-kun, wearing his usual thin smile. He was close enough that he would've been able to touch Yagami-kun if he simply reached for him.

"Looks like you and me are gonna need to have a nice, long chat," he snarled.

"What about?" asked Yagami-kun.

Ryuu-en-kun chuckled, and suddenly extended his right arm, grabbing hold of Yagami-kun's bangs and lifting up his head.

"Ryuu-en!" Mashima-sensei scolded Ryuu-en for his violent actions, but Yagami-kun seemed to show no signs of concern.

"What's your name again?" asked Ryuu-en-kun.

"...It's Yagami. Yagami Takuya, Ryuu-en-senpai."

Ryuu-en-kun lifted Yagami-kun up by his hair, and the first-year's face twisted in pain. "Yagami, huh. So, I hear *you're* the one who took such good care of Komiya and Kinoshita."

"Huh...? I don't understand what you mean."

"Don't play dumb. Komiya and Kinoshita finally remembered just the other day. They got seriously hurt during the Uninhabited Island Special Exam. They told me that it was alllll because of what you did."

*They were seriously hurt on the island?* I knew that they suffered serious injuries, broken or fractured bones, but I thought that was the result of carelessness...

"You surely don't believe that I did it, do you?" Yagami-kun said. "What in the world is this all about?"

"They forgot what happened because of the shock of their injuries, so they neatly filed it away as an accident," Ryuu-en-kun said. "But eventually, they remembered. They remembered that *you* were the one who did it."

Then, as if in response to that statement, President Nagumo spoke up as well, acknowledging Ryuu-en-kun's words. "That was just yesterday that they could finally recall. By the way, the plan was that it was just going to be the four of us meeting today, Ryuu-en. You, me, Komiya, and Kinoshita... Why are there teachers here with you?"

"I called them 'cause I figured it'd save us time and hassle," Ryuu-en-kun said. "Sakagami was the one who rushed over when they got hurt."

"Speaking of Yagami-kun... I'm fairly certain we have our answer, Mashima-sensei."

Sakagami-sensei must have remembered something, because after saying that, he turned to Mashima-sensei for confirmation.

"Yes. I don't want to suspect a student, but...I can't deny that there's a possibility," replied Mashima-sensei.

"Wh-what are you saying? I didn't do anything!" cried Yagami-kun.

It was no wonder that he was in a total panic now. Even I wasn't able to wrap my head around what was going on here.

"Yagami," said Mashima-sensei. "We know that the GPS function on your watch wasn't working at the time that their alerts went off that day. There were several other students whose watches were broken during the special exam, but there were only two people, one being you, who would have been close enough to come into contact with Komiya and Kinoshita from the point where your GPS signal dropped. Of course, at the time, neither Komiya nor Kinoshita, or even Shinohara, could tell us your name. They could only say that someone had hurt them. So, we had no other choice but to mark down what happened as an accident, but—"

"And yet despite the fact that they couldn't remember before, now they both suddenly mention my name, at the same time?" Yagami-kun protested, cutting Mashima-sensei off. "That's impossible! They must have discussed the matter in secret ahead of time to get their stories straight and chosen my name!"

"Gotten their stories straight?" repeated Ryuuuen-kun. "The fact that your watch was broken wasn't something an average student would know, though."

There were more than four hundred students on the uninhabited island during that exam. Only two of them were wearing watches with broken GPS functions at the time that Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san were injured. The odds of all that happening on its own were far too low to call it mere coincidence, for sure.

"They remembered seeing the culprit. What's your basis for doubting *that*, huh, Yagami? Tell me," hissed Ryuuuen-kun. He tightened his grip on Yagami-kun's hair and pulled once more.

"Gr...! Th-that's—"

"I bet you're thinkin' somethin' like 'There's no way anyone would have seen me. I should have done it perfectly.' Right?"

"P-please wait just a moment," Yagami-kun insisted. "I haven't done anything. Do you really think I would be capable of such a dangerous thing?"

Yagami-kun certainly didn't have a large build by any means. To the casual observer, the idea he could cause that much harm might seem strange. However, Ryuu-en-kun didn't seem to trust what Yagami-kun was saying at all.

"I've learned from past experience that it's harmless-lookin' guys like you who are the most dangerous," Ryuu-en-kun said.  
"Ain't that right, Ibuki?"

"No doubt about it, this guy is tough," Ibuki-san agreed. "He could have seriously hurt Komiya and Kinoshita before they knew what was going on."

"Normally, I would've wanted you to suffer a bit, for you to get roughed up at least as bad as my guys, in retaliation. But unfortunately, we've got the teachers here, so I'll cut you a li'l break. Because the fact is, all that's waitin' for you now is expulsion."

If these allegations were true, and it was proven that Yagami-kun had caused Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san serious harm, then it was unlikely that he'd only receive a suspension. Expulsion was inevitable here, even when taking extenuating circumstances into account.

Ryuu-en-kun let go of Yagami-kun's hair, and the first-year looked down at the ground.

"Anyway, why are *you* here, Suzune?" asked Ryuu-en-kun.

"I... I was also investigating something about Yagami-kun," I replied.

"Eh? What about?"

Now that we had reached this point, I had no other choice but to tell everyone everything. I explained to them what happened on the uninhabited island, and about how I had been searching for a student with exceptionally neat handwriting. I told them that I came here today because I wanted to double-check the meeting minutes, since Yagami-kun's handwriting looked so similar to what I had seen on the note.

I pulled out the meeting minutes notebook and opened it to one of the pages Yagami-kun had written. "Yagami-kun's

handwriting and the handwriting on that note are almost identical. It matches what I remember."

"We'd like to hear an explanation for all this, Yagami." President Nagumo looked at Yagami-kun for answers, even though he himself wasn't fully aware of everything that had been going on either.

The only thing that was certain right now was that something completely unfathomably strange was going on. Everyone gathered here had a connection to Yagami-kun, but there wasn't a definitive tie linking everyone. There wasn't anyone here who seemed to hold the all-too-important key to tie this together.

*But could...something like that even be possible?*

*Supposing this all started with that love letter...*

Did that mean that someone had calculated that I would end up entrusting it to Yagami-kun, and that he would take a peek inside? Then, Yagami-kun would solve the anagram and come to this place, as if he was drawn in... But that certain someone couldn't have known that I had my own suspicions after I saw Yagami-kun's meeting minutes.

No, wait...perhaps that didn't have anything to do with this. I was an outsider here, and so was Ibuki-san. Even if the two of us hadn't been here, this sequence of events still would have played out. Yagami-kun would have come to the student council office because he would've been drawn in by the letter, and he would have been questioned by President Nagumo.

But would something like that even be possible? And even if it was possible, who? When? Where? No, hold on. Asking myself these kinds of questions might be wrong in and of itself. Even if Ayanokouji-kun *was* behind what was happening here...I wouldn't be surprised at all. Ryuuuen-kun, Komiya-kun, and Kinoshita-san had also shown up, rather unnaturally. Then, there were the teachers. Yagami-kun was slippery and good at talking his way out of things. This was done carefully, to surround him from all sides.



Perhaps Ryuu-en-kun had the same feeling that I did. He let out a small chuckle. “Ku ku, can’t help but be surprised by this whole thing myself, actually. Looks like you got a little too close when you played with fire.”

“Why...? Why? Why would such a stupid...” huffed Yagami-kun.

“I’ve got no clue what your deal is and I don’t care, but you’ve been caught in a web, man,” said Ryuu-en-kun.

“I... I still haven’t fought him, and yet... No, this is happening before I even got to that point? Is this where things are going to end? This is ridiculous—it can’t end like this!!!” His entire body was trembling now, and Yagami-kun’s voice sounded nothing like before. “Are you saying that...you don’t even *need* to face me directly? Is that it? Ha ha...ha... Ha...ha! You’ve got to be kidding me! You have GOT to be kidding me!!!”

“Shut the hell up,” hissed Ryuu-en-kun in exasperation, plugging his right ear with his pinky finger. “Don’t cry like a little baby when you’re standin’ right next to me.”

Perhaps he hadn’t heard what Ryuu-en-kun said, because Yagami-kun wasn’t calming down at all.

“It’s fine,” Yagami-kun continued. “I just have to do it now. I just have to kill him with my bare hands right now! If I do that, then I can go back to where I belong! I’ll drag him back there with me!!!”

There were two faculty members present, but Yagami-kun was acting like it was of no concern to him at all. He had completely changed—he was now seething with anger. Just as Yagami-kun was about to move in on Ryuu-en-kun, Ibuki-san attempted to land a jump kick on Yagami-kun from behind. Without even turning around to look, Yagami-kun dodged her attack and drove his elbow into her abdomen.

“Ack!”

One single hit. It was just one blow, but Ibuki-san collapsed into a heap on the spot, unable to stand back up.

“Stop, Yagami!!!!” shouted Mashima.

But as the teachers were about to rush over to put a stop to this, Ryuuuen-kun stopped them instead.

"Step back. He's really tryin' to throw down right now. In that case, we're gonna have to take him on, y'know?" Ryuuuen-kun clenched his fist tight, not caring at all that we were still in the student council office.

"There's no way someone like you can stop me," said Yagami-kun. "You know that, right? I won't show any mercy to anyone who stands in my way right now, and I don't care if it's a girl or a teacher either. If you don't want to see anyone get hurt the way Komiya and Kinoshita were, shut up and back off."

"*Ku ku*. So *that's* what you're really like. Now ain't that interestin'" Without hesitation, Ryuuuen-kun took a step forward and spread his arms out wide, as if trying to provoke him. "I'll gladly stand in your way, so come at me."

"You're just a worthless punk..." hissed Yagami-kun.

Just like with Ayanokouji-kun and Amasawa-san, the feeling that emanated from Yagami-kun's small frame wasn't that of an ordinary student. Even though Ryuuuen-kun was willing to step in, I couldn't possibly imagine that he could stop Yagami-kun. But even so, we had to do something to try. The first-year was filled with the urge to destroy everything in his path, without regard to the other students present.

If we let him go right now, there was no guarantee that anyone would be able to quell his rampage. And his target was none other than Ayanokouji-kun. If something were to happen here, right when we were in the middle of the Cultural Festival, there was no way the people involved would get off with just a warning.

"Stop this, Yagami," said Mashima-sensei. "You too, Ryuuuen. There will be serious penalties if you start a fight here."

"My expulsion is 100 percent inevitable anyway. In that case, there's no reason for me to stop, is there, Mashima?" spat Yagami-kun, purposefully omitting "-sensei."

Even so, Mashima-sensei stepped in between Yagami-kun and Ryuuen-kun, acting as a teacher.

"Get out of my sight," Yagami-kun snarled.

There was an overwhelming difference in their builds, but that didn't faze Yagami-kun one bit. Mashima-sensei keeled over with one kick from Yagami-kun, and after he fell to his knees, the first-year slammed his fist into the teacher's face. Sakagami-sensei witnessed this all happen from up close and backed away, terrified.

Ryuuen-kun was elated now that an actual fight had started, but just when he was about to pounce on Yagami-kun—

"Just stop already, Takuya."

The door to the student council office opened again, and there stood Amasawa-san, her eyes red and swollen.

Even though it seemed like no one's words could reach him, Yagami-kun stopped moving at that. "Huh? Why are you...? When did you get here...?"

"What do you think's going to happen next if you cause more chaos?" Amasawa-san asked him. "Do you think that you'll get their approval? Do you think that they'll accept you? It's... It's already over."

"It's *not* over!" he yelled back. "The instructors are waiting! I... I'm going to become the best!!!"

*Instructors? Who is he talking about?* At the very least, I could guess that he wasn't referring to any teachers at this school.

"I was only trying to make him give up on the Cultural Festival today in a funny way, by exposing..." started Yagami-kun. "Well, he went and did something crazy instead..."

"So, *that's* what you were planning after all, Takuya..." said Amasawa-san.

"Move," Yagami-kun demanded. "I'll make Ayanokouji regret this. I'll make it so hilarious that he won't even know what to do!!!"

"If you're going to insist on getting to Ayanokouji-senpai no matter what, then I'll stop you before you get to him," Amasawa-

san told him.

"You? You've never beaten me before, not even once. Don't make me laugh."

"Maybe I can't beat you by force," she said. "But...I'll just have to try."

"Pft," Yagami-kun scoffed. "I knew you were devoted to Ayanokouji, but I didn't realize it was to such a stupid degree."

"I just realized something," Amasawa-san said. "There's a proverb that goes, 'The frog in the well knows nothing of the great ocean.' This is just like the saying."

"In that case, just die already," he retorted. "There's no point in you being alive any longer."

However, just as Amasawa-san readied herself for a fight, the footsteps of multiple people could be heard in the hallway. Five adults strode into the student council office, blank expressions on their faces. I didn't recognize all of them, but I did notice that two of the five were guests of the Cultural Festival who came to our maid café earlier.

Despite being completely out of control just moments prior, Yagami-kun suddenly started shivering. "Wh-why are you here...? Why...?" he sputtered.

"We received a call to come and pick you up at the student council office," one of the newcomers said. "Even though things are a little different than we had planned."

Yagami-kun was on a total killing spree just minutes ago, but now, before we even realized what was happening, he shriveled back like a child. To me, it looked like someone terrified of being found and chastised by his parents. Surrounded by the adults, Yagami-kun was taken away without resistance. Amasawa-san walked with them, as though she were accompanying them.

As they left, Mashima-sensei stood back up, bearing the pain he was in.

"You people," he began, looking to them for confirmation.  
"You're..."

"We are people with a connection to Yagami and Amasawa," said one of them. "We will settle matters here, so please, go ahead and seek medical attention for your injuries. Also, please do not tell anyone—not other teachers, not students—about what transpired here. Rest assured that we will discuss everything with Chairman Sakayanagi."

"...I understand," replied Mashima-sensei.

With Sakagami-sensei's help, Mashima-sensei left the student council office. The room, which had seen such chaos, was suddenly enveloped in silence.

"Talk about a letdown," Ryuuen-kun sighed. "Just when it was gettin' fun too. Get up, Ibuki. We're leavin'"

"Ugh... Give me a hand, at least," she huffed.

Ibuki-san still couldn't stand up on her own. Ryuuen-kun gestured with his chin to Komiya-kun, instructing him to help Ibuki-san up, and they all left the room.

Finally, it was just President Nagumo and me alone in the student council office.

"Well, there we have it," said President Nagumo. "A lot of things went totally sideways there, but I guess the issue's been settled for the time being."

"How much did you know about what happened today?" I asked him. "Ayanokouji-kun was involved, wasn't he?"

"What are you talking about? I already told you earlier that I only came to the office because I was supposed to talk to Ryuuen."

"But if that was true, it wouldn't have been necessary for you to bring that letter."

The love letter sat crumpled on the floor.

"To echo what Yagami said earlier, it was just a coincidence. It just so happened to be in my pocket still."

That was an obvious lie. This was essentially President Nagumo's way of telling me that there was nothing further to say on the matter—an order from him as student council president.

"And this crazy Cultural Festival is over too," he added.  
"Leave now."

"...All right."

Four o'clock would come soon, and the Cultural Festival, which triggered this completely unexpected event, was going to officially be over.

## **Chapter 9:** **Those Working Behind the Scenes**

**F**OUR O'CLOCK was here at last, and the hectic Cultural Festival finally came to an end. Just as the school explained to us beforehand, the accounting app forcibly shut down, and no further sales could be entered. The results would be available to be checked via our phones in two hours' time, starting at six o'clock in the evening. But even though the festival was over, the fact remained that we were going to need to keep taking care of things until everything was done.

The guests who stayed all the way until the end of the festival began to leave their seats now that the café was closed. They each gave the students their impressions of the maid café, telling them what they thought. Just about all of the comments were positive, telling us that the café was interesting, fun, and so on. For the students who worked so hard, these warm words penetrated deep into their hearts and seemed to wash away their fatigue.

Incidentally, the second the clock struck four, Chabashira-sensei bolted out of the classroom as fast as her legs could carry her. I assumed running in an outfit like that would make her even more conspicuous, but I decided I'd just leave that issue alone.

It was just around 5:30 p.m. when the last of the customers had finally left, and all of our classmates (with the exception of Kouenji) were gathered in the maid café.

"Great work, everyone," said Horikita. "A lot of things happened today, but we finished the Cultural Festival strong and in an ideal way. I can't imagine that we could've had a better turnout than we did."

Ike and the other guys had just finished cleaning up and packing away the outdoor food stalls and were also in attendance. Some café guests were still eating at the time the festival ended, so they had left a little bit later, and there were still some things

left to be cleaned up, but Horikita went ahead and started summing up what happened at the festival.

"The results will be announced later, but there's something I wish to talk to you about first," she said.

*That's right.* There were thirty-seven people in class, as Akito and Haruka remained. Although Horikita hadn't prompted her to say something, Haruka took a step forward as she was clearly the person on everyone's minds right now. As the classroom sat in silence, Haruka opened her mouth to speak.

"I think that there's something I wanna say first, though," she muttered. "I haven't forgiven all of you here."

Some students had been expecting her to start things off with an apology, and they exchanged looks with one another, feeling more bewildered than angry. It didn't seem as though they particularly blamed her for anything. Everyone could understand. They had matured enough to the point where they could feel the pain of what it was like to lose a friend—a close confidant.

She continued from there. "But the person that I can't forgive the most is me. I assumed that everyone who got kicked out of school must be miserable. Like Yamauchi-kun who left last year, and now Airi."

At the mention of Yamauchi's name, Sudou, Ike, and some of the other guys looked distant, like they were thinking about him.

"I was convinced that it was in Airi's best interest to remain at this school. I selfishly assumed that's what would make her the happiest. That's why I hated everyone... Why I wanted to get revenge." Haruka then gripped her uniform's skirt tightly, feelings of frustration welling up within her. "I was planning on dropping out at the end of the festival too."

That was something that Haruka didn't need to tell us, but still, she confessed the truth because she hated hiding it. I figured that some students had anticipated it, but most of them remained silent with their mouths clamped shut.

Then, Akito spoke up and revealed the truth as well, unable to stay quiet. "I was planning on dropping out too, together with

Haruka."

"If you two had chosen to drop out of school, we likely would never reach Class A," Horikita said. "That would've been the easiest, most potent method of taking your revenge."

There was no need for complicated schemes or petty tricks. Just by dropping out of school, they would cause us to lose a lot of Class Points.

"But, if you'll give me a chance, I'd like to stay in this class now," pleaded Haruka.

"You've had a change of heart?" asked Horikita.

"Airi's out there in the world, spreading her wings, trying to do her thing," Haruka said. "That's what Kushida-san showed me."

Hearing Kushida's name, everyone turned their eyes to her in unison. Kushida appended Haruka's statement, as the majority of the class couldn't understand what was going on.

"It looks like Sakura-san is trying her best to become an idol," she explained. "You can find her if you do some digging on social media. Maybe you can ask Hasebe-san to tell you about it later."

Some students seemed surprised, and others seemed to have already had some idea. But what all of those students shared between them was a common understanding that Airi had taken a step forward.

"Airi is going to grow—a lot," Haruka said. "I'm sure she'll grow even more than I thought she would. That's why I want to graduate from Class A and become someone who can go see her. I want to be able to show myself to her without feeling ashamed."

"You've made a good decision, Hasebe-san," said Horikita.

"I plan to accept whatever punishment for all the trouble I caused," said Haruka.

"Me too," added Akito. "I'm just as guilty. I didn't help with the festival and caused a lot of trouble for the class."

Horikita took a step forward to speak before any other student could chime in.

"Yes, skipping the festival in itself is problematic behavior, but fortunately, it doesn't violate any school rules," she said. "We're only required to take a one-hour break at minimum; we didn't necessarily have to work at the festival. Kouenji-kun hasn't shown up at all since this morning, so he's in the same situation."

Haruka looked stunned yet relieved as Horikita approached.

"If you are looking for a punishment, though, it can only be this: you're to remain with me as my classmate from now onward. Can you face that reality?" asked Horikita.

I wondered what Haruka thought—what she saw reflected in Horikita's eyes in that moment.

"I'll try," Haruka said. "I'll give it my absolute best."

"Okay. So, does that mean from now on, I can assume you'll be your usual self, Hasebe-san?"

"...Don't worry. I won't cause any trouble."

Horikita nodded, telling her that was plenty. "And you too, Miyake-kun," she added. "You'll be just like how you used to be. Okay?"

"Yeah, of course," he answered.

"In that case, that'll be all for today. Let's all work together and finish up the last bit of cleaning quickly," said Horikita.

Keisei walked up to Haruka and Akito, albeit somewhat hesitantly. After Akito offered an apology, Keisei's eyes welled up, a little red with tears, and he replied with words of relief. Then, with an apology from Haruka, the three of them were brought together for the first time in a long while, and they looked at each other with small smiles on their faces. Eventually, Akito and Keisei directed their gazes over at me, as though they had made up their minds about something.

The boys signaled to Haruka, and then, all three of them were looking at me, albeit with some hesitation and confusion. If I came forward and approached them right here and now, we might have been able to reform our old group, even if only in a formal sense. But that was no longer necessary. I turned my back to them and offered words of appreciation to Satou and the other girls. Our

group, which used to be five, had now become three, but I hoped that they would be joined together by a stronger bond than before.

My presence wasn't needed there. I figured the three of them could sense that what I just did was my way of saying farewell, a sign that we were going our separate ways. They didn't approach me or try to talk to me either.

After that, things moved quickly. Even with the remaining clean-up that had to be done, with thirty-seven people, things would get back to normal in no time at all. We finished everything before six o'clock came around.

Then, the results of the festival were announced.

1<sup>st</sup> Place: Class 2-B +100 Class Points

2<sup>nd</sup> Place: Class 2-C +100 Class Points

3<sup>rd</sup> Place: Class 3-B +100 Class Points

4<sup>th</sup> Place: Class 2-A +100 Class Points

5<sup>th</sup> Place: Class 1-A +50 Class Points

6<sup>th</sup> Place: Class 3-C +50 Class Points

7<sup>th</sup> Place: Class 2-D +50 Class Points

8<sup>th</sup> Place: Class 1-C +50 Class Points

9<sup>th</sup> Place: Class 3-D

10<sup>th</sup> Place: Class 1-B

11<sup>th</sup> Place: Class 3-A

12<sup>th</sup> Place: Class 1-D

"We got first place!" exclaimed Sudou. "Yeah, we did it!"

"Wow, I guess Chabashira-sensei's cosplay really did the trick, huh?" mused Satou.

All of the students were rejoicing and congratulating one another for putting up a good fight.

"But still, Ryuuen's class came right behind us in second, and Sakayanagi's class came in fourth. Impressive as ever," I remarked.

"Ayanokouji-kun," said Horikita.

"Yeah, everything went according to plan," I answered.

If we were operating on the assumption that Horikita's class was going to take the top spot, then it would have been expected from the very beginning that Ryuuen's class would also be among the top scorers.

"I was wondering how we were going to fare since we were both doing something so similar...but it seems like we managed to pull through," said Horikita.

"But there were some unexpected developments too," I said. "Sakayanagi came in close, in fourth place."

"You're right... Did you see what her class put together?"

"No, I didn't go up to the third floor of the special building today," I said. "Did you see what they were doing?"

"Class A was selling brochures and such about the school, for a low price. Other than that, they didn't have food or drinks or any other kind of entertainment. I wonder what kind of trick they used..."

"We might find a clue at the bottom of the rankings," I suggested.

"You mean, Housen-kun's class, Class 1-D...? What about them?" asked Horikita.

"If this was a case where they fought hard only to come in last place, then that would be just fine," I said. "But I can't imagine that's what happened. Their class's entertainment offerings, which were basically reimaginings of what you'd typically find at festivals, were quite a hit. I was expecting they'd be one of the classes in the top of the rankings. What do you think about the fact that they came in below Class 3-A?"

"Class 3-A came in eleventh place," said Horikita. "They basically gave up on the competition from the start by pricing

themselves out of being competitive. They were focused solely on pleasing the guests in putting together their offering."

We had confirmed that the entry fee for their haunted house thing was only 100 points. On the other hand, the shooting games and other offerings that Housen's class had set up had been priced more appropriately.

"The top classes in this Cultural Festival earn 100 Class Points. That means Housen might have gotten something else, behind the scenes," I suggested.

"So, you're saying that...it's possible that he got Private Points, conceivably?" asked Horikita.

"Does it remind you of what happened during the Uninhabited Island Special Exam last year?"

In that exam, Ryuuen and Katsuragi made a contract: Katsuragi paid Ryuuen Private Points in exchange for letting him earn Class Points. It wouldn't have been surprising if Sakayanagi and Housen did something comparable here.

"It's not impossible," said Horikita. "Or I suppose they might have entered into a similar contract, to trade places."

The accounting for the festival was done via our phones. If Housen and his classmates had Class 2-A's phones and used them for all of their accounting, thus donating all of their sales to Class 2-A, that would make sense. It was a viable enough strategy. And if Class 2-A also provided Housen's class with their start-up funds as well so they could use that for their stalls, it also made sense that they would've been able to put on such a large-scale affair.

"She's quite clever," remarked Horikita.

"Before we even realized what was going on, she chose an option that would let her win," I agreed.

In any case, this meant that we weren't going to be able to get on Sakayanagi's tail that easily. She made it look as if she was giving up on competing, but there was no doubt that she was still producing steady results.

## 9.1

**A**FTERWARD, the rest of the class was dismissed, but Horikita called some people over to the Class B classroom. They were the people who had originally planned and proposed the maid café idea, with the exception of Matsushita, who was absent due to illness.

"To tell you the truth... There's something that I need to apologize to all of you for," Horikita began.

"Huh? Apologize? For what?" asked Satou.

It had been a grueling day for sure, but there hadn't been any particular instances where Horikita made a mistake from what we had seen. Since Satou and the other girls couldn't think of anything worth apologizing for, they responded with confused looks, tilting their heads to the side.

"You remember how Ryuuen-kun spread the news about the fact we were putting on a maid café to the entire school?" asked Horikita.

"Yeah," Satou said. "That really caused a panic, for sure."

"Well, actually...the fact that he was going to leak that news was decided from the very beginning."

It actually stemmed from my suggestion to Horikita that we work together with Ryuuen in some way to score even higher in the festival.

"It was 'decided'?" repeated Maezono. "What do you mean by that?"

"Meaning that everything was planned," Horikita explained. "Ryuuen-kun and I working together, and him betraying us. And that he would let everyone know we were doing a maid café."

"WHAT!?" Maezono exclaimed. "You've *got* to be kidding me!"

It was only natural that the girls would be surprised by this. Only Horikita and I had known the truth, after all.

"Wait, does that mean that betting Private Points was planned too?" asked Satou.

"That was Ryuu-en-kun's own arbitrary decision," said Horikita. "He didn't consult me. I was a little flustered, originally, when he just suddenly came out and said that."

"I think that the main reason Ryuu-en brought that whole bet thing up was because Hashimoto and other students were spying," I added.

"Yes," said Horikita. "Sakayanagi-san had gotten a lot of information from third parties. I'm sure she heard about our situation from intelligence agents like Hashimoto-kun. Then, Hashimoto-kun would have told her that our two classes, meaning ours and Ryuu-en-kun's, were supposed to have been cooperating with each other, but we had a dispute, and Ryuu-en-kun had selfishly betrayed us."

"So, what about that whole thing where whoever won got a million points?" asked Satou.

"Unfortunately, we also decided that no one would be handing over any points, no matter which side won," Horikita replied. "Ryuu-en-kun seemed like he was personally willing to go along with the idea, but I figure that even he's awfully glad that we're not actually doing it. He would've been terrified."

We had hidden this fact from our classmates, including Kei. Only Horikita and I knew the truth—and no one in Ryuu-en's class, save for Ryuu-en himself and Katsuragi, had been told either. Not even Ryuu-en's close associates, like Ishizaki and Albert, were an exception. So, we could only assume that Ryuu-en was absolutely serious when he was saying he was going to crush us.

"His decision to launch a Japanese-style concept café to compete with us was another part of our strategy," added Horikita. "Besides making it appear to everyone that we were facing off against each other, we did that to keep other potential competitors away."

It was a rivalry, basically. The more exciting we made it, the more of a sense of duty the adults would feel in joining in, and the more money they'd spend. If everyone knew that both sides of the

rivalry were engaged in a battle they absolutely couldn't lose, it was only natural that they'd want the side they had a stake in to come out on top. On the other hand, the other classes and other grade levels weren't engaged in a deathmatch. Many of the other classes wanted Class Points, obviously, but the degree of passion there was a notch or two lower compared to the battle of Horikita VS Ryuuuen.

"I am very, truly sorry. Even if it was for the sake of winning, I apologize for keeping this quiet from you," said Horikita.

Horikita had been racked with feelings of guilt this whole time, so she had wanted to tell them the truth about this matter as soon as possible. I was sure that the three girls could tell that Horikita was serious.

"Hey, it's all right, okay? Besides, we came in first place," said Satou cheerfully, not really criticizing Horikita over it at all. She turned to Mii-chan and Maezono for agreement. "Right, girls?"

"Yeah, it's fine," Maezono replied. "I mean, I feel like it's not such a big deal when things turn out well."

"Yes, you're right," agreed Mii-chan. "Besides, I feel like if I knew what was *really* going on, I might have let it show on my face..."

Mii-chan was being very honest, admitting that she wasn't confident enough that she would have been able to pretend she didn't know.

"Aren't you glad, Horikita?" I said, turning to her.

"Yes, this really is a weight off my shoulders," she said. "Oh, and you three, please go ahead and report this to Matsushita-san as well. All of you who played a key role in this café idea will be rewarded as soon as Private Points are deposited."

"Yay!" Satou cheered.

The three girls all high-fived each other.

"So, was Chabashira-sensei dressing up as a maid also something that was decided in advance?" asked Mii-chan. "That was probably the most surprising thing to me."

"That was seriously amazing, wasn't it? She got the most photo requests in just an hour!" exclaimed Maezono.

"I know there's probably a lot to talk about still, but this is all I can say for today," Horikita said. "Really, thank you so much for everything."

Because of their suggestion to put together a maid café, our class devised a strategy, and we were able to take first place. I was also grateful for the fact that other things we couldn't have factored into our calculations also worked out positively for us.

After seeing the three girls off, only Horikita and I remained in the classroom. A slightly stronger gust of wind came through the open window, causing the curtains to flutter.

"Are you really sure you're okay with this?" said Horikita. "You came up with most of the plans on your own. You could have claimed more of the credit, you know? You came up with the idea of staging the whole confrontation and having Chabashira-sensei dress as a maid. It was, undeniably, your abilities that contributed to us getting first place."

"This was possible precisely because of the way you've conducted yourself as a leader, Horikita," I replied.

"If you were still the old you...you wouldn't have included me in these plans, would you?" muttered Horikita. She didn't even look at me as she said it as we stood in the empty classroom.

"Yeah, you're right."

"So, you're not denying it."

"Well, it's the truth," I said. "You already knew that, which was why you asked, right?"

"Well, I guess, sure. You might be right."

I mean, it wasn't like I couldn't have forced plans along with just Ryuuen, Katsuragi, and me. However, when I came up with these ideas, I told them to Horikita, without hesitation, at the same time. Before even getting to the question of whether or not we could pull it off, I knew that we couldn't move forward without a leader. But if Horikita completely rejected my ideas, then I would have been completely fine with not putting the plan into action.

"If it meant having an effective way to win, I wouldn't hesitate to consider even deceiving my own allies," I told her. "I press on when I have to, even if I'm taking on some risk in doing so. You understand?"

By having her implement this strategy herself, I made Horikita more intimately familiar with the idea, like her body was getting used to it.

"I think I might be able to understand it now," she replied. "I get the feeling that I'm starting to see it, little by little."

There might not have been too much of a response quite yet, but it seemed like she was definitely starting to get a feel for it.

"Well, I think that's enough for today," I said. "The sun's about to set."

"Wait... Ayanokouji-kun, there's something I really, *really* need to ask you right now," said Horikita.

I tried encouraging her to head back to the dorms, but she refused. I had a hunch that was going to happen. It was probably no coincidence that she and Ibuki were in the student council office. They must have ended up there because they were following some kind of thread that led them there.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The Cultural Festival today. That serious incident that took place behind the scenes... You didn't—"

I wasn't sure if it was good or bad timing, but just at that moment, my phone started to ring.

"Sorry, hold on for just a second," I said, interrupting her.

"O-okay..."

When I looked at my phone's screen, I saw that I had an incoming call from an unknown number.

"Hello?" I asked, answering the phone.

*"Are you still at school? If you wouldn't mind, could we talk for a little while?"*

I recognized the voice that I heard on the other end of the line. It belonged to Tsubaki Sakurako from Class 1-C. I didn't really care how she had gotten my number, but still, she was someone I didn't usually talk to. That being said, I wasn't too surprised to be contacted by her today.

*"Are you alone right now?"* she asked.

*"Unfortunately, no,"* I replied.

*"In that case, could we meet up?"*

*"Where are you?"*

*"Just outside the entrance. You're still in the school building, right?"*

*"Give me five minutes."*

*"All right."*

After finishing that short phone call, I turned to Horikita to ask if it was all right. "Sorry, but is it okay if I step away for a bit? I think I can be back in like ten or twenty minutes. Let's continue this conversation after that."

*"Very well. I'll be waiting here,"* said Horikita.

I left the classroom after promising her that I would return. Once I was all alone again, I decided to call the person who had helped me the most today.

*"The third-year students' information network really is something else,"* I said. *"Whether it's Kushida Kikyou or Hasebe Haruka, you could find anyone right away. I'm once again reminded of how powerful you are, Student Council President Nagumo."*

*"Did you call me just to tell me something like that?"*

*"I just wanted to say thank you, more or less. You were very helpful in my searches today."*

The number of eyes Nagumo had at his disposal among the third-years, and Nagumo's leadership of those students, were both very impressive. Those students located Haruka and Kushida very quickly.

*"I never imagined that you'd take what I used on you and use it for your own advantage,"* said Nagumo.

"Thank you very much for letting me know what was going on in the student council office. I was able to respond quickly, thanks to you."

*"At first, I thought that Yagami was just making it all up, but was there actually some kind of contrivance in that letter?"*

"If you just read the letter normally, you would only think of it as a love letter addressed to you, President Nagumo. But it did actually contain a somewhat complicated anagram, as Yagami claimed. If you decode the anagram, you can find a message inside. 'I have something important to discuss with you in the student council office after three o'clock.' I also mixed in a few other words that would've caught his attention. If he had a strong sense of curiosity, then it would naturally have piqued his interest and he would've gone for it."

There was another little twist to the love letter, aside from the anagram. Both the envelope that I used and the sticker to keep it sealed were things that could've been bought by anyone at any time from Keyaki Mall. If those items were purchased online or were custom-made or something, Yagami might have hesitated to read the letter, fearing that he'd leave evidence behind by looking at its contents.

However, if you were familiar with Keyaki Mall, you would've noticed that everything except the handwritten letterhead could easily be substituted. In that case, he could easily check the contents of the letter without hesitation. Furthermore, by personally writing the message out by hand, I could give Yagami clues via my handwriting. White Room students were given thorough penmanship lessons, which is why every one of us could write neatly.

Then, I used Kei to pass the letter I prepared to another girl, and through her, it was passed on to Horikita. She was then subtly guided into handing the letter off to Yagami, and thus unknowingly gave him time to take a look at it. Since there was a possibility Horikita might have handed the letter off directly to Nagumo, I asked Nagumo to act like he was in a bad mood that day, creating

a situation where she wouldn't have been able to give it to him immediately.

*"I never imagined that he'd go wild on the island," Nagumo said. "How much did you know?"*

"I didn't know anything. Yagami just confessed to it on his own."

*"What kind of sleight of hand did you use to make Komiya and Kinoshita point fingers at Yagami? And were the teachers showing up a coincidence too?"*

"I just told them that the person at the center of the dispute that was going on outside the office might have been the one responsible. Ryuuuen's side hadn't been able to identify the culprit yet, and they wanted a hint. I offered them a suggestion, knowing there was a risk that no one might have gone to the office, or that even if they did, nothing might happen."

*"That so? Still, I have to say that I'm skeptical about how much of what you're telling me is the truth."*

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

Honestly, everything I did was trivial. It was nothing noteworthy.

*"Well, whatever. You're ready to make good on your promise now, right?" said Nagumo.*

"Of course. I'm looking forward to it, President Nagumo," I replied.

Just as I was approaching the front entrance, I ended the call with Nagumo and reached for my shoe locker.

## 9.2

WAS TSUBAKI all by herself at the meeting place? I thought as much for a moment, but then I noticed it looked like Utomiya was there too, talking to someone on the phone a bit further away. He looked over in my direction.

"Is this something that would've been difficult to convey over the phone?" I asked.

"Well, you know, the first-years are kind of in a state of chaos right now," Tsubaki replied. "Someone got unexpectedly expelled during the Cultural Festival."

"Someone was expelled? Wow, that sure sounds scary... Or I suppose that's normally what someone would say in this situation, right?"

There was someone else involved in this whole expulsion fiasco today, and that was none other than Tsubaki Sakurako, the student standing before me right now.

"The results were even better than I imagined. I'm very pleased, Ayanokouji-senpai." Tsubaki made a circle with her fingers, as if to say that I had passed the test. "I see that you successfully extracted information from Satou-senpai. And you managed to drive Yagami-kun out of school in brilliant fashion too. I'm very grateful."



"I didn't extract information from her," I said. "You were the one who repeatedly made contact with Satou and slowly but surely drove her into a corner. And then, when she couldn't take it anymore, you coordinated your efforts, threatening her, so she would have to turn to someone and confide in them about what she was going through."

The person standing before me, Tsubaki, had been the one who had contacted Satou, as someone that Satou didn't know or have any connection with.

"I don't know what you mean by that," she said teasingly, making it clear she was kidding.

Apparently, Tsubaki had approached Satou near the women's restroom in Keyaki Mall. And there, she had hinted at the possibility of Satou changing her situation for the better, such as where she stood with my and Kei's current relationship, thus piquing her curiosity.

"It sounds as though you called Satou to come to your room with some cheap threats, but it wasn't actually a serious attempt on your part to control her and get her to destroy my relationship with Kei at all," I said. "You threatened her in that way to notify me, albeit indirectly, about the situation. To spur me to take action. In other words, you wanted the situation dealt with."

Tsubaki listened to me silently and simply stared at me, not denying anything I said.

"When I asked her for details about what was going on, the unnaturalness of the whole thing was immediately apparent to me," I went on. "And when you saw that Satou wasn't taking you up on your invitation, you immediately contacted her again, like you were trying to rub salt in her wounds, and you provoked her with similarly worded statements. Afterward, when you noticed that there were no signs that Satou was talking about things with anyone, you gradually intensified your threats against her, thus cornering her. Despite the fact that it was obvious that if you continued doing so, eventually, she'd talk to someone... Well, no, she'd come to me."

Her goal wasn't to entice Satou into doing something against me and Kei. Instead, Tsubaki was waiting for me to come to Satou's aid.

"Then, even though she hadn't asked, you told Satou that you were threatening her under Yagami's orders," I concluded.

The mentally and emotionally exhausted Satou wouldn't have had the time or energy to even think about whether what she heard was the truth or a lie.

I had then come up with the idea of using this situation to my advantage for a personal matter and decided to call up Kei during a meeting with Satou. I had Kei confide in Satou about just about everything she had endured in the past, including the bullying she had suffered. The fact that Satou didn't take Tsubaki up on her offer earlier convinced me that she would be an ally. As a result of all of this, Kei and Satou had elevated their relationship from friends to best friends, in the true sense. That was back on the first of November.

"That Yagami-kun really is a bad guy, isn't he?" said Tsubaki.

"No need for the cheap theatrics," I said. "Yagami had nothing to do with it. He wasn't involved in what happened with Satou."

"You don't think it was actually done on Yagami-kun's instructions?"

"If Yagami was using you, then it wouldn't have been necessary for you to mention his name."

Only the people who knew about the White Room knew about Karuizawa's past. That was because they wouldn't let anything slip so easily which would clue others in about their identity.

"If that were true, then on the contrary—doesn't this all sound strange to you?" Tsubaki asked. "You knew I was trying to frame Yagami-kun, didn't you? And yet, you did nothing to me. You even went so far as to get Yagami-kun expelled when he might have been innocent in this. Isn't that contradictory? There

was no indication that you were even investigating the matter in detail, either."

"Yep," I replied. "I didn't really look into you or Yagami, not really. I didn't even need to."

"...What do you mean by that?"

"Sorry, but I don't feel like talking about that any further."

After everything I heard in this conversation so far, I was convinced that Tsubaki wasn't the one who had manipulated everything. This situation told me that there was someone else lurking in the shadows who orchestrated all this.

"Utomiya-kun, could you come here for a second?" Tsubaki beckoned Utomiya to come over while he was still on a call and instructed him to hand the phone over to me.

Though he was wary, Utomiya handed the phone to me with the person on the other end of the line still there.

"...Here you go," he said.

*"Yagami got one of Tsubaki and Utomiya's classmates expelled,"* explained the caller. *"That's the reason why I helped the two of them."*

This was unmistakably the same young man I had talked to last year, when he stood outside my door.

*"You left us alone because you understood that you could've put a stop to it at any time if you acted directly, right? As a result of what happened, there was an expulsion amongst the first-years. This wouldn't have occurred if there hadn't been any troublemakers, however."*

"I won't deny that," I said.

*"We had no other choice but to make him leave the school so we could avoid any more unnecessary sacrifices. But even though we knew that, defeating Yagami was no simple task. We knew he was no ordinary high school student."*

"Which was why you wanted to use me."

They had made their decision based on an understanding of the goals and the obsession of a White Room student.

*"It seems like you received my message."*

"Basically, there would be contact with someone close to me. And when that happened, someone would be expelled. Right?"

*"That's right. But still, wow—to drive Yagami into a corner and actually get him expelled all in one go? That was a bit beyond my calculations. Did you not consider the possibility that Yagami wasn't involved at all?"*

"Whether or not he got expelled depended on Yagami's choices," I explained. "It wasn't up to me to decide whether he was guilty or not. Just like he got that student from Class 1-C expelled, he was playing with fire in all sorts of other ways too. He contacted Kushida Kikyou under false pretenses, posing as an underclassman from her old school. He tried to use the information he was given to control her and use her as a pawn. Then, there was engaging in an act of provocation by seriously injuring totally unrelated students on the uninhabited island, as well as selfishly checking the contents of a love letter addressed to someone else while suspecting it was a trap. I don't know why Horikita and Ibuki were there to see him, but I'd say that too was another instance of Yagami playing with fire."

People wouldn't normally look at someone else's love letters. And even if they did, they wouldn't pick up on an anagram that was scattered throughout the text.

*"So everything was connected,"* said the caller.

"Even if he hadn't left any clear evidence behind, the more tricks someone plays, the more traces there will be. He didn't realize that he was slowly strangling himself with his own two hands."

*"It's certainly true that if Yagami hadn't done anything, he wouldn't have ended up expelled."*

"Yeah, you're right about that," I agreed.

All of those instances of Yagami playing with fire up until now had led to this result. If he hadn't angered this young man I was speaking to on the phone, I wouldn't have acted against Yagami in the first place. If he hadn't gotten in contact with Kushida, or

caused those students' serious injuries on the island, then expulsion wouldn't have been on the table. If he hadn't read the contents of the love letter, he wouldn't have ended up in a situation where he would be questioned so aggressively.

"The only reason why Yagami was expelled was because he himself admitted to being guilty. That's all," I concluded.

All I did was set the stage so that I could watch what would happen. Nothing more. If he was totally innocent, there probably wouldn't have been any fuss in the first place. It was because he knew about me, and because he was so clever, that he went to the student council office at all.

*"It seems you're as good as people say,"* remarked the caller.

"While I've got you on the phone, there's something I wanted to check with you," I said. "Do you remember what you told me before? Something about how I shouldn't think that getting rid of the obstacles in my way alone would bring me peace. That was a bluff, wasn't it? You wanted to create a feeling of urgency in me so I'd believe that if I didn't deal with things right away, the situation would get even more difficult."

The mystery caller did that in order to get me to act, resulting in Yagami being expelled at this stage.

*"Ayanokouji-sensei was right to choose this school,"* the caller said.

"What do you mean?"

*"Exactly what it sounds like. I'm going to enjoy my life here at this school. As long as the first-years and second-years don't have any conflicts with each other, let's bring our relationship to an end here."*

With that, having said what he wanted to say, he hung up. When I snuck a peek at the screen, I saw that the caller's information had been intentionally blocked. The caller must have done that because he didn't want me to realize who he was, based on the phone number or email address that Utomiya had registered for him.

"You understand a lot more now, right?" said Tsubaki.

"Yeah," I replied.

"At first, when my classmate was expelled, I thought that Housen-kun was involved," she said. "But recently, I was told that it was Yagami-kun."

Yagami had incredible latent potential, but he was tripped up by his own arrogance. He only saw me; he wasn't even looking at the rivals standing on the same stage as him. It seemed as though Yagami wasn't a welcome presence in the first-year students' battle.

"Don't give up now just because you avenged your classmate and defeated your enemy," I told her.

"I know. To be honest, I wasn't very attached to this school at first, but... It's a little different now. This place is surprisingly fun."

Considering the conversation we had just now, I understood that there were more various thoughts and feelings there, aside from simply wanting to get revenge on an enemy.

"And with that, we'll be going now," announced Tsubaki.

"...Please excuse me," added Utomiya, forcing himself to address me politely. Then, together with Tsubaki, they headed back to the dormitories.

"Guess I need to head back to the classroom," I muttered aloud.

## 9.3

MY CONVERSATION WITH TSUBAKI concluded, I made my way back to the classroom. On my way there, I happened across an exhausted, haggard-looking Chabashira-sensei.

"Great work out there today," I told her. "You really performed splendidly."

"What *exactly* did I do a great job on?" She shot me a childish glare, making no attempt to even mask it. She was clearly angry.

"Did you hate wearing a maid outfit that much?" I asked.

I already knew the answer, and when I asked her that question, her shoulders twitched.

"When I got back to the faculty lounge, I saw pictures of me on teachers' desks all over the room," she snapped. "And that's not all. Do you have any idea how many teachers accosted me in this short period of time after the festival? How many times people talked to me about the maid outfit? Or even how *humiliated* I was? To be completely honest, right now, my deepest, most sincere wish is to just transform into a shellfish."

I figured that it must have been a very difficult experience for her, considering the intense pressure she was feeling.

"Well, that's...not something I would know anything about," I said. "I guess that goes to show how popular you are."

"I am, absolutely and unequivocally, not a popular person," Chabashira-sensei shot back. "What you did was entirely unnecessary."

If she seriously thought she wasn't popular at all, then she was going to be in for some hardship in the future. I was sure that there were more than a few adults who appreciated Chabashira-sensei as a member of the opposite sex now, even if those feelings hadn't been brought to the surface previously.

"Well, it's all over and done with, anyway," I said. "Our class won first place. Isn't that good?"

"No, it's *not* all good. Besides, you would've hit the highest reward bracket for sure, even if I hadn't done anything."

"I suppose you're right about that. But first place does look better than second or third, doesn't it?"

"It's so unlike you to say something like that... Ugh." She swallowed hard and then restrained herself, perhaps because she felt like there wasn't any point in taking me to task over it any further. "At any rate, I never would have guessed that you'd be cooperating with Ryuu'en's class under the guise of a competition against them."

"If it's just one class fighting alone, then they could have up to forty people on their side at most," I said. "But if you have two classes join forces, that means you have twice as many people in your ranks. Surprisingly enough, that's really nothing to scoff at."

Besides, even if we weren't officially working together on the surface, we didn't necessarily need to work on advertising our own offerings. If you have a lot of people get together, even in different ways, we could put on an even better act, without having to spend a lot of money.

"Even in the faculty room, people were rather surprised," Chabashira-sensei said. "Everyone thought you were having an honest-to-goodness showdown."

She only mentioned what happened during the Cultural Festival and didn't touch on Yagami's expulsion. Even though she should know about it as a teacher, it was a matter of the first-year classes and thus not her purview. She wasn't talking about it with me because she thought it didn't concern me. In that regard, as a teacher at this school, she was making the right decision.

"By the way, shouldn't you be heading back to the dormitory now?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Horikita's waiting for me in the classroom. What about you? Are you working late?"

"I'm making the rounds throughout campus. We received several missing item reports from guests who forgot things here."

Even after the Cultural Festival was over, the teachers were still dealing with the aftermath.

## 9.4

**W**HEN I RETURNED to the classroom together with Chabashira-sensei, I saw Horikita resting her upper body on her desk, as though she were taking a nap. Chabashira-sensei and I briefly exchanged looks with one another and decided to not call out to her. I drew closer just to be sure, and I saw that she was asleep after all. A strong breeze was coming in through the open window. For a moment, I wondered if I should cover her with her school uniform jacket, but I thought better of it. I felt like Horikita wouldn't be too pleased if she later found out that I had gotten too close to her.

"Mm..." she mumbled.

*Hm?* For a second, I thought she had woken up, but apparently not.

"No..."



She was talking in her sleep. I was a little surprised because what she said sounded somewhat concerning. I figured that Horikita, too, was exhausted after today. I closed the window quietly so she wouldn't catch a cold and then walked back out into the hallway.

"I decided to let her sleep a little longer," I told Chabashira-sensei.

"You're not going to wait for her to wake up?"

"She got first place in the Cultural Festival. I'd say that's the least I can do." *She'll be up soon enough, anyway.*

"You should head on back already," Chabashira-sensei said. "I'll take over here."

"Are you sure you're okay with that?" I asked.

"I figure that it's nice to show some appreciation to the person helping out behind the scenes too."

"In that case, I'll take you up on your generous offer," I replied.

"But you better listen here, Ayanokouji. Don't you dare come up with another strategy to humiliate me like this ever again. Okay?"

"You're still bothered by it?"

It took Chabashira-sensei a moment to reply. "Let's just say that today has been a day that I will never, ever forget, for as long as I live."

"Well... Anyway, thank you for your hard work today, Chabashira-sensei. This too will become a good memory someday."

"Students shouldn't say such impudent things." She shot me a glare, but then let out a sigh and leaned against the classroom door.

*Well then, I suppose I should be heading on back,* I thought to myself.

## **Class Point Totals as of the End of the November Cultural Festival**

Class A, led by Sakayanagi: 1,201

Class B, led by Horikita: 966

Class C, led by Ryuuen: 740

Class D, led by Ichinose: 675

## Postscript

**B**EFORE I EVEN KNEW IT, 2022 arrived and we're already well into the year! Time really flies. Hey folks, Kinugasa here.

Lately, eating ginger has been something of an obsession of mine. I'm totally on a ginger kick. I regularly buy a few kilos of it and grate it up, then buy a few kilos more, grate it up again, and so on. I've been eating it with both meat and vegetables. I especially love the combination of king trumpet mushrooms, ginger, and lemon sauce. It's the best. Eh he he, I kind of revealed a little something about my private life that no one is interested in.

Ahem. I went a little off the rails because I didn't have anything in particular to write about, but let's move on to the topic at hand, shall we?

The main focus of the story in this volume was the November Cultural Festival. I'm sure that some of you would have liked to have seen other students wearing costumes too, but I ask that you please understand that there may be an opportunity for that another time. At any rate, the story is progressing smoothly without stopping. Soon, the second semester will end, the students will have their winter vacation, and they'll be thrust into the turbulent third semester. Although there have been a few more volumes than I initially expected in this story, the second-year arc has finally passed its turning point. I feel like, step by step, we're getting closer to the conclusion of the story.

Will Ayanokouji be able to graduate from school safely? Where will each class end up when everything's said and done? I think that you'll start to be able to see the bigger picture bit by bit now, and I hope that you're eagerly looking forward to what's to come.

Oh, and also! Also, also! The second season of the anime will finally air this July! I've been waiting for this for a long time. I've been eagerly awaiting this so much that I even asked myself

how much longer I could possibly wait! I'm so excited to see Ayanokouji and the rest in action again for the first time in many years. And also, since a third season is also planned... Yeah, hmm... How can I put it? I'm filled with deep emotions.

So, to all of you who like *Classroom*, and those of you who don't, those of you who are interested in the story, and those of you who aren't, it would make me immensely happy if you could tune in and watch. I'll also be watching, as someone who has probably been awaiting the second season more eagerly than anyone else. Yay!

Lastly, I'd like to make a serious announcement, and I humbly ask for your understanding in this matter. The *Classroom of the Elite Year 2* anime will be starting soon, and I also wrote *Classroom of the Elite Volume 0* as a special bonus for the Blu-ray & DVD release. It was very tough work. As the name *Volume 0* suggests, the book is about getting closer to Ayanokouji's past. I'm very grateful to have gotten Tomose-shi's full cooperation as the illustrator, and the number of illustrations in that book is in line with the main volumes. I humbly ask that you consider checking it out.

That's all for this time. Thank you for bearing with me through this postscript. I hope to see you all again sometime within the year.



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