

NOVEL

9

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE 2

YEAR

STORY: SYOUGO
KINUGASA
ART: TOMOSE SHUNSAKU



Table of Contents

[Character Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 1: Nagumo Miyabi's Soliloquy](#)

[Chapter 2: Signs of Momentum](#)

[Chapter 3: A New Student Council Member](#)

[Chapter 4: How to Spend Time with People in Ichinose's Class](#)

[Chapter 5: How to Spend a Day Off](#)

[Chapter 6: Approaching the Special Exam](#)

[Chapter 7: The Expected and the Unexpected](#)

[Chapter 8: A Tinge of Anxiety](#)

[Postscript](#)

[Newsletter](#)



CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

NOVEL 9



I arrived a little before the appointed time—
and found that Ichinose was already there, waiting
for me, holding an umbrella behind her back.

*"G-good morning,
Ayanokouji-kun!"*



*"Hey... May I touch your face,
Ayanokouji-kun?"*

*"It's not like a prize is going
to come out, you know."*

Ichinose laughed softly at my joking response and nodded. Then, she reached out with her right hand and touched my cheek.

ENDLESS RAIN

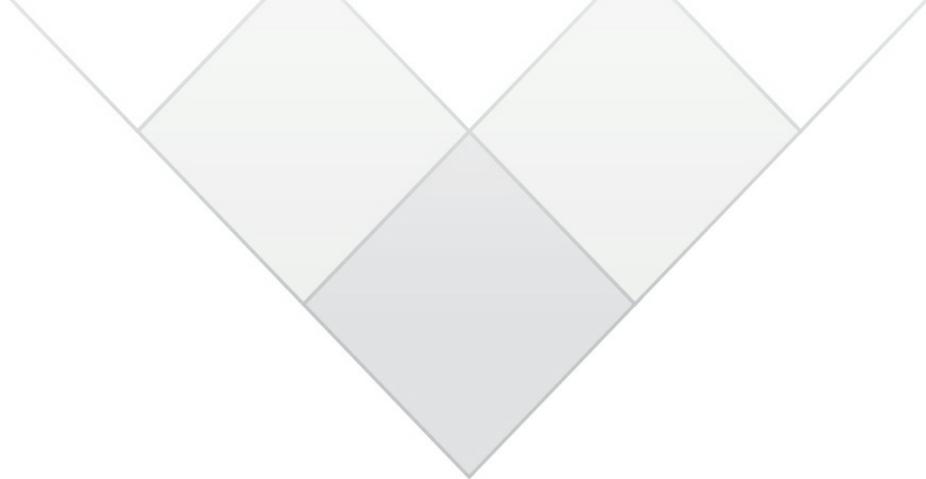
ICHINOSE HONAMI & RYUUN KAKERU





9

WELCOME TO THE CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2



CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

NOVEL 9

STORY BY
Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY
Tomoseshunsaku



Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

YOUKOSO JITSURYOKUSHIJOUSHUGI NO KYOUSHITSU E 2NENSEIHEN
VOL.9

©Syougo Kinugasa 2023

First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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

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

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

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Timothy MacKenzie

COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Rebecca Schneidereit

PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen

EDITOR: Harry Catlin

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

PUBLISHER: Lianne Sendar

VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold

PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-88843-871-8

Printed in Canada

First Printing: August 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2 9

CONTENTS

1. NAGUMO MIYABI'S SOLILOQUY
2. SIGNS OF MOMENTUM
3. A NEW STUDENT COUNCIL MEMBER
4. HOW TO SPEND TIME WITH PEOPLE IN ICHINOSE'S CLASS
5. HOW TO SPEND A DAY OFF
6. APPROACHING THE SPECIAL EXAM
7. THE EXPECTED AND THE UNEXPECTED
8. A TINGE OF ANXIETY
- POSTSCRIPT



Chapter 1: Nagumo Miyabi's Soliloquy

BEFORE I KNEW IT, I was number one, in both academics and sports.

Before I knew it, I found myself surrounded by people who wanted to enjoy the benefits of my good fortune.

It wasn't as though I had put in a lot of effort.

Even though I had learned the same things others did, in the same span of time, it was my ability to learn that was head-and-shoulders above.

It was...it was like a prerequisite for becoming unexpectedly popular.

Popularity is a talent.

From an early age, I had the talent to become popular.

It wasn't as if everyone liked me, of course; I knew that. Some people saw me as a rival—and the more intense that feeling was, the more they loathed me. But that didn't really matter. Good or bad, I was happy as long as the common riffraff recognized that I was special. It had always been the same for me—I'd followed the dazzling path of Mr. Popular all throughout elementary school and junior high.

Even so, I'd never been able to shake off this odd, niggling discomfort I sometimes felt, like something was wrong. A feeling of unease that I couldn't answer. My life had always been free of inconvenience, and that feeling was the only thing that had smoldered there in the back of my mind for all this time. Even after being recognized by so many, after being followed by them, that feeling that something was off wouldn't go away.

But I had decided not to care. Everything was fine, regardless of this feeling of unease, as long as I was still popular, still number one. That was how it was supposed to be...

But things changed completely once I entered high school. I couldn't stop that

sense of unease from boiling furiously to the surface.

Horikita Manabu. That student was one year older than me, and he had commanded the respect of many. He outshone me by far; he was much wiser than I was, and he had conviction, too, without ever seeming fickle.

Then there was another person. He was different from Horikita Manabu, but he had special talents. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. He was an unusual guy with a cocky attitude, but even so, his abilities were undeniably the real thing.

My own accomplishments weren't any less impressive than the achievements of those two were.

But, along with that feeling of unease I couldn't banish, there was something that I sometimes thought about.

Am I really that good?

Or am I simply the emperor with no clothes, unlucky enough never to have been graced with a real opponent?

The thought plagued me. It was the source of my unease.

That was why I needed to settle things—in order to eliminate that feeling. I had to defeat Ayanokouji, and become someone truly gifted.

Otherwise...

Chapter 2: Signs of Momentum

THE END OF THE SECOND SEMESTER was finally in sight. The fun of the school trip had come and gone, like a fleeting dream, and now winter vacation was just around the corner for the second-year students. Winter was the season that signaled the end of the year, and brought with it premonitions of partings of ways.

It was quite chilly, perhaps because the low for today was one degree Celsius. Other students trotted past me on the way to school, exhaling clouds of white as they talked to each other about the cold.

Every day, I closely observed these nonchalant, casual morning scenes, etching them into my memory. I supposed that those who lived only for the moment might wonder why someone would pay so much attention to interactions like these. But what if you knew that they'd only be around for a limited amount of time? What if you knew you would only be able to see these things for one more year? Surely, this world of everyday occurrences would then seem like a glittering gem.

As I was staring intently at these exchanges, waiting for a certain someone to arrive, I received a message.

"Come to the student council office after class today."

It was a text from Nagumo, worded so strongly that I felt as if I had to comply, whether I liked it or not.

"Student council office, huh?" I muttered to myself.

I wasn't entirely keen on the idea, but I couldn't refuse it so easily, considering what was to come in the future. Besides, he had cooperated with me during the Cultural Festival, even though there was a conflict of interest. I responded with a short message, simply telling him that I understood, and then turned my screen off.

As I went back to watching the students and scenery, I spotted Kushida walking to class by herself. I didn't speak up or offer a greeting or anything, but when I looked over, she waved at me with a smile. So, I raised my hand in response, and then—

Just moments before we passed by one another, she shot me a glare.

"What...? First thing in the morning?" I asked myself.

She was the one who'd just greeted me, and I waved right back, so why did she need to glare at me? She must have been confident no one would see it if she gave me a look like that, but I didn't really remember doing anything in particular to warrant it. I suppose it would make sense to assume it was simply because she didn't like me, after everything that had happened, and there was nothing I could do about it. Still... What an unpleasant bait-and-switch. My pleasant morning mood was soured.

Just then, an out-of-breath Kei came running up to me. "Sorry, Kiyotaka!" she shouted. "Didn't mean to make you wait!"

"You're only a few minutes late, if that. You don't have to worry so much about it," I replied.

"But still... I mean, wasn't it cold, waiting outside?" she asked, looking puzzled. We normally met up in the dormitory lobby.

"It's all right. More importantly, though, it looks like you still have bedhead." It was an uncharacteristic mistake for her—she must have been in a big hurry.

"No way! Oh gawd!" She held her head in embarrassment. Then she started hurriedly combing her fingers through her hair in an attempt to fix it. But no matter how many times she tried, some of her bedhead hair kept springing back up with a *pyon*.

"Ugh, what am I gonna dooo...?!" she wailed.

"You don't have to worry about it that much, do you?" I said. "I mean, people like Hondou and Ike have come to class with way worse bedhead than that."

"Don't lump me in with guys like them! Ugh, I'll just stop by the bathroom when I get to school..."

Flustered, Kei covered up her hair with her hand as she walked on ahead. Well, I supposed there were worse things to worry about than looking presentable.

2.1

I ARRIVED AT THE CLASSROOM by myself, without Kei, and then walked over to my seat.

Yousuke called out to me when he spotted me. “Good morning, Kiyotaka-kun.”

“Oh, hey, morning,” I replied.

He was surrounded by girls. I was happy that he greeted me, but the “*Give me back my Hirata-kun!*” looks that the girls were shooting my way were painful. I wondered what he wanted.

“I know this might just be me being a worrywart,” Yousuke said, “but if there’s anything I can do to help, please talk to me.”

That same offer again. “Haven’t you been telling me the same thing every day lately?”

I could guess what he was worried about—the group of three people who seemed to keeping an eye on us from a distance. Yousuke was likely concerned over the fact that I was no longer part of that group, just because I had been in the past. The only thing I knew for certain, though, was that Yousuke had been anxious about that issue since before the school trip, and still was, even now that it was over.

“If something does happen, I’ll tell you,” I said to him. “Thanks. If at all possible, I’d really appreciate it if you could keep an eye out quietly.”

Yousuke was the type of person who’d worry about things even when he said he wouldn’t. That was exactly why I let him know once again, very clearly, that I understood his feelings of goodwill toward me. I figured he was probably going

to keep talking to me about this on a regular basis from now on, until my relationship with my old friend group was repaired.

"I'm just hopeless," Yousuke sighed. "I guess I can't stand it whenever I see instability in the class..."

Even though he hadn't done anything wrong, Yousuke sounded disgusted with himself and these feelings he couldn't suppress. He just had an unfortunate disposition.

"Anyway, the girls are waiting for you," I remarked. "I'm more concerned about that, personally."

The longer we talked, the more intense the girls' envious gazes became, as if demanding to know how long I was going to be monopolizing their Yousuke.

When Kei arrived at the classroom not long after, Yousuke had gone back over to the girls. The bell rang and Chabashira-sensei strode in. Thus, the curtain was raised on yet another new day of school.

"I suppose it won't come as much of a surprise that you no longer get any forewarning for these sorts of things, but before your winter vacation begins, you're going to be taking the final special exam of the second semester," announced Chabashira-sensei.

Although my classmates had become accustomed to the experience of special exams by now, they were slightly more upset than usual by this announcement, as they seemed to have expected that we were just going to head right into winter break.

"Oh, whoops," Chabashira-sensei said. "You *do* seem to be a little surprised this time around, after all."

It must have come as a surprise because we'd just had the Cultural Festival and the school trip; a couple of big events in a row. From the school's perspective, though, that was just the way things were, I supposed; a special exam was a special exam. However, there were only two more weeks left in the second semester, so I couldn't imagine that this exam would be anything that required long-term preparations or countermeasures. *What is it going to be like, exactly?* I wondered.

"Okay. It's not like I don't understand why you might be feeling anxious," Chabashira-sensei said, "but there's no need to be so upset. This isn't the kind of special exam I know you're all most worried about, where students are expelled."

So, that key factor, the possibility of expulsion, was going to be toned down in this particular special exam.

"But of course, there's no getting around the fact that Class Point totals will fluctuate depending on who wins," she added. "Now that you're going to be chasing after Class A even more fervently, I know you can't afford to lose this one."

Just winning once or twice wouldn't be enough for us to take the lead. We'd need sufficient fighting spirit to win every battle that lay ahead; otherwise, we wouldn't be able to get ahead.

Chabashira-sensei went on, "There aren't any complicated rules that you're going to need to drill into your heads for this particular special exam. You're going to be competing against another class in a one-on-one competition of academic ability."

A competition of academic ability. That wasn't a surprising exam for the students at this school. If anything, it was about as standard as you could possibly get. Even regular midterm tests and final exams were competitions, after all. However, considering that this was being billed as a "special exam," it should go without saying that there would be some kind of unique rules which would greatly impact the outcome of the competition.

"The winner receives fifty Class Points from the loser—so, if you win, you get fifty Class Points, and if you lose, you lose fifty Class Points," explained Chabashira-sensei.

It wasn't a large number by any stretch. If anything, that would actually be a relatively small change in Class Point value.

Ike spoke up. "Wait, if this is a competition of academic ability between classes or whatever, then doesn't that mean it's just a bad idea to go up against Class A?!"

"You should be happy, Ike, precisely because Class A is who you and the rest of Class B will be competing against," replied Chabashira-sensei, confronting us with the cruel reality. It sounded like our opponent had already been chosen. "It should be easy to understand; essentially, the matchups were decided based on the average test scores from last semester's finals. First and second place from that exam will compete against one another in this exam, and the same goes for third and fourth place. Even with the presence of some special rules, there could be a substantial impact on the overall competition if Class A were to fight against one of the lower-level classes, since there is a significant gap in fundamental academic ability between them."

As of the beginning of December, Sakayanagi's Class A had a total of 1,250 points, and Horikita's Class B had 985 points. If Horikita's class won in a direct matchup, the gap between her class and Sakayanagi's would be reduced by 100 points, thus bringing the difference between them down to 165 points. On top of that, Horikita's class would surpass the 1,000-point mark for the first time since enrollment, which would be a major milestone.

On the other hand, Ryuuuen's Class C had 684 points, while Ichinose's Class D had 655 points. If Ichinose won, then she'd go back to leading Class C again, but if she lost, then the gap between her class and Class A would be doubled. That would be a painful development. Regardless, though, there was no way this was going to be an easy fight, and we had never once been victorious in a competition of academic ability. The way Chabashira-sensei had said we were in first and second place made it sound like there was only a slight difference between Horikita's class and Sakayanagi's class, but the overall difference in academic ability was by no means small.

"The questions you'll see on this test are from the usual subjects that are covered in your midterm and final exams," Chabashira-sensei went on. "They will range from relatively easy to extremely challenging. This will be just as difficult as—well, no, actually, *at least as* difficult as your regular written exams, if not more so."

Although there had been remarkable growth in terms of academic ability in this class, leagues beyond the other classes, it was unlikely that my classmates would outperform Sakayanagi's, even if they made a desperate attempt to

devote themselves wholly to their studies over the next two weeks.

“Now, though, I’m going to talk about how even you have a good chance of winning this thing,” said Chabashira-sensei.

The details of the special exam, as it was labeled, were displayed on the monitor.

2nd Semester Finals Special Exam— Cooperative Comprehensive Written Test

Overview

The entire class will complete a test with 100 questions total.

Rules

Students will solve problems one by one in a predetermined order. Each student is allowed to answer a maximum of five problems, and must answer at least two, regardless of whether they can answer them correctly or not.

A problem answered by one student cannot be corrected by another student, regardless of whether the answer is correct or incorrect.

Each student shall be given a maximum of ten minutes to answer problems, including time spent entering and exiting the room.

All students other than the student currently engaged with the test questions must wait in a separate room.

Only the student due to answer questions next is allowed to wait in front of the entrance to the room.

If a student exceeds the time limit, that student will be disqualified and will not receive any points.

Actions such as leaving an answer to a problem or a hint to a solution to a problem, whether in written or verbal form, are considered violations.

In the event such a violation is discovered, the exam will be terminated and a score of 0 will be given.

Special bonuses may be awarded based on the amount of time remaining:

1 hour or more: 10 points

30 minutes or more: 5 points

10 minutes or more: 2 points

All problems are to be scored based on the Academic Ability of the student answering them, regardless of difficulty level. (The student's Academic Ability level is based on their Academic Ability score in OAA as of December 1.)

Academic Ability A: 1 point

Academic Ability B: 2 points

Academic Ability C: 3 points

Academic Ability D: 4 points

Academic Ability E: 5 points

So, it was an exam in which the number of points received increased or decreased depending on how well-equipped the student was to solve the problem, regardless of the question's difficulty level. These rules were indeed unique—they'd definitely require us to take into account things we normally wouldn't. OAA's Academic Ability scores included + and – markers, but since there only seemed to be five categories, I guessed that meant that students who had a + were at a slight advantage in their respective categories.

"And there you have the unique rules for this written special exam," Chabashira-sensei concluded. "At first, you might think that Class A would have the simple advantage here, as they have a high number of academically gifted students—but that means the percentage of students in their class with an Academic Ability score of B or better is fairly high. So, even if they answer every question correctly, the maximum overall score that they can obtain will be lower. Do you understand what I mean?"

While there were more than a few students in Horikita's class who had shown remarkable improvement in their academics, it was also true that there were certain students who were still languishing at the bottom of our grade level, such as Kei, Satou, Ike, and Shinohara. Even though those students had a low chance of giving correct answers when solving problems, they could get as many as four or five points per question on this particular special exam as long as they got the answers right. As such, you couldn't call this a pure contest of academic ability, and we weren't necessarily at a disadvantage against Class A, either.

It was impossible to predict how this would turn out, or what the results would be, as the match exceeded the scope of our imaginations. There were added bonuses for time remaining, but whether we could actually earn those was questionable. The test was designed so that the timer included the time spent entering and exiting, starting as soon as you put your hand on the door, and there were thirty-eight people in Horikita's class. In order to finish the exam with an hour remaining, we would need to have every individual finish with close to two minutes remaining—it was impossible.

The lower a student's level of Academic Ability, the more likely they were to make careless mistakes, and the higher their risk of losing points by being distracted by the time limit. So, was the bonus for remaining time implemented more out of consideration for the students who had better Academic Ability scores in OAA, then? Well, even so, it would be dangerous to focus attention on trying to cut down time loss.

"So, we really do have a good chance of winning this special exam, don't we?" said Horikita. It sounded like she had also quickly grasped that a path to victory was possible, now that we'd heard the rules.

"Exactly so," Chabashira-sensei replied. "Of course, all the students in Class A are gifted academically, from top to bottom. They will probably score very well. And even though there are many students with an Academic Ability level around D in this class, with the potential to score very highly, if those students fail to answer any questions correctly, they'll get zero points."

Even so, our odds were much, much better than they would be in a head-to-head clash.

"I'd like to bring up an additional point regarding cheating, which is mentioned in the rules," Chabashira-sensei said. "The rules prohibit speaking to each other—for example, when you're in the classroom that is designated as the waiting room, or when switching places with a student who has completed their portion of the exam. There will always be students waiting on standby in the classroom, but do not even think about engaging in unnecessary conversation. I cannot recommend more emphatically that you keep from making any careless mistakes that will waste this exam for you."

I was sure that the students would be mindful of the fact that surveillance was going to be strict.

"So, um, say someone is absent on that day... What happens then?" asked Ike.

"If one student is absent, then that will render two questions unanswerable, and if two students are absent, that will render four questions unanswerable, resulting in zero points for each. It's treated the same as disqualification due to running out of time. The questions rendered unanswerable will be determined at random before the start of the exam. Furthermore, although chances of this happening are low," Chabashira-sensei added, "if two classes end up with the same score, there will be no change in Class Points for either class."

So, intentionally having one of your classmates absent was obviously not a viable strategy, as it would only put you at a disadvantage. And classes with a large number of students in them, such as Ichinose's class and Ryuu'en's class, would have an advantage, because they would be given slightly more time to solve problems—but that would have no effect on the number of points any of them could earn by solving the problems. The impact of having a bigger or smaller class size would be minimal, though. The most efficient ideal would be for students with lower scores in OAA to answer five questions on the exam. Those students with lower OAA scores who could study could be your main force, or they could be an unexpected obstacle.

In any case, though, Sakayanagi's class and Horikita's class coincidentally had the same number of students, so this train of thought was meaningless.

"You should think things over and discuss ways you might be able to beat Class A amongst yourselves," said Chabashira-sensei. She sounded like a mother

watching over her children. “As for the appointed date for the special exam, you have until just before winter vacation begins. The scope of the test is enormous, so the school has decided that you’ll need that much time to prepare. It will be tough, but if you win, you’ll be that much closer to Class A. That’s all.”

With that, Chabashira-sensei brought this particular lecture to a close. The exact scope of the test was apparently going to be announced tomorrow.

Schedule

December 22: Special Exam Testing Day

December 23: Special Exam Results Announcement;

2nd Semester Closing Ceremony

The exam was indeed immediately before the end of the second semester. The very last minute. Still, there were only three more weeks left before it was held. Students with a high level of academic ability typically had a different attitude toward studying than those who didn’t, so it was fine for them even if preparation time was kept to a minimum, but the key to victory here lay with the students whose academic abilities were at or below average.

“I examined each class’s OAA Academic Ability scores to see how things stand currently,” Horikita said. “Because we have so many more students who have Academic Ability scores of D and E, our class inevitably has a much higher maximum possible score. If we were to fight this battle in the ideal way, then our victory would be guaranteed.”

A class with more students with lower OAA Academic Ability scores could score more points; no matter how hard Class A tried, there was a limit to the number of points they could get. We could win if we simply exceeded their maximum possible score, even if only by one point. But this was all only armchair theory, really, and there was barely a paper-thin possibility of pulling this off. With nearly forty students participating, getting a perfect score would be close to impossible.

And if we took Chabashira-sensei's tone and the special exam's rules into consideration, there was every reason to expect that the ratio of difficult questions to easy ones would be high. If the problems on the exam were the kind that could be easily solved by students with Academic Ability scores of E and D, how could you call that balanced? It would be a completely absurd special exam in that case, one that would put a class at a greater disadvantage the more academically gifted it was.

It was inevitable that we were going to have to arrange some kind of whole-class study group, but it was doubtful that would be enough to lead our class to victory.

"It might also be important to determine who'll solve how many problems, and who they'll pass the baton to next, right?" Yousuke said calmly. He directed his question at Horikita, sounding as though he was looking to her for confirmation.

"Yes," she agreed. "If we took the simple approach, the easy solution would be to have the students who are less advanced academically take the lead, sending them out first to solve as many problems as they're able to. But..."

The time limit was ten minutes. The ability to read and understand a problem would also vary significantly based on an individual student's capacities. If they were suddenly presented with a test that had as many as one hundred questions on it, they'd probably have a hard time picking out the easy questions.

If the more academically gifted students took care of the difficult questions first, then it would take less time for the less advanced students to find the right problems, and they would be able to focus on them calmly.

Who can solve what problems? And what problems can't they solve? A strategy based on that information, which took command of the situation, would be one path to victory. There were probably several other methods as well, but ultimately, it was important to establish what strategy to pursue early on, and to get the class moving toward that.

Some of our classmates began talking amongst themselves.

"Chabashira-sensei said that it was possible for us to win, but...a disadvantage

is still a disadvantage, right?"

"If they can score a lot of points for sure, I don't think we're going to beat them. I mean, it's *Class A* we're going up against."

...And so on.

To date, Class A had never once scored below the other classes in terms of overall scores on written exams. Even with these unique rules, there was no changing the fact that they made for a tough opponent.

Horikita spoke up to address those students with grim looks on their faces. "Our opponent this time may be Class A, yes, but actually, this is really a battle against ourselves. Whatever strategy they might come up with, it doesn't affect us. We don't need to be particularly worked up over having Sakayanagi-san as our opponent."

She emphasized strongly that we should be concerned with the internal, not the external.

"I will think as hard as I can and come up with a strategy," she went on. "In the meantime, I would like you all to study as much as possible; whatever you can manage. Every second counts."

Up until now—or rather, to be more precise, until just a few weeks ago—students had been working hard studying for their semester finals. Even though studying was the main duty of a student, having to start again so soon would be an exhausting prospect. Even so, not a single student expressed anything that sounded like dissatisfaction.

"We will back you up as much as we can, too," Yousuke said to Horikita.

At that, students like Keisei and Mii-chan, the ones who could tutor in study groups and such, got up and started showing initiative.

"Hell yeah," said Sudou. "I'm gettin' fired up! Personally, this is kinda givin' me mixed feelings about how my OAA score's gone up, but I'm gonna make sure I pitch in, too."

Sudou, who had originally had an evaluation of E in Academic Ability, had seen his score rise, and now it was a C+. He would score fewer points now than

he would have before, with his older rating, but he had made a big leap forward in ability. I was sure that back when his Academic Ability score was still E, he would've had a hard time just solving the problems.

2.2

I SLIPPED OUT OF THE CLASSROOM just after discussion started at the end of class, and I arrived at my destination at almost exactly the scheduled time.

I'd been planning to just knock immediately, but I could hear loud voices coming from inside the room. It sounded as though there was a bit of an argument going on. However, because there was a thick door separating us, I couldn't tell exactly what they were saying. I figured that if I stood there and listened for a while, I might be able to hear things clearly eventually, but since the appointed time was just moments away, I quickly discarded the option of eavesdropping. Instead, I headed into the student council office at the time I'd been instructed to do so.

"...Hello," I called.

When I got inside, I saw that there were already two boys sitting down in the office. One of them quickly stood up.

"Sorry to have called you, Ayanokouji," Nagumo said.

I tried casually saying something that a normal student might say. "I don't mind, but it does make me a little nervous, seeing the president and vice president looking like they're squaring off."

"Sorry, but it doesn't really look like you're nervous." Nagumo, still seated, crossed his legs and then curled his index finger, beckoning Kiriyama to come closer. Kiriyama moved to a position where he could stand slightly behind Nagumo and still remain easily in view for me. At that moment, Nagumo took his cell phone out of his pocket and quickly looked down at the screen. Less than a second later, he turned off the screen and pocketed it again.

The next person to speak was not Student Council President Nagumo, but

Vice President Kiriyama. “We’re calling student council members Horikita and Ichinose here after this,” he said.

“Horikita and Ichinose?” I repeated.

If that combination of people wasn’t a coincidence, then they were just two second-year students who both belonged to the student council.

“Don’t be so hasty, Kiriyama,” said Nagumo. “Perhaps Ayanokouji would like to have a little chat with them, too?”

“Sorry, but it doesn’t look that way. He wants to keep this brief. It’s written on his face.”

I felt gratitude deep in my heart for Vice President Kiriyama’s sound judgment.

“Besides,” he added, “speaking personally, there are a lot of things I’d like to work on, in preparation for the upcoming special exam.”

“Special exam?” Nagumo shot a quizzical sidelong look at Kiriyama, not understanding his reasons. “But special exams held this late, in the second semester—aren’t they irrelevant to us third-year students by now?”

“Even so, I’d like to always be prepared for unforeseen circumstances. Many third-year students are more eager to get their hands on a ticket to the top than you think. What if a student comes along who wants to catch you napping?”

“Fools like that would have fallen a long time ago,” Nagumo retorted. “There isn’t anyone left who could make themselves my enemy.”

“I would hope not,” said Kiriyama.

There wasn’t much time left for the third-year students. As long as Nagumo held all the authority, they needed to somehow manage to get their hands on a ticket for twenty million points. They were still fighting that battle. It was no wonder that Nagumo was so optimistic about his lack of enemies. Since he was the one who held all the tickets that those students needed, obviously, no one could do anything to defy him. The third-years, Kiriyama included, had no choice but to quietly follow Nagumo’s orders, or else live in fear that they’d be deprived of their ticket to victory.

However, if you turned that statement around, it also meant that restraint did *not* apply to those who hadn't been given a ticket. This was an exaggeration, but if those people could get Nagumo expelled and accumulate Private Points by doing so... Well, no, even if someone were to try something like that, it was doubtful whether there'd actually be any profit in it.

If Nagumo were expelled for certain, then the enormous number of Private Points he held would probably be returned to the school treasury. Without an agreement like that in place, Nagumo wouldn't be able to protect himself. Meaning, in other words, his presence was tied to his funds, which existed for the sake of his rise to power. Without Nagumo's own existing stash of Private Points, the number of Private Points a person could get during the third semester alone would probably only be enough to save one or two people at most.



"Do you have something particular in mind, Kiriyma?" Nagumo said. "You've been hounding me about that incessantly since this morning."

"It doesn't matter whether or not I have something specific in mind, does it?" Kiriyma replied. "Well, now that I've brought it up, I'll add that I have no intention of standing still in regard to 'this matter' anymore."

Kiriyma's words were heavy with meaning, and an unspoken "*Am I wrong?*" hung in the air between the two third-years.

Nagumo smiled and nodded. "Sorry, Kiriyma. But this is a personal decision that I need to take care of while I'm still in school here."

"In that case, I hope you can understand my desire to get this over with quickly," said Kiriyma.

There had been some arguing going on in the student council office before I entered. If Kiriyma had been on Nagumo's case about it since this morning, "this matter" couldn't be something Kiriyma was pleased about. The same was probably true of me, though.

"Okay, okay," said Nagumo. "I'll leave the chitchat to a minimum. Sound good?"

Nagumo confirmed with Kiriyma that, for all intents and purposes, there was no other choice but to proceed with this chat.

"There is another student council matter that we need to discuss after this, so please keep it brief," said Kiriyma.

"Yes, come to think of it, you did say there was something to talk about," agreed Nagumo. "All right, I understand. Let's make this quick, then."

In the end, it sounded like Kiriyma had given in, and Nagumo began what he had apparently deemed a necessary chat.

"You second-years seem to be really closing the gap with each other," he remarked. "A race that close is almost unprecedented."

"Yes, it seems that way," I replied.

"Both in my generation and in Horikita-senpai's, by the time we were at the

midpoint of our respective second years, Class A's lead was already huge. I have to say, I'm a little envious that you can enjoy such a close competition at this stage."

I'd heard that, in the past, the class battles had usually been settled, with a huge disparity in Class Points, between the end of the first year and the middle of the second. The class that had started out as Class A would go on to graduate above those in Class B and below, leaving them in the dust. There was occasionally a case where Class B and Class A switched places, like President Nagumo's class had, but still, one class typically took a commanding lead by the middle of the second year. Meanwhile, in our grade level, there was a small enough gap in points that it was possible that even Class D might cause an upset—though, of course, it would be difficult.

"It looks like it's possible that any of the four classes could take the lead, at least theoretically, but that'll probably only be true until the final exams," said Kiriyma.

"Yeah, that sounds about right," said Nagumo. "At that point, two...or perhaps three classes, at most, will still be in the running for Class A."

The two of them made their judgments without any hesitation.

"So, you're saying that's how intense the finals are going to be for second-years?" I asked.

"Yeah," Nagumo said. "The specifics of your final exam will be completely different from ours, of course, but the results for us were pretty disastrous. Last year, I was in charge of the second-years when our final exams came around, and I was able to take control of the exam. I managed to keep the damage to the bare minimum possible, but even so, three people ended up getting expelled."

Even though he had tried to prevent them from happening, casualties had been unavoidable.

"There was a way we could have had zero expulsions," he added, "but we weighed the amount of Class Points we could gain against the decrease in Private Points, and decided losing them was our only option."

His story was probably true, but whether it would be a helpful reference for us was another matter. It was impossible to imagine that the details of our final exams would be the same as the ones Nagumo and the other students from the previous generation had taken in their time. However, the scale would be roughly the same. After you'd spent some time at this school, you could tell that much.

"Surely that's enough idle chitchat?" Kiriyma cut in, quietly urging Nagumo to move on. "I think it's time you get down to business, Nagumo."

Nagumo, realizing he had no other choice, shrugged his shoulders and flashed his white teeth. "It's time for my rule as student council president to come to an end. But before that, we need to decide who'll take up the position next."

"You've held the position longer than any previous president, haven't you?" I asked.

From Horikita Manabu to Nagumo Miyabi... The baton of student council president should have passed a bit sooner. I remembered Nagumo himself saying that he would extend his own term.

"That was the plan, to stay in office, but the school has approached me about the issue several times now," he admitted. "They told me that if I put this off for too long, I'd be depriving my kouhai of the opportunity to gain experience. Well, they certainly have a point."

"All of the third-year students except for me and Nagumo have already completed the proceedings to step down from their roles in the student council," said Kiriyma.

Which means that all that's left to do is decide upon the next student council president, and then these two will be relieved of office, huh? Still, I understood now. This meant that Nagumo had given in and decided to hand over the position of student council president. That would also explain why they had brought up those two names earlier.

"Suzune or Honami? We need to determine which of them would be most suited to serve as the next student council president," said Nagumo.

"You have the power to nominate someone, correct, Student Council

President Nagumo?" I asked.

"Yes. I have that authority."

"In that case, shouldn't you be having this discussion with Horikita and Ichinose, rather than with me?"

I was stating the obvious, and he seemed to have considered this already, because he didn't react with surprise.

"It would be a waste to make a decision just like that, though, wouldn't it?" he said.

"Considering that you invited me here, then... Well, I suppose I can guess what that means."

"You and I are going to decide on the next student council president," said Nagumo.

"But that'll involve more than simply cheering one of them on, right?"

"I've thought about ways for you and me to compete, and this will work well enough. Horikita and Ichinose are both second-years, same as you. I'm sure that you have just as much information about the two of them as I do."

It was understandable that Nagumo, who didn't have a lot of time left at this school, wanted to settle things with me as quickly as possible. I was sure this wasn't the ideal venue Nagumo would have picked for our showdown, but he must have decided it was better than not having any showdown at all.

"It's still possible that we could put this off until later, though," I said. "For example, what about the mixed camp last year? I wouldn't be surprised if there's another special exam like that, where different grade levels come together and compete with each other."

"If and when that time comes, we can just call this particular matter a preliminary round," said Nagumo. He didn't seem to have any intention of putting this off longer. He was boxing me in so I couldn't get away.

"I did agree to have a showdown with you, but I didn't agree to compete against you more than once," I replied.

While there was a certain amount of interest in Nagumo in the back of my

mind, it wasn't like I could devote all of my time to him forever. There were other things I wanted to do in the days to come.

"You think you have the right to refuse?" he said.

"I don't want to be challenged to a contest that's simply a game. If you really want to fight me by deciding on who will be the student council president, then I ask that you be prepared to make it a serious competition."

"Sure, that's fine with me. But it'll be a fight you'll have a high chance of losing. You understand that, right?"

"Since all currently enrolled students have the right to vote, all of the votes cast by third-year students will be in line with your wishes, Student Council President Nagumo," I said. "Which means that a third of all votes in the school have already been decided. That's what you're telling me, yes?"

"Exactly. Even if you somehow managed to band the entirety of your grade together, all we'd manage is to cancel each other out. Not that you'd be able to pull that off."

Considering that the person running opposite Horikita would be Ichinose, someone from our same grade level, it was inevitable that votes amongst the second-years would be split.

"If you can listen to one request, I think this could be a good contest," I said.

"Very interesting. Let's hear it," said Nagumo.

"Make the voting anonymous. That's all. If the school officials are the only ones who see who voted for whom, then I think it'll be an even match."

"I don't understand. You think that, if we do that, the third-years won't vote for the candidate I support?"

"You can imagine how the possibility of that happening would increase, right?"

If anonymity were guaranteed, then there would be no need to follow the rules. Even if Nagumo did promise Private Points or something as a form of reward, it would be impossible for him to prove who obeyed and who didn't, even if he ended up with close to zero votes.

"Even if I agree to that, do you really think that you could get half of the third-years on your side? That's impossible."

"We won't know unless we try," I replied.

Kiriyama watched silently as Nagumo and I argued.

"So, you're saying that you're willing to compete, as long as I add that condition?" asked Nagumo.

"Yes. I wouldn't mind at all in that case."

"You've always got that weird confidence... But whatever, it's fine. If you're so sure of yourself—if you really think you can compete with me on even ground—then I don't have any complaints. However, before we finalize this deal, there's something I wanna talk about first. I'd like to have some kind of stakes in this competition."

I had figured as much. If there weren't any stakes, then it wouldn't matter who lost. I was sure that Nagumo would definitely want to avoid being outmaneuvered by me, and so it was inevitable that he'd propose a bet that he'd be guaranteed to win.

"Is anything fair game for stakes, Ayanokouji?" said Nagumo.

"Would it be all right if I turned around and asked you the exact same question?" I asked in return. "For example, even expulsion?"

"I'd like to say yes to that, but it's a difficult proposition," he admitted.

"I'm sure it is. You hold not only your own fate, but the fate of the entire third-year grade level in your hands, Student Council President Nagumo. No one would accept the risk of expulsion just like that. I'm willing to put up expulsion as my stakes, though. So, with that in mind, please allow me to ask for commensurate stakes."

"Commensurate stakes?" repeated Nagumo.

"If I win, President Nagumo, what I want from you is Private Points. If possible, enough to buy my way into another class. Even under the rules of special exams, you need that many Private Points to prevent an expulsion. That shouldn't be too high an asking price, by any stretch."

"Yes, I suppose that's worth the cost, if you're willing to put up expulsion as the stakes on your end," said Nagumo.

Since both parties' interests were aligned in this case, we were reaching a consensus on the stakes of this competition. However, Kiriyma, standing by and listening to the discussion unfold, put a stop to it.

"I heard beforehand that you would be competing against Ayanokouji, but I cannot agree to the terms at stake here," he cut in. "There is no way I can allow you to gamble with such a large sum on a game."

"Wait a minute, Kiriyma," Nagumo said. "Do you really think that I'll lose with those rules in place? Ayanokouji may have said that just having an anonymous vote would make it an even fight, but he's wrong about that."

"I don't think you'll lose. But even so, it's not like there's a zero percent chance it could happen. The probability would fluctuate depending on whether you endorsed Horikita or Ichinose. More importantly, twenty million points is too large in scale. If you're fine with paying it to Ayanokouji, use that money to save a third-year student instead."

It was only natural that Kiriyma would strongly object to this, but Nagumo showed no signs of backing down.

"I'm free to use the money I've obtained through my real power how I want, on whatever I want. That's the way it always has been and always will be."

"...You're insisting on this, no matter what?" asked Kiriyma.

"No matter what," Nagumo confirmed. "I'm going to win this contest and get Ayanokouji expelled."

"I don't understand. You can just leave these second-years alone. I can't agree with this approach."

Apparently, though, Nagumo had no intention of listening to Kiriyma's arguments any longer. "I'll grant your wish, Ayanokouji," he said. "If you beat me, you'll officially be set for Class A."

"Thank you very much," I replied.

"Are you really sure you're okay with this?" he asked. "If you were asking for

less, then maybe if you got down on your hands and knees and begged, we'd forget about it if you lost. But if you're asking for twenty million, you're going to have to keep your promise about expulsion, even if you don't want to. Y'know? If you want to lower your asking price, now's the time."

"Is that what you want?" I asked.

"Ha. I thought you'd be a little freaked out if I threatened you like that, but you didn't flinch."

"I was counting on that level of risk from the very beginning if I wanted to get a large sum of money from you," I answered.

"I'll prepare the written contract," Nagumo said. "There will be one of two outcomes: expulsion or twenty million."

All that was left now was for each side to decide which candidate they would support; with that, the competition would be set.

"I understand that you're going to compete. But whether this is viable or not, that's—"

Just as Kiriyma was about to make one final attempt to stop Nagumo from gambling away a huge number of points, a knock was heard at the door of the student council office.

"Hello, Nagumo-senpai. This is Ichinose. I'm here with Horikita-san."

We could hear Ichinose's clear voice from the other side of the door. Apparently, both of the prospective candidates had arrived.

"...Nagumo, if possible, do not tell the two of them about this competition," Kiriyma warned. "And keep quiet about the bet, of course."

It was entirely reasonable for Kiriyma to make that request, and this probably wasn't something that Horikita and Ichinose should hear. I was sure they wouldn't feel good knowing that they were the subject of a bet.

"You have no objections to the proposal, then, Ayanokouji?" asked Nagumo.

"It's fine," I replied.

"But...are you really sure you're okay with this?" he pressed. "Once we call

those two in here, that essentially means that the game has begun.”

In an attempt to stop me, Kiriyma looked over at me, emphasizing that this was my last chance to back out. “There’s no need for you to go so far as to risk expulsion in playing Nagumo’s game.”

“But getting your hands on a ticket to Class A is no simple matter, right?” I returned. “In that case, it’s only natural to take on an appropriate level of risk, isn’t it?”

“It seems like you’re no longer doing anything to hide your true nature, either.” Kiriyma, angry to the point of exasperation at this point, took out his cell phone and looked at the screen again. “I understand. In that case, do whatever you want... Ichinose, Horikita—come on in, you two.”

Kiriyma opened the door and urged the two of them to come inside. It seemed, since Nagumo was always selfishly doing whatever he pleased as an individual, there were a lot of difficulties that came with the position of vice president. In that sense, it was a good thing we’d be getting a new president soon.

Ichinose and Horikita noticed my presence as soon as they entered the room. It was already obvious that I was an outsider, though, as someone who clearly wasn’t a member of the student council, so there wasn’t any need to mention it.

“Sit next to Ayanokouji,” ordered Nagumo.

“All right, then. Please excuse us,” said Ichinose.

Horikita sat down next to me, and then Ichinose sat next to her. Horikita shot a quick glance at me out of the corner of her eye, her gaze asking me, *“Are you involved in something strange again?”*

The conversation resumed once everyone—with the exception of Kiriyma, who went back to standing behind Nagumo—was seated.

“I’ve decided that I’d like the two of you to hold an election to determine the next student council president,” said Nagumo.

“An election?” repeated Horikita.

"Isn't that common practice in junior high?" asked Nagumo. "You give a speech and let the students determine which of you they think is best suited to the position of student council president by way of a vote. Whoever gets the most votes will be the next president."

"I see. I don't recall there having been an election like that last year, though," Horikita said.

"That's right. In past years, the sitting student council president—in other words, me, in this particular case—would decide the next president. As long as the person that the baton is being passed to directly accepts, the matter is settled, and the position is decided. Of course, I would never nominate anyone who hadn't accomplished enough to convince the rest of the student body that they're capable."

Nagumo's last point, that the student council president wouldn't be decided at random, wasn't added on a selfish whim, but rather, based on solid grounds. He stressed that point so we wouldn't forget it.

"However, the situation is a little different for you second-year students, compared to how things were in the past," he added. "We've always had at least two, but ideally three or more, students from the same grade level serving as members of the student council. However, only Honami has been serving since last year. Suzune, who joined after starting her second year, hasn't been on the council for a full year yet."

"I understand that no other students joined at the same time, but even so, I don't think there would be any problem nominating Ichinose-san as the next student council president," said Horikita. "I can't think of anything that constitutes a flaw in her case."

Horikita showed no hesitation in saying that she would hand over the position of student council president to her opponent. I supposed that was because she hadn't joined the student council with the goal of becoming president in the first place.

"Are you not interested in becoming president?" Nagumo asked her.

"Oh, it's not like that. I feel positive about the idea of that now, even if it means following in my older brother's footsteps. If the current students wish it,

I am willing to run in an election. But at the same time, I don't have any problems with Ichinose-san."

"It's certainly true that Honami doesn't have any glaring faults," Nagumo agreed. "She's a reasonable choice. But there are other things that make me feel uneasy."

In response to that, Ichinose's shoulders shuddered slightly.

"As of right now, the chances of Honami being able to graduate from Class A have dropped dramatically," said Nagumo. "That is a problem. All of the student council presidents in this school's history have graduated from Class A, without fail. This may not be an official tradition or anything, per se, but it's one that is understood implicitly—a common understanding. Of course, I am included amongst those graduating from Class A."

It was certainly true that, if your only consideration was whether she could graduate from Class A, Ichinose's position could be in jeopardy. Horikita, on the other hand, was currently in Class B and was hot on Class A's heels, so she was awfully close to being in that group, fulfilling that unwritten rule.

"So, we have Honami, who has an impeccable track record, and Suzune, who doesn't have as many achievements under her belt, but is close to Class A. After taking various factors into account, I've decided that you two are just about even right now. That is why I've decided that there will be an election."

Since Nagumo had the authority to make decisions as student council president, we had no other choice but to agree with him as long as he showed a clear basis for his decision, regardless of any objections. All that remained was for the two people in question to decide whether they would accept this proposal or not.

"I understand. In that case, I will run for the position," said Horikita.

"Then it's decided," said Nagumo.

This meant that Horikita and Ichinose would have a one-on-one battle to determine who would be student council president. Now, all that was left was for Nagumo and I to decide which candidate we'd each support.

"Ayanokouji, I'll let you choose which candidate you're going to back up," said

Nagumo.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“I’ll give you at least that much,” said Nagumo.

Horikita or Ichinose? To be honest, it didn’t really make any difference to me which one of them I endorsed, but... If he was telling me that he was giving me the right to choose, I supposed that it’d be better for me to consider which would benefit me later. However, before I could name my choice, Horikita quickly stood up.

“Please wait a minute, President. Ayanokouji-kun being here is—”

“He’s here because I wanted to have a contest with him to see which one of you would become student council president. You, or Honami,” said Nagumo.

He wasn’t supposed to be talking about this in front of them. That wasn’t the plan. Kiriyama put his hand to his forehead, but I was sure there was no way that Nagumo was going to listen to him.

“...You... Again...?” huffed Horikita.

“Hey, I wasn’t the one who initiated this, okay?” I replied.

“But even if that’s true, there’s still a problem with the process of how you reached this point, isn’t there?” she said.

What insight. I couldn’t deny that.

Perhaps even someone like Nagumo had a conscience, because he didn’t make any mention of the stakes.

“Okay then, choose which one you want,” he said.

“In that case—”

I had decided who I was going to pick and was about to say the name out loud. Just then, Kiriyama, who had been standing by as a listener up until now, interjected, and I was made to wait again.

“Hold on,” he said. “This is an unprecedented endeavor. We probably should add a few things, as an addendum.”

“What? Are you still dissatisfied with the direction of this conversation?”

asked Nagumo.

"This is a student council election," Kiriyma replied. "This is going to be a significant mental burden, for both sides. I would like to make sure that they both truly wish to run for the position, and that they have the appropriate qualifications."

"We've already made plenty sure of that, haven't we?" asked Nagumo.

"No. We've gotten a response from Horikita, but we still haven't heard from Ichinose."

"I figure we probably don't even need to bother asking," said Nagumo.

"It doesn't work that way," Kiriyma protested. He directed his gaze at Ichinose, but just then, without warning, the door to the student council office was suddenly thrust open.

"Sorry to interrupt, Nagumo."

Kiryuuin, a student from Class 3-B, entered the office without permission, almost as though she were coming to a friend's room to hang out. It was the first time I had seen her in close proximity since summer, but she didn't have that usual easygoing smile on her face. If anything, it looked like she was in a bad mood.

"An unexpected guest. Didn't you think to knock, at least once?" asked Nagumo.

We were finally about to start discussing the student council election. I was sure that this wasn't a visitor Nagumo welcomed seeing.

"I'm in the middle of something right now," he said, trying to drive her away. "Save this for later."

But Kiryuuin didn't seem to be listening. "I put in a request to Kiriyma in advance to make time for me," she said. "And you're telling me you want me to save this for later?"

"Sorry, but I didn't hear anything about your issue," said Nagumo. Irritated at Kiryuuin's appearance, he looked to Kiriyma for confirmation.

"I'm sorry, Nagumo, but technically, what Kiryuuin's saying is correct,"

Kiriyama said. “It was an error in time management on my part.”

“That’s a careless mistake for you to make,” said Nagumo.

“I will make no excuse for that. She’s been involved in another incident and was hoping that you would resolve it for her today.”

Whatever it was Nagumo and Kiriyama were discussing, I didn’t know the details.

“And there you have it,” Kiryuuin said. “So, do you mind hearing me out, Nagumo?”

“I understand the situation, but we’re having an important discussion about student council business right now,” said Nagumo.

“I can see that you’re in the middle of something, yes, but it’s not like I have all the time in the world, either. I made an appointment for this time, so I need you to honor that.”

It was certainly true that Kiryuuin had no reason to back down. It was Kiriyama’s fault for making the mistake in managing the scheduled appointments.

“My priority right now is talking to Suzune and Honami,” Nagumo told her, brushing her off. “If you insist that you have to talk to me about this issue right away, then sit there, be quiet, and wait.”

He was giving the impression that Kiriyama was the only one who knew the reason why Kiryuuin had shown up here. However, Kiryuuin seemed to think that wasn’t exactly true, and couldn’t hide her irritation.

“I refuse,” she declared, in a slightly more emphatic tone this time, and put her foot down on one of the empty student council office chairs.

“What do you think you’re doing?” asked Nagumo.

“First, I’m going to ask you a question,” Kiryuuin said. “Depending on your answer, you will be sacrificing this chair.”

Was she going to kick it and send it flying? Or smash it? From the sounds of it, the fate of the chair that Kiryuuin had placed her foot on was at stake. Kiriyama looked at Kiryuuin, who showed no signs of leaving, and offered his apologies to

Nagumo once again.

“Considering the fact that it’s Kiryuuin, trying to turn her away might backfire,” he said. “It would probably be safer to listen to what she has to say and have the second-years wait for a moment.”

Even though Horikita and Ichinose had priority, if Nagumo asked them to wait, they’d wait. On the other hand, it was obvious that if he asked Kiryuuin, who appeared to be in a bad mood, she wouldn’t be willing to. If Nagumo couldn’t turn her away or make her wait, then it would be quicker to just hear her out.

“Don’t worry about us. Please, go ahead and focus on Kiryuuin-senpai first,” said Ichinose. “That’s okay, right, Horikita-san?”

“Yes, I think that would be better,” agreed Horikita.

Since both Horikita and Ichinose had come to that conclusion without even needing to wait for direct confirmation from Nagumo, it seemed like he had no other choice but to deal with Kiryuuin.

“Good grief... All right, I’ll hear what you have to say. What’s your business in coming here?” he asked.

“So, you didn’t tell Nagumo that either, did you, Kiriyama?” Kiryuuin said. “You really were sloppy about this.”

“I understand your desire to blame me for this, but I also have a great deal on my plate right now,” Kiriyama replied. “Besides, I decided it would be better for you to relay your ridiculous story directly to Nagumo yourself.”

Apparently, Kiriyama had purposely not passed on the reason for Kiryuuin’s visit. Kiryuuin shot an icy look at him, but she seemed to have no other choice but to let it go.

“Well, I’ll get straight down to business, then,” she said. “Now, personally, I don’t want to just arbitrarily jump to conclusions. That is why I’m going to ask you outright. Who is the one who decided to viciously harass me via a third party?”

“Harass you? You’re not giving me enough information here,” said Nagumo.

"In that case, I'll be a little more specific. Something despicable and contemptible was done to me, and... Was it you who planned to frame me for shoplifting, forcing one of your friends to do it?"

Shoplifting. An entirely unexpected word. Ichinose was the first to show any reaction—although she was trying to appear calm, it was obvious that inside, she was quite startled. It was understandable to feel that way, if you had engaged in that kind of criminal activity in the past, even if it was for the sake of family.

"Shoplifting? I feel like I'm understanding this conversation less and less," said Nagumo.

"Allow me to elaborate," said Kiriyama. "Kiryuuin was accused of shoplifting at Keyaki Mall after class the other day. Kiryuuin claims that while shopping at a cosmetics store, a student from Class 3-D, Yamanaka, approached her from behind and tried to secretly slip some unpurchased merchandise, a stick of lipstick, inside her bag. When Kiryuuin noticed and confronted Yamanaka about it, Yamanaka told her that you, Nagumo, were the one who ordered her to do it."

Kiriyama's statement made Kiryuuin's earlier words of condemnation much easier to understand.

"I see. So, that's why you barged in here with such bravado, eh?" said Nagumo.

"The reason why I didn't tell you the details of this matter directly was because I knew that there was no way you would order something like that. Right?" said Kiriyama. Apparently, he trusted Nagumo on this point—but Nagumo looked like he didn't really care about what either of them was saying, like he didn't feel anything about one or the other.

"Can you state with certainty that you're not involved?" asked Kiryuuin. She clearly suspected Nagumo was behind this.

"Who knows?" Nagumo replied. "At the very least, you seem to assume it was on my orders."

"Because Yamanaka, the perpetrator, testified such. Isn't that enough?"

asked Kiryuuin.

"She might just have used me as some half-baked excuse so she could get away with it, though. Right?"

Kiryuuin lightly shook her head. "Yamanaka wouldn't get away with it just by mentioning an unrelated person's name, though. It would've been less trouble for her to pin the blame on another side. Am I wrong?"

The train of thought Kiryuuin was describing certainly made sense. Almost the entirety of the third-year students were in Nagumo's grasp. It didn't matter if they had a ticket or not. I couldn't immediately think of any benefit in lying about being given orders by Nagumo. If Nagumo held this incident against Yamanaka, it would become a major hindrance to her. That was precisely why it wasn't unreasonable to suspect that Nagumo really was the one behind it, considering that his name had been mentioned. If I were to suffer the same thing, Nagumo would've been the very first person I suspected too, after all.

"Anyway, you seem very angry over one simple shoplifting incident," Nagumo said. "That's not like you."

"You don't understand me well enough to be able to say that it's not like me," snapped Kiryuuin. "Unfortunately, I have an intense hate for acts like shoplifting. People have this mindset that as long as they don't get caught, it's not a problem. I hate the idea of only thinking of yourself and hurting others in the process. I hate it so much it makes me want to vomit."

Judging from the way that she was speaking, it was likely that Kiryuuin didn't know about Ichinose's past. While Kiryuuin was openly talking about how much she loathed shoplifting, Ichinose's face grew sadder and sadder. Perhaps Nagumo noticed this change in Ichinose's behavior and understood the situation, because he interrupted Kiryuuin.

"I get it. I understand what you're trying to say," said Nagumo. It seemed like he might have deliberately chosen to take this shoplifting matter lightly out of consideration for Ichinose, but it had backfired.

"So, do you admit it? That you tried to frame me?" demanded Kiryuuin.

"That's another matter," said Nagumo.

Kiryuuin, sensing Nagumo's unwillingness to admit it, replied, "Relax. If I hear an apology from you right here and now, I promise to forget it and leave things be."

If Nagumo was the one who'd given the order, then that meant he was the instigator. In cases like this, the instigator would obviously receive a weightier punishment than the person who had carried out the order. It was clear that even if it was true that Nagumo, the representative of the third-years, was behind this scandal, even someone like Kiryuuin would have the discretion not to make a big deal out of it.

"On the other hand, what will you do if I don't apologize? Will you be satisfied with breaking that chair?" asked Nagumo.

"It'll show that, as far as you're concerned, I'm not owed an apology over this," said Kiryuuin.

"I see. In that case..."

Nagumo averted his gaze from Kiryuuin and turned his attention back toward us second-years. "I'm finished talking with you, Kiryuuin. Please leave."

Forget about an apology; Nagumo didn't even admit it or deny it—he just brought the conversation to a close and swept it away.

"I never imagined you'd respond like *this*," said Kiryuuin, stunned.

Nagumo replied rather coldly. "You said that you made Yamanaka tell you the truth, but how much credibility is there in statements you extracted by threatening her? Do you really think that the school officials would take your story seriously if we took this past the student council and reported it to them?"

"Yamanaka's attempt to frame me for shoplifting was almost definitely caught on camera, though," Kiryuuin pointed out. "They can't just ignore that."

"In that case, get that footage first," Nagumo said. "But that's the end of this conversation. If you don't find something that directly links me and Yamanaka, it's pointless."

Yamanaka would be the only one punished. There would be no evidence of

his involvement. Nagumo was showing his confidence in that right now. As for the school, if they heard Kiryuuin's complaint, they would likely put the utmost effort into investigating the issue, but there were limits. Yamanaka had lied in an attempt to discredit Nagumo, the student council president and leader of the third-years. Unless irrefutable evidence was produced, that kind of conclusion was inevitable.

"We got sidetracked for a moment there, but returning to our earlier conversation—I take it that you have no objections to an election, then?" Nagumo must have seriously intended on ignoring Kiryuuin, because now he was asking for a final confirmation from Horikita and Ichinose.

"Correct," said Horikita. "No problems on my end."

Though Horikita was concerned about Kiryuuin, who still had her foot on the chair, she agreed. I wondered if Kiryuuin was going to kick the chair and send it flying any moment now, but instead she continued observing, as though she were trying to see into Nagumo's mind.

Now Nagumo turned his attention to Ichinose. If things had been progressing in the proper way, he might have gotten an affirmative response from her immediately, but...

Perhaps the word "shoplifting" was lingering in her mind, because Ichinose's expression still hadn't brightened.

"Honami, you're okay with running in the election too, right?" said Nagumo.

"...Um, about that... May I say something, Nagumo-senpai?"

"What?"

A completely unexpected statement came out of Ichinose's mouth. "I...do not intend to run in the student council election this time."

"You don't want to become president?" asked Nagumo.

"Well, no, it's not like that," Ichinose said. "Rather, I think it's a problem that goes beyond that. Up until now, I've always believed that being a part of the student council and striving to become president was for both my own good and the good of people around me. But I've realized that thinking was just

arrogance on my part. The fact that my class is far from Class A, as you stated earlier, Nagumo-senpai, is also proof of that.”

So, she was pulling out of the election after taking into account the disappointing position of her class, then, huh?

“Besides, someone like me could never serve as student council president. I’m a criminal, so...” said Ichinose.

Kiryuuin’s choice of words may have been unintentional, but they seemed to have cast a long shadow over Ichinose regardless.

“Criminal?” Kiryuuin, who didn’t know Ichinose’s situation, sounded puzzled, but obviously we couldn’t step in and explain things to her at the moment.

“That’s irrelevant,” Nagumo told Ichinose. “That has nothing to do with who you are now.”

“I don’t think that’s true. No matter how much time passes, past crimes won’t disappear,” answered Ichinose.

She must have still had something on her mind, because she continued speaking. “Also, even apart from running in the election, I...I would like to step down from the student council, effective today.”

“Wait, Ichinose-san,” said Horikita. “Don’t you think that’s a rash decision? You’re...”

“No, it has nothing to do with what’s happened today. I’ve actually been thinking about this since shortly before the school trip,” confessed Ichinose, with a sad, forced smile. Apparently this wasn’t a decision she had only come to just now.

“I’m sure you understand this as well as the rest of us, but serving on the student council is more than just a simple burden on us students,” Nagumo said. “While there can be somewhat tedious routine duties, it is something that essentially only works as a positive at school. Even if the opportunities haven’t been very visible, you have benefitted from it too, at the very least.”

What Nagumo said was correct. Being a part of the student council wasn’t a bad thing. If you had spent any time at this school, you would know that just by

being on the student council, you got something back, with contributions to your Class Points, even if just slight ones. For a class like Ichinose's, which was in quite a predicament right now, this was like Ichinose was throwing away one of their weapons.

"I'm sorry, but I have no intention of changing my mind on this," Ichinose said.

Not only did she not want to run for president, she also wanted to resign from the student council. Even Kiriyama seemed to be surprised by that.

"You sound serious about this, Ichinose," he said.

"I'm sorry," said Ichinose. "I apologize for not being able to help all the way to the end, even though you've helped me in so many ways, Vice President."

"No, whether someone will continue serving on the student council or not is their own choice, of course," said Kiriyama. "I don't have any right to object..."

Kiryuuin seemed to have figured out what was going on, to some extent, based on everything that had just happened, but it probably would have been more illogical for her not to have connected what Ichinose was saying now with her own shoplifting incident. All she could do was resent the unlucky coincidence of bringing such an unpleasant topic up at exactly the wrong time. Still, even if the shoplifting incident hadn't happened, it seemed like Ichinose's intention to resign would be firm.

"I sincerely apologize for not being able to live up to expectations in my duties," said Ichinose solemnly. She stood up and bowed her head deeply to Nagumo and Kiriyama. "I'm sure you'll be a wonderful president, Horikita-san. I'm rooting for you."

"Ichinose-san..." said Horikita.

Though Ichinose was supposed to have been Horikita's rival in the election, she encouraged her with a smile on her face.

"I'm afraid I'm feeling a little under the weather, though, so I'll excuse myself here. If there are any forms that need to be filled out, I'd like to ask that I please be allowed to take care of them at a later date." She turned to me. "See you later, Ayanokouji-kun."

Saying that, she gave a gentle wave of her hand, and left the student council office without hesitation. While the shoplifting incident had undoubtedly opened emotional scars for her, she had shown no signs of wavering in her determination to resign throughout, and I couldn't feel any sense of lingering regret from her, either. This must have been something that she really had been thinking about, rather than something that she had just blurted out now.

It wasn't just me and Nagumo who felt like this was an unexpected development. Horikita, who had announced her candidacy for student council president, felt the same way.

"Ichinose-san just resigned from the student council," she said. "What should I do?"

With Ichinose's withdrawal from the student council, even the battle that had been brewing between Nagumo and I had automatically been swept away. Still, now that this had happened, not even Nagumo could do anything about it.

"It's impossible to get a substitute for Honami now," said Nagumo.

I didn't know what the rules were at other schools, but at this one, it sounded like a student who hadn't served on the student council in at least some way didn't have the qualifications to become president.

"I don't like the way this conversation has developed, but I'm going to go ahead and allow you to become president, Suzune," said Nagumo.

The biggest thing that they needed to avoid was the absence of a student council president altogether, I guessed. It would also be quite unreasonable to just suddenly select someone from the second-years who didn't have any experience.

"I have to admit, I feel a little disheartened that there isn't going to be an election, but... Yes, understood," said Horikita.

Since she was now unopposed, Horikita's inauguration as student council president was swiftly decided.

"Before getting into that, though, I have one more task for you," Nagumo told her.

"What is it?"

"Fill the vacancy left by Ichinose's departure as soon as possible. Bring in at least one new student council member from among the second-years."

Indeed, now that Ichinose was gone, Horikita was the only second-year student left. There was the risk that the student council could be rendered completely dysfunctional if some unforeseen incident happened.

"Are there any conditions to keep in mind in appointing someone?" asked Horikita.

"Just one," Nagumo replied. "Whether or not the people around them think they are someone fit for the student council."

"I see. That sounds perfectly reasonable," said Horikita.

I supposed that meant Nagumo couldn't allow a notorious troublemaker like Ryuuken to be brought onto the student council, although I felt guilty that he was the first example I thought of. Also, I could see that this meant there were really no restrictions on who to recruit, whether it was someone from Horikita's own class, or another class...

"So, it doesn't matter whom I bring onto the council, as long as that requirement is met, correct?" she asked.

"To put it in plain and simple terms, you're free to bring anybody you want, even someone from your own class. You do know that the previous president, Horikita-senpai, brought someone from his class onto the student council, right?"

"Yes, that's true. I understand."

"Oh, and one more thing," added Nagumo. "Appoint one student from the first year to the council, too. There's been an opening created by Yagami's unexpected expulsion, after all."

Horikita's expression hardened when Nagumo gave her this somewhat daunting order. "Soliciting one person is the same as soliciting two people. I'll try as best as I can," she said obediently, as there was no way that she could've refused him.

"Well, it seems like you've wrapped things up here, then." Kiryuuin addressed Nagumo once more, having been watching this whole time.

Kiryuuin might have been thinking that he couldn't say what really happened with us second-year students present. Horikita, who had been given new duties, read the writing on the wall and stood up.

"Well then, I think I'll excuse myself as well," she announced. "I will report back as soon as I've found two people."

"All right. When that time comes, I'll officially hand over the position of student council president to you," said Nagumo.

Horikita bowed gently to everyone, even Kiryuuin, and left the student council office. Now that the student council election wasn't happening, the battle between Nagumo and me should've naturally drifted away, too. If I was going to leave, this was likely the best time to do it.

"I'm sorry, but I think it's about time I be leaving, too," I said.

"Wait, Ayanokouji." Nagumo cut me off suddenly, stopping me in my tracks. He wasn't letting me go so easily. "I'm still not finished speaking with you."

"Don't hold him up any longer," Kiriyma said. "This issue with Ayanokouji ended with Ichinose's resignation. I think it's best to let it go, and clear up Kiryuuin's issue as soon as possible instead."

"You've got your fair share of faults, but I'll give you credit for that proposal," said Kiryuuin, who clearly approved of Kiriyma's thinking on this matter. She turned to Nagumo. "I hope you make the wise decision here, Nagumo."

"Tch..." Nagumo clicked his tongue in apparent dissatisfaction, but he recognized that he had no other choice in the matter. Still, he must not have liked the idea of just letting me go, so he added something at the very last minute. "You're a student from Suzune's class. Help her find people for the student council," he ordered.

"Me?" I asked.

"There aren't any other student council officers from your grade. And we have a new student council president from Class 2-B who's coming into the

position unconditionally. I'm not willing to let you get off so easy."

I think he could have said that to any of my classmates, not just me, but... Well, first of all, that had nothing to do with me helping. I had to assume that he was simply taking things out on me indiscriminately, but trying to argue that would probably have been futile.

"Well, I'm not sure how much I can be of help, but I'll try," I replied. "Maybe."

I tried to leave myself an escape route, but Nagumo didn't overlook what I'd said.

"I'll make sure to let Suzune know that you'll be helping her after I'm done here," he said. "No slacking off on this, okay?"

I had been hoping that by saying what I did with that air of innocence, there might be a possibility of not having to accompany Horikita on this task, but Nagumo cut me off and dashed my hopes.

"Understood, I'll help," I conceded. "Is that satisfactory?"

With that, Nagumo finally showed me sympathy, and his resistance toward letting me go vanished.

"Oh, that reminds me. Just before I go, here are a few souvenirs for you, in case you're interested." I took out some of the extra souvenirs that I'd bought in Hokkaido and handed each bag to Nagumo individually.

"You're really disciplined, in a strange sort of way," said Nagumo.

"Well, I knew I was meeting the student council president. I thought it was best to at least bring souvenirs."

I didn't know when the right time was to hand souvenirs over, but waiting until the very last minute had been a mistake.

"None for me?" asked Kiryuuin.

"No, because I didn't know you would be here, Kiryuuin-senpai. If you would like some, please ask President Nagumo to share."

Nagumo handed the souvenirs over to Kiriyama, who was still close by. But he must have remembered something, because he muttered, "Speaking of the

school trip, now that it's over... It's about time they announce the next special exam, right?"

He must not have been in the mood to talk with Kiryuuin yet, because he was still addressing me.

"It was just announced today, actually," I replied.

"It's customary for a special exam to be held after the school trip, I guess. That would mean your opponent will be Sakayanagi's Class A, right?"

"You can predict all of that?" I said.

Judging from what Nagumo was saying, it seemed like this was an annual event, and the matchups were always between the top two and bottom two classes respectively.

"So, does that mean that last year, your classes fought against one another, President Nagumo, Vice President Kiriyma?" I asked.

"Yeah, we did," said Nagumo.

"What were the results?"

"If I recall, it was your class that won, Kiriyma."

"...Yes, it was." Kiriyma didn't sound especially thrilled about it; he answered with a tone of indifference.

Kiryuuin, who was also in Class B, must not have had any particular thoughts on the matter, as she just quietly let it pass.

"Normally, it's tough to win a fight against Class A, but I think you've got a surprisingly good chance at it, considering what the exam is," Nagumo said.
"Don't you?"

"I think it depends on how you think about it, but you might be right," I answered.

"I figure the special exams held at this time of year are designed to keep all of the classes locked in a struggle for supremacy and make them more competitive, and that's why they give advantages to the lower-ranked classes. It also means they're designed so that the lower a class's original rank was, the

easier it is for them to win.”

It was certainly true that, in this special exam, it was Horikita’s class and Ryuuuen’s class respectively that held the keys to victory in their matchups. Both were originally lower-level classes. So, in other words, Nagumo had allowed Kiriyma and his lower-ranked classmates in Class B to get the upper hand in their grade’s fight.

“I thought that someone like you would always win, no matter the circumstances, President Nagumo,” I remarked.

“Don’t say that,” he scoffed. “I mean, I can’t even take things seriously in a case where, regardless of who wins, it doesn’t affect the outcome.”

Hunh. So, he was saying that his class had already been far in the lead back then, and he wasn’t concerned with trivial victories.

“Just as was typical in Horikita-senpai’s day, Class A got the lead near the start and just took off, getting further and further away from the rest of the pack,” he said. “Granted, I was originally in Class B, but after moving up to Class A early on, we outpaced them pretty quickly. Ultimately, the gap between my class and the classes below at that time was huge. But it’s different for you guys. Yes, it’s true that your Class A is in the lead, but it’s not like they’re in a definite safe zone like in the past.”

It was true that right now, Horikita’s class had a lot of motivation, because Class A was clearly in sight. What would things have been like if, instead, the gap between our Class A and Class B right now was closer to a thousand points? In that case, we wouldn’t be able to catch them, even if we won.

“Give it your best,” said Nagumo.

“Yes, I will. I’ll be in touch.”

And with that, since I was finally given permission to exit the student council office, I took my leave.

“Phew... Finally free,” I muttered.

Ichinose’s resignation from the student council had resulted in the whole matter of that twenty-million-point bet over the election going down the drain,

but that was okay; it didn't impede my plans. My relief was short-lived, however, because someone who had been watching me from close by approached.

"You couldn't get away immediately, hm?" said Horikita.

"You were waiting for me?" I asked.

"There were a lot of things that bothered me in that discussion," she said.
"Were you ordered to do something?"

"No, I was dismissed."

"It seemed like you were talking for quite a long time, though."

"I gave away souvenirs from the school trip, and we talked about unrelated things."

Right now, I wasn't going to bring up how I'd been instructed to help Horikita. My thinking was that I'd get away with not helping for the time being, until Nagumo actually passed the message on to Horikita and I was told directly to help.

"Well, as for you, Horikita, I guess this means you're one job away from becoming student council president," I remarked.

"I just never imagined that Ichinose-san would drop out of the race like that—or, rather, that she would just leave the student council."

"I agree. Putting aside the question of whether she would've won or lost the race for president, I was expecting her to stay on the student council until the end."

I had not anticipated that she would give up her position of her own volition. I supposed that the tears she'd shown me on the school trip might have been at least partially related to this matter.

"So, Kiryuuin-senpai is staying behind to continue the discussion with President Nagumo and Vice President Kiriyama after all, then?" asked Horikita.

"Seems that way, yeah," I replied. "I'm sure even you could tell that she was pretty ticked off."

"Yes. I don't know very much about her, but it seems like she'd be trouble if you made her your enemy. I got the impression that President Nagumo was at a loss as to how to deal with her."

I supposed it was perfectly understandable that a student council member would have an impression like that, since they usually only saw Nagumo in a favorable position.

"How much of the story do you think is true?" Horikita asked. "About President Nagumo supposedly ordering a third-year student to frame Kiryuuin-senpai for shoplifting?"

"Who knows? But at the very least, the fact is that this Yamanaka student tried to pin the crime on her."

Whether a third party was involved still remained unclear.

"Whether Nagumo is involved in this or not, I don't see any reason or purpose in trying to lay a trap for Kiryuuin," I added.

"Do you think it could be...out of revenge?" Horikita suggested. "As retaliation for a fight someone had with her?"

"That is possible, of course. It's not unusual for people to be disliked by an unspecified someone." At any rate, there wasn't any point in us dwelling on it. "More importantly, shouldn't you be focusing on the student council thing?"

"You're right. If you would become a member of the student council, Ayanokouji-kun, that would solve half the issue, wouldn't it? And considering who you are, I'm sure you would fulfill the criteria that President Nagumo is looking for, without a doubt."

"I'm not so sure about that," I said. "I'm not liked by Nagumo, at the very least."

"This isn't an issue of like or dislike."

"I don't think that's true. I'm sure it would be unpleasant, from Nagumo's point of view."

"It's simply that you don't want to join the student council, isn't it?" asked Horikita.

"That's exactly right," I replied. When you joined the student council, you ended up with a lot less free time. I wanted to avoid that.

"In that case, at least help me find someone capable. You're the one who was responsible for bringing me onto the student council in the first place, so I trust you won't refuse," said Horikita, quickly and definitively, as though she were blocking off my escape route.

"Yeah, well, that kind of thing sounds like a bit of a hassle," I said. "Sorry, but I'm going to pass. You're the one involved with the student council, so you should be the one to take care of student council business."

Perhaps Horikita had gotten used to my uncooperativeness, because she let out a sigh and backed off. "Personally, I really think I'd like to bring on one of my classmates, after all. Just as the president himself said, joining the student council is a positive for the class."

"I think Yousuke would be more than happy to help with most things in times like these," I pointed out.

"Yes, you're right. But that would mean taking his club activities away from him."

You couldn't be involved with the student council and a club at the same time, and Yousuke had achieved a certain degree of success in the soccer club. There were probably fewer benefits to be gained by purposely pulling him from his club and putting him on the student council.

"I'm going," I announced.

Just as I tried to escape, Horikita wrapped around and blocked my way before I could leave.

"Enough about student council business for the time being. Ayanokouji-kun, regarding the special exam—"

"Sorry, but there's nothing you can do to make me take the lead on that matter either," I said, cutting her off.

"Okay, someone on the student council should solve student council issues. Those were your words. But the special exam is a class problem. If you're my

classmate, then shouldn't you cooperate with me on that?"

"There are other allies you should rely on. You have close to forty classmates." There was no need for her to specifically come to me for help with anything.

"Oh, for crying out loud. You don't want to help me with anything after all," huffed Horikita.

"Even if I do help, it's not going to dramatically change the situation," I said.

"Don't you think you're being too modest? It would be very reassuring to me if you could lend a hand. Our enemy is Sakayanagi-san. If you were to help me by providing wisdom during the planning stage, we'd have a better chance of beating her, like with the Sports Festival."

If we were to lose, the gap between our class and Class A would widen by a hundred points, so losing would be a pretty big blow. But really, even if we were to lose, we'd be able to recover from it.

"I don't have any advice to give you," I told her. "But I will follow your orders, as your classmate. If you order me to answer a difficult question correctly, I will do so." I wasn't going to help her with planning during the preliminary stage, but I had every intention of cooperating with her on the exam itself.

"...You're saying that you'll solve any problem, regardless of subject or difficulty level?"

"That's right. My Academic Ability score in OAA was B as of December. While you won't get a lot of points from me answering correctly, whether you ask me to clear just the minimum requirement of two questions or the maximum of five questions, I'll answer them correctly, for sure."

I was sure that would be an important issue for Horikita. I could guarantee that part alone.

"So, you're telling me that you don't mind if I count on you as an individual. But you can't help me during the preliminary stage. Right?" said Horikita.

"That's what I'm saying."

"What are the chances you'll get the questions wrong?"

"As close to zero as possible."

There wouldn't be any issue unless they were problems unrelated to the normal curriculum, or miscellaneous trivia questions.

"Wait a minute," said Horikita. "Didn't you say that the only thing you're supposed to be exceptional at is mathematics?"

"I don't remember that," I replied.

"Good grief," Horikita muttered under her breath, but afterward, she nodded, showing that she accepted my proposal. "Then we have a deal. Just being able to count on a student with an Academic Ability ranking of B reliably answering five questions correctly, regardless of difficulty, is something that will most definitely reduce my burden."

I was sure that this was going to be one of the key experiences for Horikita when it came to conducting herself as a leader. I hoped that, in the course of this special exam, she'd learn that there were things more important than winning or losing.

"You have my sympathy, though, to a degree. You're being appointed student council president at a tough time," I remarked. I was sure that she would've preferred to take care of this during a less busy time, if possible.

"There's nothing I can do about it. This is just the kind of thing that happens when you decide to join the student council."

Technically, it was because I (well, actually, it wasn't really me) had led her to the student council. Although she had some concerns, Horikita seemed in a relatively good mood as she walked next to me.

"There's no point in thinking about this in a negative way," she went on. "So, I'm going to be positive, and look at this as a good thing. If I become student council president, I'll be more highly regarded at school than I am now, and I'll be granted some degree of authority. I can't abuse my position, of course, but I intend to get as close to it as possible, within that gray area."

She was determined to get to Class A by any means necessary—at least to a point. That was fine. In Horikita's case, becoming much greedier might be just what she needed.

"You can help me too, okay?" she added. "You can help select new student council members."

"Don't repeat yourself," I said.

"I was thinking you might've already forgotten."

"I'm going to stay far, far away from this."

Nagumo had also told me to help Horikita, so I was hoping that she'd find people before she discovered that truth herself.

2.3

EVEN THOUGH IT WAS a seed that I had sown myself, I found myself caught up in something I had almost nothing to do with. While I would've liked for this student council election or whatever to go ahead so I could settle things with Nagumo, no one could have predicted Ichinose's resignation, so I supposed that there was nothing to be done. I decided to call my girlfriend, who was waiting for me at the dormitory, to give her a report.

"You're still not back yet?!"

As soon as the call connected, Kei's very frustrated voice came through on the other end of the line.

"I just left the student council office now," I answered. "I'll be back in about fifteen minutes."

I thought she would still be angry, but her happiness over being given a clear time seemed to win out.

"Okey dokey! You know, I waited for you all nice and proper, without pestering you. Aren't I great?" she asked, suddenly switching over to a much gentler tone.

"Yep, you're great, all right," I said.

Girls like Kei were skilled at using their cell phones—that was probably why sending messages every few seconds, one after another, was her specialty.

"Eh heh heh heh." It wasn't that much of a compliment, but she seemed happy about me telling her that she was great. *"Okay, I'm waiting."*

After finishing that brief conversation, I put my cell phone away in my pocket. Our romance had progressed further, and I felt that we'd established a relationship where we didn't need to have lengthy conversations.

Only people who were very close could detect slight changes in one another, but it didn't mean they were particularly clever or sharp. They were able to notice changes merely by spending a prolonged period of time together. It wasn't a matter of trying to read the other person's thoughts, imagining them in your head. Rather, it was like an intuitive sense that both sides could feel.

A tense moment could turn into a tender one. Two sides of the same coin. That probably applied to many other things as well, aside from the circumstances I just described.

The remaining number of pages in my textbook was decreasing by the moment. However, the final part of the textbook was going to grow more difficult as I got further in, and it would take more time than it had at the start.
Now then...the next lesson is...

Chapter 3: A New Student Council Member

WHILE THE FINAL SPECIAL EXAM of the second semester was just around the corner, Horikita had a problem that needed to be solved right now. Namely, the job that she needed to do in order to officially take over the position of student council president from Nagumo, who was retiring from his role. The day after being appointed the new president, she seemed to decide to take action immediately after class.

As expected, I was called on, and I awaited Horikita's arrival in the hallway outside the classroom. She was the one who had called me to meet her, but she was currently in the middle of a small meeting with other students gathered in class.

The student council business was an issue that she needed to take care of, but of course, she couldn't neglect preparations for the new special exam right now. I figured that if I quietly left without a word, I'd have to be prepared to pay double for it later. I preferred avoiding that. After I'd spent close to ten minutes thinking about all of that, Horikita finally showed up, without really offering any kind of apology.

"Well then, let's have a change of venue, shall we?" she said.

"You already done with your strategy meeting?" I asked.

"Yes, because I already had a thorough discussion with Hirata-kun and some others just yesterday. Today I was just listening to progress reports. Fortunately, the majority of our classmates are quite motivated. Even if they dislike studying, they're taking the initiative in approaching this matter. The fact that Sudou-kun, whose grades were once the lowest in the class, has risen in the ranks, along with the mental pressure over Sakura-san's expulsion and how close our point score is to that of Class A—all of those things are evidence that everything is moving in the right direction."

As she mentioned Sakura Airi's name, Horikita briefly shot me a look, as

though she were trying to examine me.

“Does it still bother you?” I asked.

“I’m...not so insensitive that it wouldn’t bother me,” she said. “Even if what I’m saying is completely true.”

“That’s not very admirable. You should stand tall.”

With time, Horikita should come to terms with things more fully deep down inside. As I started to walk away, Horikita followed after me, somewhat hurriedly.

“To be honest, it feels very encouraging to hear from Nagumo-senpai that you’re willing to cooperate with me,” she said.

“Sounds like you only heard the good parts,” I replied. “I just want you to know and really understand that, personally, I am not on board with this at all.”

It’d be difficult later if there was a misunderstanding or disagreement on the idea of motivation. But, well, I was sure that the student standing in front of me understood that quite well, without me needing to expressly say that aloud.

“I’m sure,” she said. “Apparently, you decided to keep quiet about the fact that you were told to help. You were planning on feigning ignorance about this if I didn’t approach you, weren’t you?”

Apparently, she had known what I was doing, and now she was deliberately saying things to try and provoke me.

“If you cared about me, you could’ve just let that slide,” I said.

“No.”

My attempts to find a way out were dashed by Horikita’s immediate, blunt response. Recently, she had been refining her crudeness in dealing with me quite a lot, though in a good way... Actually, no, in a bad way.

“But don’t worry,” she went on. “I don’t intend to drag this out spending several days finding new members for the student council. I already found some candidates yesterday, so I’d like to make a decision today. The student council is important, but we have a special exam coming up, and I’d like to focus on that right now.”

It sounded like Horikita was determined to decide quickly, so that was a relief.

"You need one person from the second-years and one from the first-years, right?" I asked.

"Yes. Also, after I met with Nagumo-senpai once again, I got a little more specific information about his preferences. He said that students should have an Academic Ability score of B or better in OAA as a minimum requirement."

"Academic Ability score restrictions, eh? Well, I suppose if they're going to be on the student council, it's not surprising that there's a minimum requirement."

Since Societal Contribution didn't seem to be regarded as important in this choice, I figured that meant a wide range of selections would be possible.

"Come to think of it, someone somewhere has improved their Academic Ability score and has a B. I wonder where that certain someone is," said Horikita.

"I've suddenly got a stomachache. I think I'm going to head out," I replied.

"Can't you even take a joke?"

"No, because you were serious when you said it."

"I intend to fill the second-year-student vacancy left by Ichinose-san when she resigned right now. And I'm picking someone other than you."

"That makes sense. You said that you're deciding on a candidate."

"Yes. The only other requirement to become an officer of the student council is that you're not registered with any clubs," Horikita said. "As long as a student has a score of B or better in Academic Ability, the rest can be decided by the person who will become student council president, at her own discretion and judgment."

Which meant that as long as that person fit the criteria, Horikita was free to seek out basically anyone she wanted, with whatever abilities they possessed.

"Just because someone has an Academic Ability score of B or better doesn't mean they'll do well, though," she added. "It's not like just anyone can do the job. If someone is going to be helping to run the student council, things would go more smoothly if they had a variety of proficiencies."

The student council would definitely be in jeopardy if its members were a motley crew of randomly selected people with no motivation, for sure.

"I intend to tackle this aggressively," she said. "I don't want to bring in someone from a strong rival class, like Class A, since you can earn more than a few benefits just by being a part of the student council."

Apparently, that was a stance she wanted to stick to, no matter how small the advantage it granted.

"In that case...ideally, it'd be a student from your own class then, huh?" I said.

"Exactly right. Even if people see that I have ulterior motives in selecting someone from my same class, it's still not a violation of the rules."

I thought I could see the answer to the question of why we hadn't been walking away and instead had just been standing here outside the classroom.

One of our classmates, Kushida, left the classroom and called out to Horikita. "What did you want to talk to me about, Horikita-san?"

It was only a brief instant, but Horikita shot me a signal with her eyes, asking me, "*What do you think?*"

It was certainly true that Kushida was a student who was highly regarded by those around her, and her looks were included in that. Her Academic Ability score was B or better, and her stats compared favorably to even those serving on the student council. But that was just looking at things from the outside. Horikita and Kushida were like oil and water.

"To tell you the truth, I have a favor to ask of you, Kushida-san," said Horikita.

This was the dangerous act of pouring a large amount of water into a pot of oil.

"This is still off the record, but it's been decided that Ichinose-san will be leaving the student council," Horikita went on.

"Huh? Is that so? Was there some kind of problem?" asked Kushida.

"It's just for personal reasons," Horikita replied.

Kushida hadn't yet grasped the situation, but the oil was beginning to heat up.

However, it had yet to reach a high temperature.

"So, because we have an open position due to someone leaving the student council, I was wondering if you could fill the vacancy, if at all possible." And with that brief statement, Horikita had conveyed the decisive bit of information. The temperature of the oil was rising; it was starting to make popping sounds, causing the water to jump.

"So, is President Nagumo still going to continue in his role on the student council?" asked Kushida.

"No, so I'll automatically move up into the position. I'm the only remaining member on the student council out of the second-years," Horikita said.

"So, in other words...you're going to become student council president, Horikita-san," said Kushida.

"That's the plan, as long as no problems arise from here out," said Horikita.

While Kushida did seem a little surprised over the sudden shakeup in the student council presidency, that likely wasn't the crux of the matter here. It had already been established that either Ichinose or Horikita would become president originally anyway.

"Which is exactly why I've decided to select people personally," Horikita continued. "I'm required to find people who have the requisite abilities to meet the minimum posted requirements for the council, and knowing you, I'm sure you'll meet those without any issues."

A large amount of water and oil had already begun jumping out of the pot; you'd need to worry about being splashed if you got too near. You'd probably suffer burns if you stayed close by.

"So, supposing I did join the student council... Would you make me your secretary or something, Horikita-san?" This point seemed to bother Kushida more than anything else, so she came straight out and asked.

"I still haven't decided on a position yet, but probably," said Horikita.

"Ah ha ha ha! That's a funny joke."

Kushida was laughing aloud, and she had the right facial expression to match,

but Horikita and I knew exactly what was going on. We could both feel, very strongly, that she was saying, “*Who the hell would want to work for you, idiot?!*”

“Depending on how motivated you are, I could also immediately make you vice president,” said Horikita.

“Um, you do understand that’s not the issue here, right?” said Kushida. Her answer was intimidating, essentially telling Horikita, “*Don’t bother coming to me with something that there’s no way I’ll accept. You’re just wasting your time.*” That was an impressive feat on Kushida’s part, since she was able to convey it with her usual smile. She added, “I mean, I’m not so sure someone like me would be fit to serve on the student council.”

Since we were standing out in the hallway, with students coming and going, the only reason that Kushida could push to refuse Horikita’s offer was that she was lacking in ability.

“That’s not true,” Horikita said. “You’re highly regarded, even in OAA, and you’re respected by a considerable number of peers in our grade, as well as our kouhai. And, knowing you, I’m sure that the first-year students who start school here next year would be able to open up to you right away, so you could easily become friends. I’ve scouted you because I value that kind of ability.”

Horikita strongly emphasized that she wasn’t just trying to give Kushida the job so that she could order her around and lord over her. She was expressing how she genuinely felt. But I figured that, from Kushida’s point of view, something like that wouldn’t make much of a difference. There was no way she could accept an arrangement where she’d be working under Horikita.

“It makes me happy to hear that you feel that way,” Kushida said, “but I still really think it’d be difficult for me. I don’t have any student council experience or anything...”

Horikita had persisted, but it looked like it wasn’t going to be that easy after all. The fact was that the idea of working under Horikita was especially hard for Kushida to accept.

“Our class will get a slight advantage just by having you join, though,” Horikita argued. “The added bonus of having a student on the council is a weapon in our

arsenal when it comes to getting to Class A.”

“That’s true,” Kushida admitted. “I understand what you’re trying to say, but... I really don’t think it’s possible. I’m sorry.”

Horikita had deliberately gone after Kushida as she was leaving class, probably so that she could make her continue to play the good girl. If they were having this conversation with no one around, in an empty dormitory room, Kushida would have wasted no time in flat-out refusing.

“Please, Kushida-san. I need your talents.” Horikita, pleading strongly, reached for Kushida’s hand as she made her appeal. The students passing by casually looked over, wondering what was going on.

“.....”

Kushida continued to feign surprise and bewilderment. I supposed this had to be painful for the outer version of Kushida, since she couldn’t bluntly refuse Horikita, who wanted her help.

Just then, I directed my gaze in the other direction for a moment.

“What’s wrong?” asked Horikita.

“Nothing,” I replied.

Horikita, standing next to me, seemed to notice me reacting to something, and she seemed concerned about it, but I didn’t want to derail the conversation by mentioning something irrelevant at the moment. There was a slight pause in the conversation, but Horikita then turned back to Kushida, who remained silent.

“I’m not telling you to come work for me,” Horikita said. “I just want you to help me get to Class A.”

“But...it could be someone other than me,” Kushida protested. “I’m not very confident I can do this.”

“You would get the most benefit out of accepting the position, Kushida-san,” argued Horikita.

“Hm? What do you mean by that?” Kushida asked.

It wasn't surprising that she wouldn't understand what Horikita meant.

"Well, that's obvious, isn't it? It means that by joining the student council, Kushida-senpai, even if there's someone out there who haaaates you, they wouldn't be able to carelessly raise a hand against you!"

It wasn't Kushida herself who answered her own question, nor was it Horikita—instead, it was a third party, a female student named Amasawa Ichika. She had been stealthily closing in for a little while now, but I hadn't expected her to suddenly involve herself in the conversation.

"...Why are you here by the second-year classrooms, Amasawa-san?" asked Kushida.

Kushida seemed to feel that Amasawa, who'd just suddenly appeared, was even more of a natural (?) enemy.

"It's fine for me to go where my senpai are, isn't it?" replied Amasawa.

"We're kind of busy right now," Horikita said. "Who do you want to speak with?"

"Hm, well, it isn't like I came for anyone in particular or anything," said Amasawa. "But if I had to say, I guess Kushida-senpai."

"Me? I-I see. What on Earth do you want?" Kushida was clearly angry, a vein on her face visibly bulging.

"Hmm? What was it? What do you think I want?"

"I don't know that. I have no idea what you're thinking, Amasawa-san."

To my eyes, Kushida looked incredibly uncomfortable from any angle, but that was probably because I was seeing her through a filter. *Perhaps Horikita sees it in the same way?* I wondered.

"I'm having an important conversation with Horikita-san and Ayanokouji-kun right now, so I wonder if we could perhaps talk later?" said Kushida.

"No way," said Amasawa. "If you and I are all alone, I bet you'll be scared for sure, Kushida-senpai."

Amasawa obviously didn't care about Kushida at all. She was just coming out

and saying exactly what she thought. I was sure that even Horikita, seeing how these two were together, probably fully grasped what was going on—at least that there was something hidden. Of course, it was entirely possible that she already knew everything. But why did Amasawa purposely come all this way to see Kushida? I looked at Amasawa, trying to rein her in with my eyes.

“That was a lie!” Amasawa said quickly. “It was a lie, Senpai. The truth is, I actually came here to see Ayanokouji-senpai. And when I got here, I noticed that he was talking to you and Horikita-senpai. You know, Kushida-senpai, that’s why I was secretly listening in.”

She had no shame in openly admitting that she had been eavesdropping.

“How much of the conversation did you hear?” asked Kushida.

“How much? I just started listening a little while back. From the part where Horikita-senpai said, ‘I’m not telling you to come work for me.’ Really! It’s the truth, y’know?”

Although Amasawa was telling the truth, she clearly doubted that Kushida and Horikita trusted her. That was exactly why I decided to cut in to assure them that Amasawa was telling the truth.

“It’s true,” I said. “She heard nothing more and nothing less. I saw her approaching.”

“I see,” said Horikita. “So, what’s why you looked away for a moment.”

“Right, see?” said Amasawa. “I’ve only been telling the truth, right?”

“Oh, so then, where did the lie about you coming to see Kushida-san go?” Horikita argued. “Actually, scratch that. We don’t even know if it’s true that you came to see Ayanokouji-kun in the first place.”

As soon as you started doubting one thing, other things started to look suspicious too.

“Come on now, let’s not worry over all the tiny details, shall we?” Amasawa blustered. “Enough about that, anyway. Please continue with your recruitment efforts!”

Amasawa then pointedly took a step back, as if to assure the two of them that

she wouldn't interfere anymore.

"...All right then," said Horikita. "Putting the matter of Amasawa-san aside for now, I'd like to hear your answer." To turn a bad situation around for the better, she had settled on disregarding Amasawa and continuing her attempts to persuade Kushida.

"I think that I just gave you my answer earlier, though. I can't accept," said Kushida.

"Why not?" asked Horikita.

"I'm sorry, but I can't live up to your expectations. Someone like me isn't right for the student council, and—"

"Why don't you just join the student council instead of saying that?"

After insisting that she wouldn't interfere, Amasawa didn't even make it ten seconds before she broke her promise and interrupted.

Actually, because she was convinced that Kushida couldn't do anything to directly counterattack, Amasawa was now getting carried away, standing directly behind her. She started touching Kushida to mess with her, clinging to her all over. And to top it all off, she began playing with Kushida's cheek, prodding it with her index finger, *poke poke*.



"You know, Kushida-senpai, you're kinda a hottie," she said. "And you got a faaiirly good figure, too. And you're sorta smart, you know that?" She was whispering in Kushida's ear like a little devil, trying to persuade h... Actually, no, she was just continuing to agitate her.

At any rate, nothing Amasawa was saying sounded like a genuine compliment.

"Um, excuse me," Kushida said. "If we want to keep having this, um, conversation, can we, you know, have a change of venue?"

Even if Kushida continued to refuse Horikita's offer, it seemed like it would be stressful for her to be out in front of the public eye like this. She probably felt like it would be difficult to continue this conversation any further, which was why she made the suggestion. Normally, she probably would've been fine with ending the conversation here and running away, but that wasn't something the outer Kushida could do.

"Ayanokouji-kun, why don't you go talk with Amasawa-san for a while?" asked Horikita.

"Huh? Don't you senpai think you're being too cold, trying to exclude me like this?" said Amasawa.

"That's exactly why I'm trying to lend you Ayanokouji-kun." Horikita crossed her arms, basically telling Amasawa that she should be grateful that Horikita wasn't trying to send her away all by herself.

"I wanna be together with you and Kushida-senpai too right now, Horikita-senpai, not just with Ayanokouji-senpai," said Amasawa. I was certain that the only reason was simply because it was fun for her. "And besides, if you try and make me go away, then I might just go and blab a bunch of not-so-good secrets."

By mixing in threats that might equally have been genuine or baseless, Amasawa had removed any possibility of trying to forcibly remove her.

"...I suppose we have no other choice," Horikita conceded. "Let's have a change of venue then, as Kushida-san wishes."

Horikita had done her best to corner Kushida, weaponizing that tactic to force

her to agree, but things had only gotten worse when Amasawa showed up partway through their conversation and started showering them with her merciless words. It sounded like Horikita had determined that she wouldn't be able to get a good response anyway at the rate things were going, and so she agreed to change locations.

3.1

HORIKITA BROUGHT KUSHIDA up the stairs and over to the special building, which was probably empty by this time.

"There shouldn't be any prying eyes in this area, for the time being," said Horikita. She was seeking Kushida's approval, implicitly asking her, "*This should be okay, right?*"

"Yeah, I guess so." Kushida let out a deep sigh, probably because she honestly hadn't even wanted to follow Horikita here.

"It's a safe place, y'know," said Amasawa. "If anybody comes close, I'm sure we'll know right away. Yep."

"You really do follow me anywhere, don't you, Amasawa-san?" said Kushida.

"Because I'm still curious! I'm wondering whether you'll join the student council, Kushida-senpai." Amasawa probably wasn't going to leave until she knew how this ended.

"Gawd, you're annoying. Horikita's annoying too, but right now, you're three times as annoying." Kushida, who was no longer out in the public eye and thus no longer needed her outer persona, couldn't take it anymore, and her inner self appeared without warning.

"It seems you're deeply disliked too, Amasawa-san," said Horikita.

The fact that Amasawa could make Kushida say that she found her three times as annoying as Horikita must have been quite remarkable to Horikita, since she knew painfully well herself that Kushida disliked her most. Without

hesitation, Kushida directed a cold look at Amasawa. Meanwhile, Amasawa wore the biggest smile she had yet today.

"Ahh, I just *love* seeing that look on your face. I can't get enough of it!" she squealed. Far from being frightened, she clasped her hands together, overjoyed, like it was finally time for her to have some fun. "Good for you! Now you have more people you can expose your true self to. So, if Ayanokouji-senpai and Horikita-senpai are on your side, you aren't scared of me anymore?"

"Look, I don't know if you're trying to play with my state of mind or whatever, but could you please stop doing pointless things?" asked Kushida.

"Nope. If you want, I can make trouble for you again, Kushida-senpai."

Amasawa had made the decision to stay in school, but I wondered if she was planning to entertain herself by teasing Kushida. Was Amasawa's visit to the second-year classrooms really just because she was after Kushida, after all?

"Are you the type of person who is convinced that she'll never, ever get expelled?" asked Kushida.

"Huh? Are you saying that there's someone who could get me expelled? If there is, I wanna see 'em!" said Amasawa.

"Okay, that's enough," Horikita announced. "Stop. Especially you, Amasawa-san. Your teasing is going too far."

It was certainly true that Amasawa was being especially obnoxious today, trying to pick a fight with Kushida. I wanted to avoid getting involved in the selection of student council members for too long myself, anyway.

"Taking this any further would cause problems, even for Horikita," I said. "Stop it."

I gently reprimanded Amasawa, who was getting carried away. And when I did...

"...Okaaay." Amasawa held her hands up. "If you say so, Ayanokouji-senpai, I'll be a good girl."

"Kushida-san," Horikita said. "Putting matters with *her* aside... Once again, can I ask you to join the student council?"

"No," replied Kushida.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to. Can I go?"

Seeing that Kushida was trying to end the conversation there, I decided that I should do a little something.

"Horikita," I said. "Don't you think it'd be better if you gave Kushida a presentation that's easier to understand?"

"...A presentation that's easier to understand?" Horikita repeated.

"Yes. Kushida would certainly gain some advantages by joining the student council. But at the same time, you would receive the same benefits, Horikita. So, it's no wonder that, from the perspective of the person being invited, it's somewhat dissatisfactory. You think so too, right, Kushida?"

"Well, I guess so, yeah..." Kushida shot me a glare, but she mumbled a response and averted her gaze. As I had guided her to do, she turned back to Horikita and said, "I do think it's naïve to try and ask for a free favor."

"Then you'd consider it under certain conditions?" asked Horikita. "As before, though, I refuse your request that I drop out of school."

I supposed that would have been acceptable to Kushida, but of course I couldn't say it was realistic. I wondered under what conditions Kushida would join the student council.

"If you insist on wanting my help, no matter what, then get down on your knees and beg me for it," said Kushida.

"...Get down on my knees?" asked Horikita.

"That's right. If you show me that you really mean it, like, 'Please, Kushida-san,' then I'll consider—no, I *will* join the student council."

Rather than giving Horikita a vague answer to try and get out of it, Kushida gave her a definite promise. Of course, Kushida had made that statement in absolute certainty that Horikita would never get down on her knees and beg like that. While not as much as Kushida, Horikita was certainly extremely proud. Even if it were for the sake of the class, she would probably never lower herself

like that in this kind of situation.

"Okay. Get down on my knees. That's your condition. I understand," muttered Horikita.

She then sat down on the cold floor of the hallway.

"Huh? Hold on, you're kidding, right?" said Kushida.

"If I get down on my knees, you'll join the student council. That's what you promised just now, isn't it? Ayanokouji-kun and Amasawa-san both witnessed it. If you want to rescind your promise, it's now or never, understand?"

Horikita looked as though she really was about to get on her knees and beg in order to persuade Kushida to join—which caused Kushida, who should have had the upper hand in this situation, to choke on her words.

"...You're bluffing. There is no way you would ever beg on your knees for someone like me."

"It's not like I don't understand why you'd think so, but I really don't hate you as much as you think I do, Kushida-san," said Horikita seriously, looking up at Kushida with sharp eyes from her low position. "If getting on my knees will be a positive thing for the class, then it's worth it."

Amasawa, after declaring earlier that she wouldn't interfere, quietly watched things unfold, seemingly enjoying herself.

"No," said Kushida. "You can't get on your knees and beg. There's no way you can." That was her conclusion—despite her hesitation, Kushida was certain that Horikita couldn't do it.

"If...I do this, get on my knees and beg, I'll make you join the student council," said Horikita.

So saying, Horikita slowly began to stretch out her arms, as though she was going to kneel. But before her hands touched the floor, she stopped. No matter how many seconds passed, she didn't move beyond that.

"Oh, what's the matter, Horikita-san? Weren't you going to get down and beg?" Kushida sounded pleased, assuming that Horikita had stopped because she couldn't bear the humiliation.

"Can I ask just one more thing before I do this? Are you telling me you'll be satisfied with me getting down on my knees and begging in such a boring way as this?" asked Horikita.

"What?" said Kushida.

"If I bow to you right now, I'm going to get you to work for me. No matter how you think about it, I'm the only one who benefits, not you."

Kushida could see Horikita groveling before her right now, in this moment; she could burn that image into her eyes. But at the same time, it meant she'd pay the price of supporting Horikita, who would run the student council and give Kushida orders. You couldn't call that a cheap price to pay.

"I know that you don't like me," Horikita continued. "I can understand why you'd want to make me beg on my knees for you. But if you do this, I don't think you can get the real pleasure and joy of making me kneel down to you of my own will, as opposed to forcing me to do it like this. Am I wrong?"

This was Horikita's attempt at bargaining. Horikita most definitely did not want to get down on her knees and beg Kushida—in other words, Kushida's reading of the situation was spot-on. However, Horikita was putting up an exquisite front, making it look as though she had no reservations whatever about doing this.

But Kushida wasn't going to be so easily convinced. "I don't understand," she said. "If you say that you're fine with getting down and begging, then why don't you just hurry up and do it? Forget all this talk about joy and pleasure or whatever, why don't you just kneel already and get me to join you? Wouldn't that be better?"

She wasn't going to join the student council without a condition in the first place, so it was understandable that she'd press Horikita on that point.

"If there is any resistance in me about begging right now, it's because I'm positive that you'll regret it later, Kushida-san," Horikita insisted. "If I bow to you right here and now, that means you join the student council, even if you don't want to. I don't want you to become an officer of the council with such low motivation as that."

Since Kushida Kikyou was going to be joining the student council, Horikita wanted to make full use of her abilities. If it was a student council that Kushida herself didn't want to be a part of, then that couldn't happen.

"It's difficult for you to make me kneel down to you if you keep me at a distance in your personal life. But if you join the student council, even if you don't like it, you'll have more time to interact with me, and you'll have more opportunities to demonstrate your capabilities. At times, there should be opportunities when I'll want to rely on you. And if that happens, I may kneel to you of my own free will, more than once or twice."

Horikita was essentially telling Kushida that, rather than forcing her to kneel to her now, she could create a situation where Horikita would kneel down to her of her own accord. Surprisingly enough, such a provocative statement from Horikita seemed to resonate with Kushida.

"But it doesn't change the fact that I'll be working under you, right?" she said.

"You seem to think of it as if there's the president and everyone below her, but you're mistaken," Horikita replied. "It's not the position itself that determines how things are; it's the person who determines what the position really is. If that's the problem, why don't we just build a relationship where the vice president has more power and authority than the president?"

Horikita continued to remove obstacles in the way of her objective in this discussion, placing herself in a lower position to press Kushida into accepting.

"You'll immediately become vice president right after joining, even though you're a new member," she continued. "And you'll be someone with the kind of power to be able to twist me, the president, around your finger. I would surely think that's the best kind of position for you, which would more than satisfy your need for approval."

Since Horikita had already completely dissected Kushida, she knew what she wanted and what she craved. Looking at the situation from that perspective, it was clear once again that Kushida really was the right person for the student council.

"I don't think I like this," said Kushida.

"It doesn't matter if you don't like it now," said Horikita. "It's a trivial matter."

Kushida, with a stern look on her face, averted her eyes from Horikita, who seemed ready to kneel at any moment now. Then Kushida turned further, putting her back to Horikita.

"My position will become stronger if I join the student council. That's not a bad thing," she said.

"Yes, you're exactly right," Horikita agreed. "So, the idea of adding conditions to joining isn't all that interesting, is it?"

"As much as it pains me to go along with your attempts to smooth-talk me, I would be able to use you, just like you would use me," said Kushida.

"Yes, that's—"

With a thin smile on her lips, Horikita started to retract her arms, but then...

"But, you know, Horikita-san," said Kushida, turning back around to face Horikita with the biggest smile she could muster, "I really think I'd like to see you beg on your knees right here and now after all."

"...You know this means that you're not getting me to actually beg for real, though, in the true sense, right?" said Horikita.

"Don't worry. I'll accomplish that another time, you'll see. As for today, get down and beg."

Up until this point, things had been progressing remarkably well for Horikita, at the pace she dictated, but at the very last moment, she'd miscalculated. Kushida, now more resolute, revealed her more ill-natured personality and forcefully turned the situation around.

"So, what will you do?" she taunted, pressing harder for an answer now that she could see she had the upper hand. "Give up? If you do, I'm not joining the student council."

It was a disadvantageous situation for Horikita to try and get Kushida, who was originally against the idea of joining the student council, to join for nothing. If Horikita avoided the option of begging her to do so, Kushida might throw away her offer. Considering that, perhaps the game had been rigged from the

start.

“...Ayanokouji-kun,” Horikita said. “And you too, Amasawa-san.”

“What is it?” asked Amasawa, in a singsong voice.

“I’m sorry, but could you give us a minute alone, please?”

Horikita, clearly in a foul mood, ordered Amasawa and me to get out of sight. I supposed this meant that she couldn’t allow multiple people to see the humiliating display of her begging on her knees. Amasawa wanted to watch, but I practically dragged her away by the arm, and we left.

Horikita had brilliantly achieved her goal of getting Kushida to join the student council of her own volition. But she had paid a price for it.

3.2

“**A**HH!” Amasawa sighed. “I wish I could’ve seen it! Horikita-senpai begging Kushida-senpai!”

“Don’t say that out loud.” Horikita sounded exasperated. She was shaking with anger as she recalled what happened just minutes prior. “It was a fatal mistake on my part.”

“Even though you were the one who brought it on yourself, you really let Kushida take advantage of you,” I remarked.

“I underestimated her need for approval.”

Amasawa and I had seen how incredibly happy Kushida looked on her way back to the dormitory earlier.

“So, you were forced to get down on your knees and beg in order to solicit her,” I said.

“...Even so, in the end, Kushida-san said yes,” Horikita said. “That was her own decision. If she really didn’t want to do it, she had the self-confidence to be able to say no. You understand that too, don’t you?”

"It's impressive that you managed to see that far ahead," I remarked.

On the outside, Kushida smiled at everyone without showing favoritism, but on the inside, she was strongly fixated on doing things out of her own self-interest, just as Horikita had said. The situation back then was one where Kushida could freely show her true colors, and there was no need for her to hold anything back. Kushida could have refused the offer to join even after seeing Horikita down on her knees. The only reason she had ultimately decided to accept was because she recognized that there was a benefit in joining.

"I know that she hates the idea of working for me with every fiber of her being, but that's not important," Horikita said. "Joining the student council will, without a doubt, increase her power to draw people to her. This should be a major stepping stone in restoring her, even though she was once driven into a corner in our class."

"You intend to get the most out of Kushida, then," I said.

"Obviously. I was the one who made the choice to keep her. This is an absolutely necessary move to keep getting results so that everyone else in the class will be convinced it was the right decision. Besides, she even made me get down on my knees and beg."

It sounded like she was still hung up on the whole begging thing, but there was no use crying about it. It was her own mistake, a result of her own strategy. Kushida probably wouldn't have accepted Horikita's offer if she'd absolutely refused to beg her.

"You should have fought to do something else, other than getting down on your knees, then," I replied.

"Just stop talking about that already. I'll put her to good use next time..."

Horikita had suffered for it, but it was the first step. Not just anyone was fit to be a member of the student council. And by appointing Kushida to the council, Horikita could make the class feel that Kushida was someone capable, someone necessary to the class, and thereby position Kushida further from being marked as a target for elimination. Kushida should have been very aware of that fact herself. However, she was letting her childish feelings, her dislike of the fact that it was Horikita recruiting her, get in the way.

"Now your class is going to have a monopoly on the student council for two years," I observed. "That's a definite advantage."

"If President Nagumo approves, that is," said Horikita.

"He said so himself already, didn't he? He said that you're free to bring anyone from your own class."

"Yes, but when he said that, there was a 'if you've got the guts, then go ahead and try' kind of implication to it."

"In that case, just show him that you've got the guts," I replied.

Horikita made an expression of displeasure. "That's easy for you to say."

But what she was saying, and what she was doing, were exact opposites. She hadn't hesitated to go as far as begging on her knees to bring Kushida over to her side in order to get closer to Class A—even if only slightly. What could you call that if not guts?

"I think that was close to the best possible way to recruit Kushida, as well," I added.

"I think so too. That's the new student council president for you, wow!" exclaimed Amasawa, nodding exaggeratedly as she stood behind me.

"...How long are you planning to follow us?" snapped Horikita. "The show's over already."

"Come on, it's fine, isn't it? I'm interested in seeing what first-year you'll invite. Besides, Horikita-senpai, aren't you and I friends?"

"You and I do not have the kind of relationship where we can casually chat with one another, at the very least," Horikita replied. "You know that, right?"

"Really? Sure, we've had ourselves some scuffles, but only during special exams. Once they're over, don't you think it's better for senpai and kouhai to get along?"

Horikita furrowed her brow slightly at that, but she gave up, perhaps because she couldn't forcefully make Amasawa go away.

"Why don't you just bring Amasawa onto the council?" I suggested. "Her OAA

scores are impeccable.”

“Even if there’re no issues with her OAA scores, Amasawa-san isn’t fit for the student council,” said Horikita.

“Huh? Couldn’t you at least invite me, though? You never know, I might even say okay.”

“I’ll pass.”

Apparently, Amasawa wasn’t part of the student council that Horikita was scheming to create. Well, I supposed the council required seriousness, and Amasawa certainly did seem like she wasn’t suited to that.

“Since you turned the idea down, does that mean you already have someone in mind?” I asked Horikita.

“I have several candidates in mind, but... I wonder if he’s still on campus,” mused Horikita.

Judging from the fact that Horikita had just said “he,” it sounded like it was a male first-year student she was after.

Horikita looked around the first-years’ building, but apparently, didn’t find the person she was looking for. After searching classrooms 1-A through 1-D, she let out a sigh. “I think he might have already left after all.”

Horikita grumbled for a bit, complaining that she had spent too much time dealing with Kushida and Amasawa. However, she must not have been willing to give up on this right away, because she turned to speak to Amasawa and me.

“I’m going to try asking his classmates directly,” she said. “Wait here.”

With that, she went inside Class 1-A’s room. Amasawa and I exchanged looks, and decided to wait for Horikita to come back.

“So, the reason you came was to see me?” I asked.

“Hm? Oh, you mean the reason I came over to the second-year classes? You curious?”

“Well, I can’t help but be curious if you’re going to keep sticking around without showing any sign of leaving.”

"To tell you the truth, I came to check on Kushida-senpai," she admitted. "I mean, there was that whole thing that happened at the Cultural Festival, so I was just wondering how she was doing. Plus, I know that Takuya made a lot of trouble for her, too."

"It looked like you were making fun of Kushida an awful lot to me, though," I replied.

Amasawa stuck out her tongue a bit, and then smiled. "How do I put this? I guess it's like, only someone like me can tease her so openly. It's because I wanted to see just how strong she's gotten emotionally."

So, it was like that. I had thought that Amasawa was awfully combative with Kushida, but now she was saying that it was calculated, huh?

"I think that there were several miscalculations on Kushida's part in getting involved with the White Room students, but it helped her break out of her shell in the end," I said. "So, I guess it worked out all right."

When I said that, Amasawa's face relaxed a bit into a cute smile. "I have to be at least a little bit useful."

"I can accept your reasoning for coming to see Kushida, but that doesn't explain why you're still following me and Horikita now," I added.

"Simple curiosity. I mean, Ayanokouji-senpai, you were concerned about Horikita-senpai, weren't you? Since Horikita-senpai is going to be president, I thought I'd observe her supposed appeal up close. She seems like the serious sort, but she's a little careless, and she's kind of funny, isn't she? I really thought it might be nice to join the council myself there for a little bit."

"In that case, you should've been a little more serious about it when talking to her," I said. "Horikita knows that you're a capable person, so she might not have rejected you after all, you know."

"Oh no, it's all right, really. There's no point in joining the student council at this point, anyway."

"There's no point in joining it at this point"? Although we were at the end of the second semester right now, Amasawa was still only a first-year student. With Yagami out, even if she was joining as a replacement for someone else,

she should have plenty of time. Then, I thought back to a conversation I'd had with Amasawa when I saw her before the school trip.

"What have you been planning?" I asked. "You still haven't given up on that idea yet?"

Amasawa's eyes narrowed at my roundabout implications. "Just as I'd expect from you, Ayanokouji-senpai. You picked up on it from my subtle phrasing."

"Well, you said that you weren't going to cause trouble, and that you were only giving special treatment to me specifically."

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

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

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

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

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

It wasn't so difficult to connect the story of Yagami's expulsion to the student council.

"You didn't throw out hints because you wanted to stop, did you? That's not the kind of person you are, Amasawa," I added.

"Correct. I guess if anything, Ayanokouji-senpai, I wanted to know where you stand on all this, y'know?"

"You're free to decide what you're going to do. And more importantly, you're also free to retract your previous statement, and direct your desire for vengeance at me."

"But I suppose you're not saying that because you're being bighearted, are you?" Amasawa said. "It's just because there's such a massive difference between us."

Horikita had been talking with first-year students for a while, and now she came back up to us with a satisfied look on her face. “Sorry to have kept you waiting. Let’s go.”

With that, she was off, though she was walking a little faster than she usually did.

“Who are you really planning on meeting, anyway?” I asked.

“I don’t think you know him,” Horikita said. “A student named Ishigami-kun.”

“Ishigami?” I repeated.

There was no doubt that this was the very same Ishigami who had been on my mind. There were no other first-year students with the same surname.

Amasawa was a first-year student, and Ishigami’s classmate besides, so of course she was aware of him, and reacted immediately. “Oh, wow, setting your sights on Ishigami-kun? Not bad, Horikita-senpai!”

“Is he an excellent student? Like the class-leader type or something?” I decided to ask them about Ishigami as if I didn’t know anything about him.

“He’s not like a leader, exactly...I guess he’s more like the strategist for Class A, maybe,” said Amasawa.

Unlike most normal students, Amasawa hadn’t ever made me feel uncomfortable with her attitude. She hadn’t done anything to clue me in as to whether she knew or didn’t know about Ishigami, who knew my true identity, in advance. Since there was nothing to hide anymore, it was conceivable that she didn’t know anything, but it was dangerous for me to assume.

“What’s your connection with him, Horikita?” I asked. I hadn’t expected her to mention Ishigami’s name.

“We’re only slightly acquainted, really,” she replied. “As far as I can tell from OAA, his Academic Ability score is nothing to scoff at, and he seems to be quite trusted by his classmates. I think that he’d be qualified for the role. It sounds like he was just in the classroom up until a few moments ago, so I thought I might be able to catch him if I go now.”

So, that was why she was walking fast, huh? For a moment, I wondered

whether I should really keep following Horikita as she went to meet Ishigami... but there wasn't any point in worrying too much about it. This was a strange connection, but it was conceivable that one of us would unexpectedly try to make contact with the other, or that we might be assigned to the same group by sheer coincidence during some special exam or what have you. Going out of my way to irrationally avoid him would be completely absurd.

As we approached the hallway leading to the entrance, we saw a small circle of boys chatting with one another. Horikita immediately noticed that Ishigami was among them, so she moved closer.

"Ishigami-kun," she called out.

Ishigami turned around and quietly looked at Horikita and me. Although this was our first meeting, and it was happening in an unexpected way, he showed no signs of losing his composure. On the contrary, it was like he didn't even see me at all. But I supposed it might not have been so surprising when you considered that, being in a small school like this, it was inevitable that we'd meet at some point.



The other first-year students were only acquainted with Amasawa, and they seemed a little nervous to be in the presence of second-year students like Horikita and me.

"May I help you?" Ishigami asked.

"I've come here to request something of you," Horikita told him. "I was wondering if you'd consider joining the student council."

"....."

Ishigami, rendered silent by Horikita's favor, turned once more to his friends.

"Sorry, but you go on ahead," he said. "I'll catch up right away."

I wondered if they had plans to hang out together or something afterward.

"I'm sorry. I don't plan to take up too much of your time," said Horikita.

"I don't mind. But why me, if I may ask?" Ishigami spoke politely when addressing his senpai—quite unlike the casual way he'd spoken to me that time before.

"I have little interaction with first-year students," said Horikita. "You're one of the very few I've spoken to. On top of that, you're in Class A, and you excel in Academic Ability in OAA. I wouldn't think it's so surprising that I'm inviting you to join."

It was certainly true that there were no issues whatsoever when it came to those abilities of his that were disclosed publicly. Just like Horikita had said, he was undoubtedly the sort of capable person who could very easily find himself called upon by the student council.

"Also, you don't appear to be in any clubs at the moment," she added. "What do you think?"

Ishigami immediately turned her down without hesitation. "I'm sorry, but I am afraid that I have no interest in the student council."

"Does that mean it would be too much to ask for you to at least consider it?" asked Horikita.

"I do not wish to join any clubs, nor do I wish to join the student council."

Please look elsewhere.” With that, Ishigami turned his back to us and walked away.

Horikita seemed to hesitate for a moment over whether to call out to him, but she seemed to decide that she couldn’t force him into doing it, given his clear lack of interest.

“You’re not going to get anywhere with him, I guess,” I remarked.

“I thought he’d be a good candidate, but I suppose this means I have to give up on him,” she agreed.

“There are lots of other excellent students in Class A, y’know,” Amasawa cut in, “so, isn’t it possible you could find someone even if you just go around asking people randomly?”

“I’d like to think so,” said Horikita, “but...I’m not so sure about that. Ambitious students, like Ichinose-san last year, or Yagami-kun this year, would have requested to join the student council early on, right? If a student hasn’t acted by this time, that essentially means that they don’t want to get involved.”

That was true. If this were something a student was interested in, they would already have come knocking on the door during Nagumo’s administration.

“So...what happens now?” I asked.

“Now I intend to go for Class 1-D,” said Horikita.

“Class D? That’s another surprising choice on your part,” I said.

The wise course of action, from the student council’s perspective, would be to select someone from A or B, which both had a high percentage of competent and serious students. Yet she was deliberately going for Class D?

“There’s only a difference of about two hundred points between Class 1-C and Class 1-D, so there’s a chance for them to turn things around. From Class 1-D’s perspective, having one of their students join the student council could create a tailwind for them. It’s fair to expect that some students in their class will interpret that as a positive thing. They just need to be made aware of that advantage.”

“How about inviting somebody like Housen-kun? That’d probably be

interesting.” Perhaps Amasawa wanted to stir up some chaos in the student council, because she recommended an outlandish candidate.

“I can’t imagine he’d want to do it,” said Horikita. “And besides, even if he did want to, there’s no way I would allow him to join, given how violent he is now. We need to show proper results over the next year and a half.”

Amasawa’s suggestion had only been made for the fun of it, but Horikita was sure that Housen didn’t meet the minimum requirements and flatly refused the idea.

When we stepped into our old classroom, Class 1-D, Horikita looked around for students still in the room. One of the students immediately took notice, stood up from her chair, and approached us.

“Good day to you, Horikita-senpai, Ayanokouji-senpai. Oh, and hello, Amasawa-san.”

It was none other than Nanase Tsubasa—rather a poor fit for Class 1-D, which had many poorly behaved students.

“Heya,” replied Amasawa.

“It’s a little surprising to see you with Amasawa-san, I must say.” While I wouldn’t go as far as to say she seemed alarmed, Nanase did give me and Amasawa rather pointed looks.

“It seems like most of the students have already left after all,” said Horikita.

“Actually, there are especially few people around today,” Nanase said.
“Usually there are a few more.”

“Is that so?” asked Horikita.

“Yes. One of my classmates is having a birthday, and people are celebrating at Keyaki Mall. I was actually invited to come join later, as well... Anyway, why are you here, by the first-year classrooms?” It was only natural for her to ask.

“Yagami Takuya-kun’s expulsion has created a vacancy on the student council,” Horikita replied. “I’m here to fill that opening.”

“Meaning you’re recruiting someone for the student council?” asked Nanase.

"It's been decided that I will be taking the position of next student council president, and this is my first task, yes."

Nanase nodded in admiration, and then looked around Class 1-D herself. "Can even students from Class D apply for the position?"

"Of course," said Horikita. "I was originally in Class D to begin with, so there's no reason for me to refuse anyone."

"In that case, does that mean... Could I please be allowed the honor of assisting in the position?!"

"...You, Nanase-san?" asked Horikita.

"Yes. That is, of course...only as long as someone such as I wouldn't be a hindrance to you. I would very much like to help the student council."

"I'm not sure what sort of decision the outgoing president, Nagumo-senpai, will make," Horikita pointed out, letting Nanase know that she wouldn't go against him.

I figured I should speak up with some supplementary information, since there was a possibility that Horikita didn't remember Nanase's OAA scores in detail.

"Nanase would be fine, though, wouldn't she?" I said. "She has excellent OAA scores, and she's diligent, so I think she'd be suited to the student council."

"You're right. There don't seem to be any issues at all with her as a candidate," Horikita agreed. This would also be a quick solution to her problem, since she had been turned down by Ishigami. "Very well. Can I count on you, then, Nanase-san?"

"Yes, of course!" Nanase said.

I had my own thoughts about Nanase, but that was one matter, and this was another. If Nanase was willing to accept a role on the student council, then I had absolutely no reason to get in the way.

"Sounds like you don't have any issues if it's Nanase-chan joining, hm?" remarked Amasawa.

"That's right," said Horikita. "Unlike you."

"I kinda get the feeling you're making fun of me a little."

"I hold your abilities in high regard. It's just that your blunt attitude, your way of thinking, and your personality aren't suitable for the student council."

Having confirmed a spur-of-the-moment candidate, Horikita nodded in apparent satisfaction.

"Um, if I may ask, what should I do starting tomorrow, then?" asked Nanase excitedly.

"I don't think there will be any problems, but tomorrow, I'm going to talk to Student Council President Nagumo first," Horikita told her. "Once that's settled and your appointment to the council is official, I'll contact you."

Horikita and Nanase exchanged contact information. With that taken care of, Nanase smiled happily. "I'm happy to get more contacts in any way that I can."

"Well, tomorrow then," said Horikita.

"Yes, I'll be eagerly awaiting your call!"

Nanase sent us off with a smile, and Horikita, Amasawa, and I left Class 1-D's room.

"At any rate, this means that I've gotten my candidates," Horikita said. "All that's left now is to wait for an answer from President Nagumo."

"Well then, think I'll be headin' on back myself. See you later, you two!"

Amasawa had come rushing in like a tempest and left in the same fashion.

Horikita and I watched her go.

"As usual, I can never tell what she's thinking," said Horikita.

"You've got that right," I replied.

"Thanks for your hard work today."

"Well, I was accompanying you, but in the end, I really didn't do anything. You made it easy for me, so thanks."

"That's not true. At the very least, in Kushida-san's case, it seemed to me like your words had an effect on her. I'll be sure to report that you did your part

properly.”

I guessed she was referring to how I coaxed Kushida into coming up with a condition for accepting the deal.

“I don’t think I’ll get any compliments from Nagumo, but what you just said makes me so happy I feel like I’m going to cry,” I said.

“Okay, what? Oh—that reminds me, there’s a study group session happening at Keyaki Mall later. Want to go see? Your girlfriend is supposed to be participating, too.”

“A study group session? Sure. I can pop my head in for a bit, I guess.”

“Huh?” Horikita looked shocked, even though she was the one who invited me.

“What?”

“It’s just, I was sure you were going to refuse. Is Karuizawa-san’s presence that significant after all?” asked Horikita.

That wasn’t it, but I supposed it was the sort of scenario where it was inevitable someone would perceive it that way.

“I guess so,” I said. “I do have concerns about whether she’s being taught to study properly.”

With that, I headed to the café along with Horikita.

3.3

“SORRY TO HAVE KEPT you waiting, everyone,” said Horikita as the two of us arrived at the meeting place for the study group, whose members got together in the café after class.

She naturally went over and joined her classmates. I was curious about how she was doing when it came to interacting with the other members of her class, and I had to say, I was impressed with how much she’d improved.

"Oh! Kiyotaka, you came too?!" Kei had been looking down at her notebook with a perplexed expression on her face, but she smiled when she noticed me.

"Sorry, but I just came to check up on things," I said.

"Aww, really?" She pouted, obviously displeased, but she didn't continue complaining beyond that. I was sure that was because I had told her well in advance, up until the day before, that she needed to proactively show up to study sessions, and that I wasn't going to help her with studying.

Shortly after Horikita and I had arrived, Sudou appeared.

"Whoa, sorry I'm late!" His voice was strained; he was out of breath from running to the café.

"It must be difficult for you, Sudou-kun, doing this on top of your club activities," remarked Horikita.

"Nah, it ain't no big deal," he replied. "I do this stuff all the time anyway."

Sudou's attention had been momentarily captivated by the sight of Horikita, but then he went ahead and sat down in an empty chair nearby. He placed his bag on his lap and took out his study materials, including some kind of oblong case, from which he produced a pair of glasses.

"Huh? Sudou-kun, you wear glasses?" asked Horikita.

"Oh, just recently a little, yeah. I thought I'd put 'em on while I study. Oh, but, um, the prescription strength is like, practically nothin'."

Generally, if someone had good eyesight, they wouldn't use corrective implements such as glasses. However, it wasn't as though having good eyesight dictated whether it was okay to wear glasses. Unlike basketball, which required you to look out within a wide field, studying was an up-close battle. Adjusting your eyes when focusing on specific things caused significant strain, after all.

Many students, Kei included, seemed shocked to see Sudou in study mode. That was probably because he hadn't really attended many of these study sessions until now.

"What the hell are y'all starin' at?" asked Sudou.

"It's just, it's like you give off a completely different vibe just by putting on

glasses. And it's also like you really have started studying more," said Shinohara. Impressed with Sudou, she jabbed Ike, her boyfriend, in the side.

"H-hey, I'm tryin' my best too now, y'know!" said Ike, sitting next to her.

"I know that. But Sudou-kun has a huge lead on you in that area."

"That's—come on, I mean... Well, yeah..." Ike tried to object, but ultimately, he ended up hanging his head low after his girlfriend's sobering comment.

"Oh, sorry," Shinohara said. "I know I'm not really one to talk in that area, either. But I have to ask, are there like, any tips on how to keep studying for longer? You used to be at the same kinda level, Sudou-kun, and I was just thinking it'd be neat to know if you had any helpful tips, y'know, as reference. It's gotta be super difficult for you to balance playing basketball and studying at the same time, right?"

Several other students nodded in agreement. It was certainly true that, from the perspective of students with a low level of academic ability, students like Yousuke, Mii-chan, and Horikita seemed like they had always been prodigies and geniuses with exceptional intellects from the very beginning. Even if they tried asking such high-level students for tips and tricks, they probably wouldn't feel like they could actually put those things into practice themselves. Those students were already smart to begin with, so the lower-level students couldn't help thinking they must be able to handle anything, no matter the obstacle.

On the other hand, Sudou had started out with the lowest level of academic ability in the class. It was only natural that they would want to know what had caused Sudou to mature.

"Tips... Hmm," said Sudou, thinking. He crossed his arms, rather at a loss. Horikita was the main reason Sudou had started studying originally. His motivation was that he wanted to become smarter so he could be worthy of Horikita. However, he must have been highly reluctant to talk about that here. "Hmm, yeah... Okay."

For a while, he seemed like he didn't know what to say, but then he must have finally gotten his thoughts in order. He started speaking, though he still seemed to feel awkward, his words spilling out clumsily. "Weirdly enough, I started to enjoy studyin'. And when that happened, basketball started gettin'

more fun, too... It's like, y'know, that kinda feeling."

He started to tell the other students the reason he was able to do both things well—and also, something else good about it.

"It's like, at first, I hated studyin'. It put me to sleep, and I couldn't solve the problems right away. But y'know, the more you learn, the more you realize how useful this stuff is in school."

"Wait, hold up, Ken," said Ike. "Isn't studying, like, completely useless in the future? Depending on the kind of job you do, it's not gonna help at all."

I was sure that was a question that everyone had wondered about at least once.

"Yeah, I used to think, 'Well, I'm gonna be a pro basketball player, so studyin' is just a waste of my time,'" said Sudou. "But then I asked myself, 'What if I can't go pro? What kind of job could I do if I can't even study?' Maybe the only job I'd get would be the kind that anybody could do. You know?"

While there wasn't any need to name specialized professions, it was true that his choices would be more limited than the average person's in that case.

"So, even if my wish of goin' pro doesn't come true, I'll get more options if I study, right? I could even go to college and study some kinda specific field or somethin'. I mean, I don't have anything concrete in mind yet, though."

You didn't have to have only one dream.

"Studyin' is an investment in your future," Sudou concluded. "That's how I see it, anyway."

Even if the dream of becoming a professional basketball player, something Sudou had been chasing for years, was closed off to him, he wouldn't fall behind in life, provided he could find and hold on to one more big dream. This was a little story about Sudou, whose thinking had improved a notch or two through his studies. In the past, the people around him might have sneered when they heard his story—but now everyone here was listening to it with total sincerity, without poking fun. That was proof of just how much weight had been given to his words, and how much truth there was to what he was saying.

Feeling embarrassed and bashful, Sudou shifted in his seat and hurriedly opened his notebook. “A-are we done with this now? Come on, let’s get started with the studyin’ already.”

He should have been exhausted, because he worked harder than anyone else with his club activities, but Sudou didn’t show even the slightest hint of fatigue. He wasn’t the type of person who was good at making speeches, which was precisely why his words and actions had truth to them, without a hint of lies, and they moved people’s hearts. I was sure that it was a moment that resonated very strongly with the lower-level students, like Shinohara and Ike.

3.4

THE DAY AFTER HORIKITA selected the new student council members and the study sessions for the special exam began, she was called by Nagumo to come to the student council office right away, so she headed to the office after class. I wasn’t expecting I’d be called again, too, but...

Horikita walked up to me and showed me the message on her phone’s screen.
“I was told that you are to come with me.”

“My stomach is in pretty rough shape, like yesterday, so I’ll pass,” I replied.

“Well then, I suppose there’s no helping it. But you know, if you can’t come, you will probably be called at a later date, yes?”

“...Let’s hurry up and meet and get it over with.”

It was entirely conceivable that I’d be forced to go through this hassle again after some time had passed. Horikita looked like she was determined to march right into the student council office straight away, but she stopped.

“Kushida-san should be coming too,” she said. “Let’s wait a minute.”

Apparently, Horikita wanted to take care of introducing the new members right away as well. Kushida was in the classroom too, so... Well, that’s what I’d thought, but when I looked around, I noticed that she was nowhere to be

found.

"Looks like she must have gone ahead to wait by the office," said an exasperated Horikita, shoulder-to-shoulder with me as we left the classroom.

"I guess she didn't want to go together with you, then, Horikita?" I said.

"She's going to be spending more time with me once she starts getting student council work, whether she likes it or not," huffed Horikita.

Well, I supposed that meant Kushida wanted to take every opportunity she had to avoid spending time with Horikita, even if only for a moment.

"It's also a hassle when another person just automatically resents you for no reason, and yet you keep having to interact with each other," Horikita sighed.

"Well, we don't know how things would've turned out if you were a little more gentle-mannered yourself," I pointed out.

"It would've been different, yes, but in a worse way, wouldn't it? It'd be dangerous to let her seize the lead all the time."

Horikita was certainly right that she needed to rein Kushida in to some degree.

When Horikita and I arrived outside the student council office, we saw Kushida and Nanase waiting there, standing side by side, in the distance. Whether or not the two of them had actually been acquainted before, they seemed to be having a rather good time talking, perhaps because they had the ability to talk with people naturally.

"They're sure getting along well," I observed.

"Yes, they certainly are," Horikita agreed.

Somehow, as I watched the two of them talk, it didn't seem like they were going to stop. They both seemed to have a calm, gentle air about them and were constantly smiling. It felt like, if we left them be, they'd keep on talking forever.

"I'm sure the student council can get along fine without you, Horikita," I said. "Don't you think? I'm sure those two would be well-received by the student body, too."

"Shut up. Let's hurry inside."

Perhaps to stop Nanase and Kushida from having even more fun than they already were, Horikita quickly approached them.

"Good day to you, Horikita-senpai." Nanase greeted Horikita politely and bowed to her while Horikita gave her a sidelong glance.

Kushida smiled openly too. "I was a little relieved when I heard that Nanase-san would also be joining the student council starting today. I've been so nervous this whole time, I haven't been able to calm down." She patted her chest and let out a sigh of relief. I hadn't expected to hear things like that from her.

The student council candidates went inside first. I felt a little uncomfortable about following them, but since I had been invited, I supposed I didn't have much choice in the matter.

"President Nagumo," announced Horikita on behalf of her group. "I've invited Kushida Kikyou from Class 2-B and Nanase Tsubasa from Class 1-D to join the student council as new members. I've brought them with me here today."

Nagumo and Kiriyama welcomed them inside.

"You seriously picked one of your own classmates? You're a pretty shameless person yourself, eh, Suzune?" Nagumo laughed, making it feel like he intended to sound as if he was half joking.

"I chose people impartially," Horikita replied. "Perhaps you disapprove, though?"

That was the official story, but it was a bald-faced lie on Horikita's part to keep from admitting that she had selected Kushida for own class's sake. There was no conceivable way that Nagumo didn't see right through her the moment he saw she was bringing Kushida onto the council, but at least on the surface, he showed his approval.

"I have no problems with your choices," he said. "I'm not complaining."

We were looking at the new, complete makeup of the student council. Now, Nagumo, Kiriyama, and Ichinose were out, and Yagami had been expelled,

resulting in the unfamiliar arrangement we were seeing.

"This is probably the first time that the ratio of male to female student council members has been reversed," Kiriyama, the now-former vice president of the council, observed after looking at the new lineup.

"That's not a problem," said Nagumo. "Men and women are equal nowadays. It's just that the next generation's best and brightest are disproportionately women. Isn't that right, Ayanokouji?"

"I don't have anything to say back to that," I answered.

The rise of girls wasn't a bad thing. However, if the ideal ratio was supposed to be one to one, then you could say that this result reflected how pathetic the latest crop of boys was.

Nagumo addressed Horikita. "Serve as president from an impartial perspective."

"Understood," she replied.

"Well then, I guess this means I'm officially dismissed from my role as president." Nagumo patted the student council president's chair once, as though he were reluctant to part with that, before getting up from his seat. "It feels like it went on for ages, and at the same time, like it's hardly been any time at all. I can't really put the feeling into words."

"Do you have any regrets?" asked Horikita, seeing Nagumo's seemingly sad expression.

"I wanted to create an environment where capable students could cross class boundaries and graduate from Class A," he replied. "But in the end, I couldn't attain my ideal vision."

When Nagumo took up the position of president, he had emphasized that he was going to push that ideal strongly. As a result, the current batch of third-year students had created a situation close to what he had envisioned, but that was mainly made possible by the rules that Nagumo had personally created, rather than his achievements as student council president.

"The student council here has more authority than at a normal high school,

but even so, it's impossible to do anything to overturn the school's decisions," said Nagumo. "I guess I thought I could do more, somehow."

"Even so, I think that you undoubtedly had some effect, Nagumo-senpai," Horikita said. "Policies such as Class Transfer Tickets and Protect Points never existed in the history of ANHS until now, after all."

"I guess so," he conceded.

Whether those things would produce good results or not would be something for future generations to discover. Horikita Manabu had protected the Advanced Nurturing High School's traditions and served as an admirable student council president. Then, Nagumo Miyabi had created OAA, introducing new winds of change that seemed to revolutionize the system and place even more importance on merit. And now Horikita Suzune was succeeding him. What kind of president would she be, in the one year she'd serve in the position?

Well, the most obvious, and also most difficult, goal was...to successfully graduate from Class A after starting in Class D. If she could pull that off, then she would most definitely make her mark as student council president.

"There are some procedures we have to take care of that will require a little paperwork, so we'd like to ask that everyone except for Ayanokouji stay," said Kiriyma. While he was telling the others what to do, at the same time, he was also telling me that I was in the way.

"Well then, if you'll please excuse me, I'll be going now," I said.

"See you, Ayanokouji. Remember, our game isn't over yet." Apparently, Nagumo had purposefully asked that I come here just to remind me of that one more time.

"I understand." I gave a slight bow and left the student council office.

After leaving Horikita and the rest behind, I took out my cell phone. It had vibrated in my pocket a few times earlier—apparently, I had received a message. I thought it'd be from Kei, but it wasn't. It was an invitation to meet up on our day off, from a certain someone who I didn't often hear from.

Apparently, this person wanted to meet up with me on either Saturday or Sunday, if I had the time. Since I had a date with Kei on Sunday, I sent a

message back saying that Saturday would work. By the time I reached the front entrance, I'd received another message offering a specific time and place to meet: in Keyaki Mall at 2:00 P.M. on Saturday. I responded once more to say that time and place worked for me and there wouldn't be any problems.

Although the person contacting me hadn't mentioned anything about the nature of the conversation we'd be having, it wasn't difficult for me to guess what it would be about once I saw the name of the other person who would accompany us.

Just as I was leaving the building, I passed by a female student.

"Were you called to the student council office again?" Kiryuuin asked.

"I see you have business with the student council yet again yourself, Kiryuuin-senpai," I replied. "Is it about what happened the other day?"

"That's right. After you left, we couldn't see eye to eye, unfortunately... In the end, the situation's still unresolved."

"Sounds like quite a disaster," I said. From the sounds of it, their last meeting had ended without Nagumo giving a definite yes or no.

"I was planning to take a slightly more aggressive approach today," said Kiryuuin.

"While you're free to do that, they are in the middle of something right now," I told her. "They're going through the process of having Horikita take over the position of student council president, and registering the new student council members, and so on."

I figured that even though she might say that she didn't care about that, and just force her way in anyway, I'd go ahead and tell her what was going on, just in case. Perhaps what I said was unexpectedly effective after all, because Kiryuuin stopped in her tracks and began to ponder.

"Well then, if you'll please excuse me." My intuition was telling me that I should hurry up and leave, but it was already too late.

"I'm wondering if I can ask for a little bit of your time, Ayanokouji," said Kiryuuin.

“...This wouldn’t be about your unresolved issue, would it?” I asked.

“Yes, because even if I challenge Nagumo about it again, however strongly I press him, he probably still won’t talk that easily.”

“Didn’t you say you could just take a more aggressive approach or something?” I asked.

“I can’t exactly traumatize the new president and council members, can I?”

I didn’t care about that. Besides, if she was determined to avoid something like that, she could just wait until Horikita and the others left.

“You simply thought that using me would more likely lead to a solution than trying to bulldoze your way through,” I said.

“Mhm, I should have expected as much from you, Ayanokouji,” said Kiryuuin, snapping her fingers. “You certainly are quick-witted.”

She was complimenting me, but anyone would have arrived at the same conclusion.

“Anyway, you were just heading back to your dorm room now anyway, right?” she said. “Accompany me instead.”

“I was planning to have a stay-in date with my girlfriend,” I said.

“Just let her wait. It’s a girlfriend’s job to quietly wait for the head of the household to come home.” Coming from Kiryuuin, who didn’t seem like she would ever wait quietly, the words weren’t convincing.

“Can we walk and talk?” I asked.

“Hm. I suppose that’s fine.” Kiryuuin turned back around and started walking, matching my stride.

“Did you get the chance to discuss things with Yamanaka-senpai again?” I asked.

“Nagumo and Kiriyma forcefully made sure that didn’t happen,” she said. “I don’t think I could’ve gotten a better result, though, after she named Nagumo as the one behind it.”

“That’s bizarre. Stopping you from contacting the perpetrator?”

"You're absolutely right, but I agreed with them, actually," she said. "I can't expect Yamanaka is going to name a third party if I verbally threaten her. Besides, when I questioned her the first time, I went as hard as I possibly could. I threatened everything short of violence and torture."

So, in other words, she had gotten Yamanaka to spill everything she possibly could already. Yamanaka had given Nagumo's name, regardless of whether he was really the one who'd given the order. From the sounds of it, Kiryuuin must have decided it was unlikely she'd get any other big names from Yamanaka, even if she threatened her.

"Thinking it through logically, then, shouldn't that mean President Nagumo is definitely the one?" I asked.

"I do suspect him, of course," said Kiryuuin. "That's exactly why I wanted to march into the office. But without proof, I can't press him any further, can I?"

Did that mean, after thinking the situation over, she was seriously planning on threatening Nagumo?

"At any rate, there's still a possibility that Nagumo isn't the one behind this," she said. "Do you know what that possibility is?"

"The possibility that Yamanaka-senpai had a grudge against you without your knowledge, I suppose," I said. "If that's the case, then it wouldn't be difficult to understand trying to frame you for shoplifting out of a desire for revenge. While I don't know much about the goings-on of third-year students, it seems like there are people who dislike you, Kiryuuin-senpai."

"That sure hits home, yeah. It's painfully true, actually." She wasn't angry. Rather, she didn't deny it at all, just nodded and smiled. "Nagumo or Yamanaka? Or perhaps someone else entirely, a third party lurking in the background?"

"What about just leaving things be?" I suggested. "Maybe if the culprit has learned their lesson, they'll just sneak away and pretend this whole thing never happened before their identity is discovered."

"No. My pride won't let me turn the other cheek to someone trying to frame me for a crime."

From the sounds of it, it didn't seem like she was going to stop pursuing this investigation until the culprit was caught, no matter what.

"I can't help but stand out," she went on. "So, I thought maybe you could do some investigating on my behalf."

"I don't feel like I have any obligation to help with this," I replied. "Besides, I have hardly any interaction with third-year students. It's pretty much just you, Kiryuuin-senpai, and student council members like Nagumo-senpai."

You could hardly say I was the right person to play detective and gather information for her, even as flattery.

"That's exactly why I want you," Kiryuuin insisted. "You have an unbiased perspective, you know?"

"It would make sense if you were asking someone who had some degree of communication skill, but..."

"Yes, it's certainly true that I can't expect much of you in that area," she admitted. "However, the rest of your abilities are great. In particular, I'd say that your sense for fighting is unrivaled. No one else has made me feel so convinced that I would be completely and utterly defeated if I had to go up against them, even before actually facing off directly."

That may have been intended as a compliment, but it didn't really feel like one to me.

"There are people with violent temperaments even among the third-years," Kiryuuin went on. "That's why nothing beats having strength on your side."

"Even before getting to whether I'd win or lose, I don't want to get into fights with third-year students in the first place."

"Come on, don't say that, help me out. I don't have a single person I can call a friend. And besides, there's no way I could pull off playing detective on my own."

How self-centered. I sympathized with Kiryuuin-senpai being set up like this, but I figured it'd be best if I declined her request.

"You know, I think that you owe me for what happened on the uninhabited

island, though,” she insisted. “I mean, I think you probably could have handled things better if I hadn’t shown up at all, but I might need to bring the issue up to the student council, so they can investigate the situation. I’m sure you wouldn’t be pleased to have the whole story of Ayanokouji Kiyotaka’s battle with the former acting director reported, would you?”

She forcefully blocked my escape route, telling me that she wouldn’t allow me to refuse.

“If you were going to threaten me, it would’ve been quicker and more helpful if you’d just done that right from the start,” I said.

“I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I want to have an amicable relationship with you—that’s why I didn’t want to resort to this.” Kiryuuin looked at me, arms crossed, not looking ashamed whatsoever.

“...I understand. I’ll try and do some digging. Okay?”

Kiryuuin-senpai nodded happily, a look of satisfaction on her face. “I figured you’d say that, knowing you.”

I couldn’t just do this haphazardly, at any rate. Kiryuuin was sharp, so she was likely to pester me, depending on how well it went on my end.

Chapter 4:

How to Spend Time with People in Ichinose's Class

EARLY DECEMBER. It was just before 2 P.M. on Saturday, the start of the weekend. I had received a message from Kanzaki two days earlier, and, as promised, I headed over to Keyaki Mall to meet him. Though we technically hadn't decided on a specific meeting place within the mall, I was able to find Kanzaki and the other person without any issues. Kanzaki had been watching the mall entrance, and he immediately noticed me coming and gently waved.

"Sorry for calling you out on your day off," he said.

"I usually just sit around doing nothing on my days off. I welcomed the invitation," I replied, politely telling him that it wasn't necessary for him to feel bad. I noticed that along with Kanzaki, who'd invited me here, Himeno and Watanabe were here too, as well as Amikura. "I was told it was just Himeno coming with you, but there's more of you, huh?"

"My apologies," said Kanzaki. "Some things happened."

Kanzaki was about to explain the details of how things had changed since he contacted me, but Watanabe and Amikura spoke up first.

"Sup, Ayanokouji!" said Watanabe. "It's pretty cold out today too, huh?"

"Hello, Ayanokouji-kun," said Amikura.

Watanabe and Amikura treated me no differently than they had back when we were on the school trip, greeting me with smiles on their faces. I nodded in response, expressing that the feeling was mutual. When Kanzaki contacted me beforehand, he'd said that only Himeno would be accompanying us on the day of our meeting. For that reason, I'd thought for sure that it would be a discussion about *that* issue.

But the combination of these four was a little unexpected—or rather, I couldn't clearly discern the goal of this meeting. Were Watanabe and Amikura the first two key players for Kanzaki and Himeno, perhaps? But surely it would

be an absurd coincidence for Kanzaki and Himeno to pull in two people who just so happened to be the ones I was grouped with during the school trip?

"It's understandable that you'd be puzzled by this," Kanzaki said. "I hadn't initially expected these two to be here myself."

Himeno also seemed somewhat unsettled, and she nodded in agreement, albeit only slightly.

"Meaning?" I asked.

I felt like I had more and more questions by the moment, but Kanzaki seemed more concerned about us being seen by others in the area. I'd assumed there would only be a few people around for at least a while, but students kept on coming to shop, one after another.

"Christmas sales have started." Amikura pointed to a store, looking at the hustle and bustle inside the mall. She was right; the stores were completely decorated with decorations that screamed Christmas, and the various store shelves had the words "Christmas Sale" displayed prominently.

"I'd like to move to a less conspicuous location for the time being, if at all possible," said Kanzaki. "I want to make sure our group isn't noticed by anyone else... I'd especially like to avoid people from Sakayanagi and Ryuuuen's classes finding out."

Since I could guess the circumstances without asking for details, there wasn't any reason for me to refuse his request. If it had just been the four of them alone, it probably wouldn't have been a problem, but with me added to the mix, we wouldn't really be able to avoid looking like we were holding some sort of mysterious meeting. Besides, I'd much prefer to discuss things in a calm and quiet place, rather than in the middle of traffic.

"In that case, why don't we just go with the go-to choice—karaoke?" proposed Amikura. The karaoke rooms were often used for things like studying and strategy meetings. They were one of the few places on campus where it was possible to meet in an enclosed space. That floor was about a three-minute walk from where we were now.

"That's a safe choice. Let's move quickly." Kanzaki, taking the initiative,

walked on ahead, in the lead, and I followed slightly behind. Amikura quickly came over to walk in step with me.

"I guess this is going to be a kind of serious discussion, then," she apologized in a whisper. "I'm sorry. I didn't think it was going to be like that."

It sounded like she had just suddenly decided to join the group. Watanabe, who was standing beside her, spoke up next to explain the events that led to this.

"Well, me and Amikura just happened to overhear Kanzaki and Himeno talking earlier completely by chance, basically. It sounded to us like they were gonna meet with you, Ayanokouji, so we asked them if we could come along."

"Yeah, that's right," said Amikura. "I originally came here to go shopping with Watanabe-kun—at his request, actually."

At that, Watanabe looked both a bit embarrassed and happy at the same time. Then, though, he looked like he was sad about something, and glanced away.

"Are you sure you don't want to go shopping instead?" I asked.

Both were empty-handed, so it didn't look like they had bought anything yet.

"It's okay. I guess it's like... It's not really that big a deal," Watanabe said. "Besides, I can just go shopping later."

Kanzaki was walking just in front of me, and was able to hear what we were saying, so he turned around and explained things. "Originally, I thought only Himeno and I needed to meet with you, Ayanokouji. However, I changed my mind after I heard that you took such good care of them during the school trip."

Wait, I took good care of them? I should be saying they took care of me. Over the course of the school trip, Watanabe and Amikura had helped me out in lots of different ways. I was grateful to them, but I hadn't done anything for them to thank me about.

"So, you decided that you ought to take another step forward, then, eh?" I asked.

Kanzaki nodded, a humble look on his face.

"Wait, what?" asked Watanabe. "Ought to take a step forward?"

"I'll explain later," said Kanzaki.

I could guess how eager Kanzaki must be feeling, judging from how quickly he was walking.

4.1

AFTER CONFIRMING THINGS at the karaoke reception desk, the five of us headed to our assigned room. Since I was invited to join them as their guest, I was ushered to the back, where the other guys, Watanabe and Kanzaki, were seated together. It wasn't like we could just not order anything, so we went ahead and got drinks for everyone.

"So, guess we'll start singing songs right away...won't we?" said Watanabe as he picked the microphone off the table. He jokingly pointed the microphone toward Kanzaki, as though he were conducting an interview.

Much like me, Kanzaki wasn't good at playing along with playful joking like that, so he brushed away the microphone with his hand, looking disgruntled. "I'm sorry, but that can wait."

"...Yeah, you're right." Watanabe sheepishly retracted the microphone and slumped back.

"First things first," Kanzaki said. "I've explained to Himeno what today's discussion is about, but you two haven't heard anything about this yet. I know I already asked you this before Ayanokouji arrived, but can you promise to keep everything we talk about here strictly confidential?"

Apparently, before granting them permission to accompany us, Kanzaki had told them in advance that today's discussion was private.

"We'll keep it secret, no matter what we talk about. Right?" said Watanabe, turning to Amikura.

"Yes," she agreed. "Don't worry about us."

They both seemed to take pride in how tight-lipped they were, but it looked like Kanzaki still didn't fully trust the two of them yet. Almost as if to prove my hunch was correct, Kanzaki conveyed his thoughts openly. "I'm sorry, but I still have my doubts."

"Hey now... Okay, what should we do, then?" asked Watanabe.

Watanabe seemed to have his own thoughts about the situation—about still being held under suspicion, even after having been made to promise not to tell anyone. However, considering my assumptions about the subject matter of the conversation we were about to have, Kanzaki's actions were justified. If Kanzaki simply wanted to ensure that he managed this situation safely, then he could have refused Watanabe and Amikura, who'd asked to follow along because they were curious. Or he could have tried to leave this meeting for another time. His choice not to do those things, and how thoroughly he was checking with Watanabe and Amikura, was probably a gamble on his part. He was doubting the two of them precisely because he wanted to trust them and rely on them.

"How about we just have them sign, like, a written contract or something?" Himeno suggested. "Something that says they won't talk to anybody."

"I see," said Kanzaki. "A written contract. That's not a bad idea. We could even take a record right here with our phones."

Kanzaki was going to make them swear on camera that they wouldn't tell anyone else, and punish them if they broke their promise. A protocol like that would be one way to make sure that Watanabe and Amikura kept their mouths shut. Without any hesitation, Kanzaki took out his cell phone and placed it on the table to show them that was the plan.

"Wait, are you being serious? I dunno, this kinda makes me feel awkward," Amikura looked like she was somewhat disgusted by the idea, like she couldn't imagine a proposal like this coming from a classmate.

"I already told you," Kanzaki said. "We're going to have an important discussion with Ayanokouji today. I believe that if what we talk about here were to be leaked, even if the chances of that are unlikely, the impact it could have on our future would be immeasurable."

"You're...not exaggerating, are you?" said Watanabe.

Kanzaki wasn't the only one staring at Watanabe. Himeno was also looking straight at him with an intense gaze.

"I'll ask you just one last time. Can you promise you won't tell anyone?" Kanzaki, fully prepared to be disliked as an individual, placed his hand on top of his phone as he asked the two of them for confirmation once again. *If you don't want to bear responsibility for this, you should probably leave right now.* That was the kind of determination and spirit radiating from Kanzaki, and it surely must have penetrated Amikura and Watanabe deeply.

"I promise," said Watanabe. "I absolutely, positively will not tell anyone."

"...Me neither," Amikura agreed. "Besides, saying 'I don't think I can keep a secret' and walking away because of it is totally uncool. You can even record this on your phone if you need it."

If the two of them went back on their word and told people, they'd certainly disappoint Kanzaki and Himeno, at the very least. Although they didn't appear to be close friends with Kanzaki or Himeno, Watanabe and Amikura had the stance that they should keep their word, just as fellow human beings.

Kanzaki, now convinced, put his phone away, looked away from the two of them, and turned his gaze toward me. "And there you have it. Once again, I'd like to ask that Watanabe and Amikura join us today."

"I didn't have any objection to it in the first place. This is a problem that Ichinose's whole class is facing, after all," I replied.

If a foreign body were to get mixed in, then it would be Kanzaki's fault for making an error in judgment.

"That reminds me," Kanzaki said. "Ayanokouji, there's one thing I want to ask before we get down to business. I'm sure that most of the class, including you, Watanabe, and you, Amikura, have heard about this, but there's a rumor that Ichinose is leaving the student council."

Kanzaki wasn't just asking for confirmation as to whether it was true; he was also saying it as a way to brace himself for the answer. Since Ichinose's replacement hadn't been officially announced yet, it was likely that he and the

rest of the class hadn't gotten a statement from her saying that she had quit. However, since Horikita had been proceeding with the recruitment process, rumors were spreading, and it sounded like Kanzaki and the rest of his class had heard whispers about it.

"What makes you think I'd know?" I asked.

"Because your name was mentioned among the rumors, Ayanokouji," said Kanzaki. I was caught slightly off guard by the way he said it, with a hint of implication, but that mystery was immediately solved by what Watanabe said afterward.

"There was one about how you were joining the student council as a new member or something, Ayanokouji," he chimed in.

Rumors are interesting, aren't they? Someone must have seen me going around with Horikita, the person who was going to be appointed president, and thought I was going to join her. And so, a story that was divorced from the truth had spread.

"I'm sure you'll hear about this soon enough, but yes, it is true that Ichinose is resigning from the student council," I said.

"...So, it's true after all," said Kanzaki.

If he and the others had asked Ichinose about it directly, she wouldn't have denied it. But I guessed they didn't have the courage to confirm it for themselves. If people carelessly blabbed that Ichinose had resigned, then she might have started getting hounded by people asking why, why, why. There was the concern that it would bring about discord if something like that were to happen.

"I'm sure that Ichinose would have liked to have told you all right away, but President Nagumo ordered everyone to keep the matter quiet until a replacement was found," I added. "So, even if she wanted to say anything, she couldn't." I made sure to let them know that now, so that they didn't misunderstand that point specifically.

"Ichinose is free to decide whether she will or won't continue to serve on the student council," said Kanzaki. "I understand that, even though I'm part of her

class, I have no right to say anything about that. However, I can't shake the bad feeling I have about it."

"I wonder if this means that Ichinose-san has given up on trying to get to Class A, after all." Unlike Kanzaki, who had suggested it in a roundabout manner, Himeno said it straight out.

If Ichinose left the student council at a stage when everyone was chasing Class A, devoting themselves diligently to the task, then it was possible that she could frame it in a positive way. By just telling her classmates that she was resigning from the student council to focus more on the competition between classes, she could make them feel that she was serious about it.

However, right now, their class was on the verge of being left out of the competition entirely by falling too far behind, and so her departure from the student council would be seen in a different light. It could be perceived as surrendering, as though Ichinose were giving up a weapon they could use to catch up. In fact, it was safe for me to assume that was exactly what Kanzaki and Himeno were thinking. On the other hand, though...

"That's probably a bit of a leap, Himeno," said Watanabe.

"Yeah, I think so, too. I can't imagine that Honami-chan would give up on Class A so easily." Amikura continued to believe, without a shred of doubt, and argued back.

"Okay, then why did she quit the student council?" asked Himeno.

"Maybe so she could concentrate on getting to Class A. You know, like she wanted to lighten her load of responsibility with the student council." Amikura didn't think that Ichinose's spirit was broken and answered accordingly. Watanabe probably aligned closely with Amikura's line of thinking, and nodded repeatedly in a show of agreement.

"Then why didn't she say anything to us about it?" Himeno argued. "If she said something, we would've been able to have some assurance about it."

"Because the student council president told her to keep quiet and not say anything about it, remember? Honami-chan wouldn't carelessly break a promise like that." Amikura, undaunted by Himeno's objections, countered with

a sound argument. Given Ichinose's nature, if she was ordered not to say anything, it was only natural that she would keep quiet about it for as long as she was told to.

"Ichinose hasn't given up on Class A," repeated Kanzaki. "That's what our class currently thinks, and the status quo we're contending with."

"So, Kanzaki, what are you trying to say?" asked Watanabe. "That Ichinose quit the student council because she's given up on catching up to Class A?"

"That's not it," Kanzaki replied. "The truth will remain unclear unless we hear it directly from the person in question. But what I'm trying to say is that our class has too much blind faith in her. No one is considering the possibility that she made the decision to leave the student council because she's given up on reaching Class A."

Amikura and Watanabe were the spokespeople for the rest of their class. Their thinking was in line with a lot of people in Ichinose's class.

"It's obvious. It's because Honami-chan isn't that kind of girl," said Amikura.

"I agree with her on that," said Watanabe. "Besides, Kanzaki, aren't you just assuming that Ichinose has given up on Class A? If you weren't, you wouldn't be talking like that."

After hearing Amikura and Watanabe's statements, which were like the very embodiment of blind faith, Kanzaki opened his mouth to reply without missing a beat. "Yes, it's true that I'm strongly supporting that line of thinking. But still, I must admit that the probability is about seventy-thirty at most."

Which meant that he was 70 percent in favor of doubting her. That was by no means a low percentage. If anything, it was rather high.

"Man, you're always so skeptical." It didn't seem like Watanabe was particularly surprised by the specificity of Kanzaki's statement; rather, he sounded pretty exasperated.

"I think the same thing, though not to the same degree as Kanzaki-kun," Himeno said. "For me, it's about fifty-fifty, at least."

"Are you serious, Himeno-san?" asked Amikura.

"Of course I'm serious. I mean, don't you think you should be a little more skeptical?"

"That's crazy, though. There's nothing to doubt Honami-chan over."

Himeno and Kanzaki exchanged glances. They probably wanted to believe that there were other people among their classmates who, like them, were skeptical. However, the truth was that students like Amikura and Watanabe probably made up the majority. The current reality was that the possibility of Ichinose's spirit being broken was not being taken into consideration at all.

"I think it's terrible that people are saying these things just because she quit the student council... I feel sorry for Honami-chan," said Amikura.

"But there's no question that leaving the student council means fewer benefits for our class," argued Kanzaki.

"But how can you even say that we, people who haven't even joined the student council, are qualified to make those kinda complaints!?" countered Watanabe.

Watanabe's rebuttal was also correct. No one could criticize Ichinose for her actions—no one had the *right* to criticize her. If anyone did try and take her to account over it, they'd probably get immediately reprimanded. They'd be told something like, "*If you don't want to lose the benefits that come from having someone on the student council, then you should do something about it yourself, and run for office.*"

As a result of completely opposing opinions clashing, the karaoke room went silent. We hadn't even gotten to the main topic of discussion yet, but the internal state of affairs within Ichinose's class was now coming into clear focus through the structure, flow, and logic of their conversation. Kanzaki wasn't incompetent by any means, but he made more than a few statements with openings that could be exploited, giving other people room to easily counter his arguments. Most likely, that was due to some conflict between Kanzaki's consciousness and his process of putting his thoughts into words. His weakness, that he wasn't accustomed to arguing or making speeches, was rearing its head.

"...Let's move this conversation forward a bit." Kanzaki, clearly suffering, turned to me for confirmation and tried to change the subject. "Ayanokouji, you

really don't know the reason Ichinose resigned?"

It was probably better for me to offer him a gentle helping hand here, I supposed. There was a collective understanding amongst everyone here that they all wanted to confirm what Ichinose's intentions were, and why she'd decided to quit.

"I'm sorry to let you down, but I honestly don't know what Ichinose is thinking right now," I said. "I never imagined that she'd resign from the student council."

With that on the table, I decided to continue before anyone else could reply. If I simply handed the initiative back over to Kanzaki, there was a chance that the conversation would just continue its futile bouncing back and forth. Although I was an outsider, I needed to work to manage risk here. And it might be something I could even use later, as a test case.

"Wouldn't her classmates, the people who are in the classroom with her every day, know more about what's going on with her than someone like me?" I added.

"U-um, that's certainly... You sure struck a nerve there, Ayanokouji," said Kanzaki.

Watanabe and Amikura were willing to trust Ichinose, but they couldn't see the true essence of the situation. The same went for Kanzaki and Himeno; they were equally guilty of that. While I was glad to see that multiple people within their class had started to take a more skeptical view, all that had changed was the position of the class. That skepticism had yet to play a role in transforming the class into its ideal form.

"It's true that it's a problem that, even though we're her classmates, we don't know anything about this stuff..." Amikura seemed to have her own thoughts on the matter, and found herself reflecting on the issue.

While I waited for the four of them to give me their answer, a server came by to give us the drinks we had ordered. Apparently, the karaoke place had been busy all day since this morning, so orders were taking longer than usual. After telling us to please order as soon as possible if we wanted something else, the server left.

"Kanzaki," I said. "I think that, before you lecture Watanabe and Amikura about their thinking, you first need to at least confirm what's going on with the student council situation yourself. Am I wrong?"

"But if I tried to take action right now publicly, would—"

"Publicly?" I echoed, cutting him off. "There's no 'publicly' or 'privately' in the discussion here, in confirming what Ichinose's true intentions are. There are many ways you can get in touch with Ichinose, whether you reach out to her early in the morning or late at night, over a phone call or via chat."

It wasn't just Kanzaki who had a blank look on his face—the same could be said for Himeno as well.

"Are you satisfied with just finding a few sympathetic allies who agree with you, without doing anything yourself?" I asked.

"But that's not... I mean, I'm particularly close to Ichinose-san myself, and I can't possibly imagine she'd really tell me the truth even if I asked her," said Himeno.

That was part of the problem Ichinose's class was facing. Their issues weren't just limited to the one-sided blind faith of those who worshipped her.

"In that case, you should have gotten closer to her and gotten to know her better than anyone," I replied. "If you got close enough to Ichinose that you could confide in each other, Himeno, without any secrets between you, then these doubts and suspicions you have wouldn't have arisen."

All Himeno would have to do, after extracting the information from Ichinose, was share it with Kanzaki right away. Himeno's face stiffened, and it seemed like she didn't know how to respond to that.

"W-wait a minute." Perhaps because he felt like the vibe in the room was getting more and more depressing, Watanabe spoke up in Kanzaki and Himeno's defense, even though he was on the side they were criticizing. "I understand what you're trying to say, Ayanokouji, but I think maybe you're goin' a little bit far... I mean, it's...it's probably not that easy to just be like, 'Hey Ichinose, tell me what's really on your mind.' Right? Forget about how you even try and go about it. If people could share their feelings easily, no one'd be

having a tough time.”

There was nothing wrong with being very willing to speak up in defense of your friends. Even amid lots of negative factors, there was value you could see in arguments like those.

“I know that Ichinose normally acts as the leader of your class, but I don’t have any idea how she talks to or looks at her peers,” I said. “Which is exactly why several things come to mind.”

“S-such as?” asked Watanabe.

“If you can’t ask her directly, you could observe her and try and understand her. If a student is obviously feeling sick, anyone would notice and at least come up and ask them, ‘Are you okay?’ If Ichinose doesn’t always have a poker face on, then that would be a great way for you to determine if there are any changes with her.”

An essential part of deciphering someone’s emotions was to look at their facial expressions. Were there any visible changes in Ichinose’s day-to-day routine, from the time before she left the student council to afterward? Even if they didn’t know exactly what was going on, I wanted to know whether they had felt something was amiss.

I was sure that the four students here were racking their brains desperately hard, trying to think back on the time they had last spent with Ichinose. Wondering if Ichinose had made any gestures or facial expressions, or if anything had happened that might have clued them in to something, from the time before the trip to now. Wondering if she had sent out any kind of S.O.S. However...

“I dunno, I guess she doesn’t seem any different from usual... Right?” said Watanabe after that extended period of silence. He glanced over at his classmates, as if seeking their agreement.

Amikura spoke up next, offering her thoughts. “You know, if it’s really true that she’s resigned from the student council, she might not have shown anything that you could really call a change before or after. I mean, even today, things were like normal. We were having a discussion about the special exam and stuff.”

"...I agree," said Kanzaki. He had probably observed Ichinose far more than anyone else, and he didn't deny it, either.

Most of Kanzaki's classmates kept their thoughts to themselves. They didn't share information. However, if these four could get together and discuss this with one another, then doors that had been closed would now open.

"It's just... Um, well, I don't think I can really say this is, like, recent, but it's seemed like she's been feeling down ever since around the time the Uninhabited Island Special Exam ended," said Amikura shyly. She casually cast a glance in my direction. "And as for the reason why... I don't think it's so much to do with Class A."

"Huh? Really?" said Watanabe. "I didn't notice anything at all... Like, for serious?"

Kanzaki seemed like he hadn't been aware of it, either.

"You're right. Now that you mention it, I think there might've been a change then." Himeno demonstrated a certain level of understanding of what Amikura was saying. Perhaps she was thinking something like, "*You know, I hadn't noticed before, but thinking back, maybe that's what happened.*" That was probably her state of mind right now.

The boys in the room didn't seem to have any idea what they were talking about, but the two girls seemed to have suddenly understood something.

"I guess you could say it's no wonder Honami has been acting strange, then..." mused Amikura.

"Amikura, you seem to have some idea as to the cause," said Kanzaki. "Tell us."

"Oh, well, it's, um... I guess what I'm saying is, I think her feeling down, it's completely irrelevant. I mean, I don't think it's directly related to why she quit the student council, maybe..."

"How can you be so sure of that?" Kanzaki demanded. "Even if that's true, I'd like to know the cause of her lack of enthusiasm as soon as possible. It also affects the chain of command."

"I understand what you're saying, but it's just... A-Ayanokouji-kun, what should I do here?" Amikura turned to me for help, panicking, perhaps thinking that she might have said something unnecessary.

As Ichinose's best friend, Amikura had a lot of insight, but the rest of the people here didn't seem to understand what she was getting at. However, after noticing the strange pause and the fact that Amikura was asking for my help, a light bulb suddenly went off above Himeno's head.

"Oh! Wait, are you saying *that* might be the cause?"

"Yes, *that*, exactly!" replied Amikura.

I supposed that Himeno wasn't a girl for nothing, as she seemed to notice what Amikura was getting at much more quickly than the three of us boys, who couldn't follow what she was saying.

"I didn't really know what was going on at the time at all," said Himeno, "but... Yeah, that seems to make sense."

"Tell us, Himeno. What in the world makes you think that Ichinose has been feeling down?" Kanzaki's question was filled with pressing urgency, because he felt like he was being left behind in this conversation.

"Well, I feel awkward saying this right in front of the person in question, but I'm fairly sure Ichinose's lack of energy has something to do with Ayanokouji-kun. Doesn't it?"

Amikura nodded, albeit hesitantly, in response to Himeno's remark.

"What...?"

I'm sure that came as a sudden shock to Kanzaki. He was surprised to hear that I was the primary cause of Ichinose's slump. I figured that Kanzaki and Watanabe would only continue to be confused if they kept trying to keep up with this half-finished story.

"Although this matter is Ichinose's personal business," I said, "I suppose it's no good for me *not* to disclose information in this situation, so... During the Uninhabited Island Exam, Ichinose told me that she has romantic feelings for me."

Watanabe was the first to process that information, and he looked shocked, more so than anyone else.

“Romantic feelings?” echoed Watanabe. “Huh? W-wait, what? She said she likes you?”

“That’s what it means, yes,” I said.

“S-s-seriously, for serious?!?” he spluttered. “Ichinose said that?! To you, Ayanokouji?! T-talk about huge news...!”

“No way...!” Amikura held both of her hands over her mouth, losing her ability to speak. “I didn’t even know that either...”

“Huh?! Wait, then what were you talking about just now, Amikura?!” said Watanabe.

Panic enveloped the inside of the karaoke room, because each person seemed to have a different interpretation of what had happened.

“Um, well, it’s just, I knew that Honami-chan likes Ayanokouji-kun, so... My thinking was that once she found out that Karuizawa-san was his girlfriend, it was a shock to her, or something like that.”

It seemed as though not even Amikura, who was Ichinose’s best friend, knew that she had expressed her feelings for me.

“It happened at almost the exact same time that she found out about Kei,” I said. “So, you’re not that far off.”

Watanabe looked like he was at his wits’ end. “Oh, man. If Shibata finds out, dude’s gonna cry for sure... No, not just Shibata, if this gets out...”

“So, it has to do with romance, hm... I see.” Perhaps Kanzaki had a headache, because he held his hand to his forehead and shook his head several times. “Well, yes, even if she weren’t feeling down, it doesn’t seem like that would be relevant to the issue at hand, I suppose...”

The three of them were trying to separate that incident from the matter of the student council, but...

“But we don’t know that for sure, do we?” Himeno quietly offered her analysis. “I don’t know how long Ichinose-san has had a crush on Ayanokouji-

kun, but a broken heart seems like it's a serious issue. Maybe she keeps dwelling on it, and it's making her get worse?"

Did she think that I had something to do with Ichinose's resignation from the student council? I wanted to deny it, but right now, I didn't have any information that would allow me to state with one hundred percent certainty that Himeno was wrong.

"Is there a possibility that things will improve if Ayanokouji breaks up with Karuizawa right away and starts going out with Ichinose, then...?" Kanzaki muttered to himself, wanting to improve things in his class somehow.

"Come on, that's a ridiculous idea, no matter how many times you say it... Right?" said Amikura.

Though that's what she said, there was a sort of undertone to it like she was implicitly asking me, "*Well, how about it?*"

"I'm sorry, but I can't accept a proposal like that from someone not involved in our business," I replied.

"...Yes, you're absolutely right," said Kanzaki.

Love and the class battles had to be kept separate, even if they indirectly affected each other.

"I shared that with you as a piece of information, but now, you should probably look at this situation from a different angle," I added.

"Dude, how can you be so calm about this, Ayanokouji?" cried Watanabe. "I mean, Ichinose likes you! You're pretty darn lucky! You gotta recognize that!"

I didn't want him to talk about such things so passionately. At any rate, the top priority right now was to change the thinking of the four people here, since they had gotten all flustered and giddy. In order to find out the reason Ichinose had left the student council, we needed to narrow things down even further.

"Did you see any signs of her backsliding, with respect to taking a productive stance in fighting against Ryuu'en's class?" I asked.

Perhaps they still hadn't gotten the previous subject out of their minds yet, because the answers didn't seem to be coming right away.

After a short pause, with people taking a drink here and there, Amikura raised her hand meekly. “I guess it feels like things really aren’t any different from usual at the moment. Y’know, like, trying to win in a positive way?”

“I agree,” said Watanabe. “It feels like the plan is just ‘everyone do your best together,’ like we’ve been doing.”

“Yes. And I’ve even heard her talk about a few specific plans for fighting as well,” said Himeno.

Kanzaki was the only one who didn’t say anything, but I guessed that was probably because he agreed with the other three. That’s what I thought, anyway...but apparently, he was thinking beyond that.

“That’s exactly why you can sort of interpret this situation as another form of trying too hard,” he said. “It’s like...she’s so driven into a corner that it’s enough to make her quit the student council, but even so, she’s putting up a tough front, so that she doesn’t burden us, her classmates...”

Most likely, once Kanzaki and the others thought about that, they’d get irrevocably sucked into that line of thinking until they broke the chain. But they needed to think long and hard about it. They needed to dig a little deeper and expand their horizons. If each of them gained the ability to think for themselves, the class could be reinvigorated.

“I know that you want to know about Ichinose leaving the student council,” I said. “I understand that you all can’t help worrying about whether things are going in a good direction or a bad one. However, what are Ichinose’s true intentions in doing this? And do you want Ichinose not to push herself too hard? Or do you perhaps want her to work even harder for the sake of the class, if she has quit the student council? I’d like to hear the answers to those questions.”

After I’d told the four of them what I wanted to know, I took a sip of my oolong tea. All four stopped moving, conversing only by exchanging looks. I could tell just by looking at them that they were struggling to produce responses, predicting what Ichinose’s other classmates, who weren’t here, would be thinking. Many of them would likely be worried about Ichinose’s state of mind. They’d be genuinely worried about Ichinose as a person, before even

getting to the question of whether she would stand or fall as a leader. However, that wasn't everything for Kanzaki and Himeno.

"I'll speak first," Kanzaki said at last. "Naturally, I expect Ichinose to be capable as a leader. If she feels that the student council doesn't matter, and that it's a burden, then I think she should quit without hesitation. The important thing is whether she has the will to rebuild our current class and aim for Class A. If she's lost that will, then that's a problem."

"Honestly, I think she's always had that will since the beginning, and that hasn't changed," Watanabe said. "But y'know, if she *did* decide to give up on getting to Class A, it's not like anyone else would say anything about it, right? If I had to put it another way, I guess it's like, it's up to the individual whether they want to pursue it."

For Watanabe, representing the side of someone who thinks of his friends, it was perfectly understandable that he couldn't force someone to do something they didn't want to do.

"Yeah... I mean, we can't force her, can we?" Amikura felt the same. In that situation, she felt, there'd be nothing you could do. When someone gave up, it was indeed a terrible thing to go as far as to drag them along and force them into aiming for Class A.

"But as a leader, that's unacceptable behavior," Kanzaki pointed out. "In that case, she should notify the class immediately."

Kanzaki was saying he wished that she wouldn't drag them down, at the very least. Then they wouldn't have to worry about Ichinose in that regard, since she absolutely wouldn't want to cause trouble for her peers. It was easy to imagine, after all, that Ichinose would contribute at as much as she could for the sake of her friends in that scenario.

"If Ichinose is giving up, then I'd like her to make that clear to us at an early stage," he added. "Forcing herself to stay in the leadership position even though she doesn't intend to reach for Class A would leave us unable to get a good result."

"So, everything should be okay, then," said Watanabe. "The fact is, Ichinose hasn't said anything, right?"

"What I'm afraid of is Ichinose's innate nature as a good person," Kanzaki said. "I said something to this effect earlier, but what if she's putting up a tough front, hiding the truth that she's given up, and forcing herself to do the job? Almost nothing could be as cruel to the rest of the class as that."

Because she cared for her friends, Kanzaki was saying, she wouldn't outwardly tell them that she'd given up. If Ichinose's spirit really was broken, then we couldn't deny such a possibility.

"I kind of get what you're trying to say... You mean that you're working with Himeno-san to prevent that from happening, then?" asked Amikura.

"Yes, but that's not all I'm saying," said Kanzaki. "By gathering together those who can give their opinions to Ichinose, the class can have another brain. There will be a second option available to us that doesn't leave everything to the leader alone."

"I dunno, that kind of feels a bit like an act of betrayal," said Amikura.

The class led by Ichinose must be a monolith. No, it's supposed to be that way. From Amikura's perspective, as someone who thought like that, it was no wonder that what Kanzaki and Himeno were doing looked like an act of desertion.

"I think that if we don't do something now, it'll be too late," Himeno said. "Which is why we're laying the groundwork."

"That's exactly what I mean," said Kanzaki. "But, as Ayanokouji pointed out, there are still things we need to consider..."

Watanabe and Amikura hadn't been thinking about these issues too deeply at first, but they were now being informed of what was happening. However, it was still difficult to say that the discussion happening here was clear and coherent, even if I was being charitable. Kanzaki himself seemed to be painfully aware of that fact, so the awkward feeling lingering in the air didn't dissipate.

I supposed this was probably the end of our pursuit of Ichinose's reason for quitting the student council for the time being. If we persisted in this any further, it was unlikely we'd be able to get any closer to the truth with the amount of information we had now. It was pointless to continue spending time

on a discussion that had no answer in sight.

"Kanzaki," I spoke up. "Don't you think it's about time you say what you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Hm? Y-yes," he replied. He looked at his phone to check the time, as though he had only remembered just now. "The main reason I called you here today, Ayanokouji, was to introduce you to a new ally. He said he'd arrive here late because he had another matter to attend to this morning that he could not miss, but he should be arriving soon."

For the next twenty minutes or so, we spent the time just chatting, without engaging in any further grimly serious discussion. We talked about various things that had happened on the school trip while we waited for this mystery person to arrive, until at last...

"Please pardon my intrusion," announced the visitor.

"You've come, Hamaguchi," said Kanzaki.

Hamaguchi? When I looked over, I saw Hamaguchi Tetsuya, from Ichinose's class.

"Wait, you don't mean Hamaguchi-kun is...? No way. This is totally unexpected..." Amikura exchanged looks with Watanabe, shocked at the visitor's identity.

"Hey there, Ayanokouji-kun," Hamaguchi said. "I don't think we've seen each other face-to-face like this since the uninhabited island exam, right?"

"I think you're probably right about that. Thanks for everything back then, by the way," I replied.

The memory of how he and his group had politely welcomed me, a stranger, while I was trying to conserve food was still fresh in my mind.

"Nah, we didn't do all that much, it wasn't a big deal," he said. "More importantly, where should I sit?"

"Well... I'd like to ask you to sit over by me, Hamaguchi, on this side." Kanzaki got up from his spot, and ushered Hamaguchi to a spot next to him, kind of jamming him in there.

"So, it was Hamaguchi who was supposed to join up with us, then?" I asked.

"Yes. Though I suppose you could say it was *only* Hamaguchi who was supposed to have joined us here," said Kanzaki.

That meant that, in other words, if you excluded Watanabe and Amikura, who had joined this meeting spontaneously, there should have been four of us here.

"I've already talked to Hamaguchi about getting his help regarding that matter we discussed," said Kanzaki.

"Which means he's officially the third member of your team, then," I replied.

Kanzaki and Himeno had found someone who could change Ichinose. Of course, Watanabe and Amikura probably didn't understand what was going on here, but it was by Kanzaki's will that those two were allowed to attend this meeting, even if they did join by chance. If Kanzaki had thought they would be an obstacle, he could simply have rescheduled this meeting for another day or refused to let them join.

"We're getting to the point where we need to take action if we're going to move forward," said Kanzaki. His enthusiasm had kicked up a notch, and Himeno quietly nodded in agreement.

"Wait, hold on," said Amikura. "Hamaguchi-kun, I've heard a bit about this from Kanzaki-kun, but do you know what you're all planning to do?"

"Ichinose's mental and emotional state are in a precarious position," replied Hamaguchi. "It's not a good idea for us to just leave things the way they are. I'm not saying that because it's something Kanzaki-kun pointed out to me. I've been worried about this for a long time, ever since we started our second year."

Apparently, Hamaguchi had already seen through Ichinose and noticed her anxiety.

"For real?! But you haven't shown any sign that you've been thinkin' about that before," said Watanabe.

"You're right, I haven't. That's because our class doesn't like that kind of vibe. No one would follow me if I tried to act on my own. We've all seen how Kanzaki-kun has been suffering for a long, long time now."

The details of their situation were unknown to me, as someone from another class, but the truth and weight of the situation were conveyed to me through the body language and expressions of Ichinose's classmates here and now.

"It's not like I'm saying I want Ichinose-san to step down as leader," Hamaguchi went on. "But I have most definitely been thinking that I want to become the sort of ally who can help her when she's in trouble. So, your invitation came at a great time, Kanzaki-kun."

"Back when I was completely isolated during the Unanimous Special Exam, I noticed that Hamaguchi looked like he was worried about me whenever he wasn't in sight of our other classmates," Kanzaki said. "I could tell from the way he looked and spoke that he understood."

I could tell quite a few things just by looking at everyone here. Hamaguchi was someone dependable and trustworthy. He might be close to having the same kind of potential as Yousuke in Horikita's class, and close to taking a role like his, too.

"...Is it really okay for you guys to be tellin' me and Amikura somethin' as secret as this, though?" asked Watanabe.

"It was a gamble. It's important that we do things carefully and operate under the radar, but with Ichinose's departure from the student council, I decided that I couldn't take my time any longer," Kanzaki explained. "Besides, if I couldn't bring in people like you two, Watanabe and Amikura, then I'd soon come to a standstill anyway."

Apparently, after his chance encounter with Watanabe and Amikura, Kanzaki had seen a bright light of hope and chose to reach for it. Amikura's comments were noticeably pro-Ichinose, but she did have her own opinions on everything that was going on.

"I mean, I guess it's not like I feel bad about being trusted..." said Amikura.

"Yeah, I mean, we did promise we wouldn't tell anyone, too," added Watanabe.

Neither of them could hide how confused they were feeling about this, but there was no indication that they were going to betray Kanzaki and his team.

"I'm not going to say that I want you to come over to my side immediately," Kanzaki added. "However, I do want to change the mindset a little, which so far has been to leave all the decision-making solely to Ichinose. Even if the process is only incremental from here onward."

"I think this would be a different story if you were trying to do somethin' bad, but it's super clear to me that you're doing this in the best interest of the class." Watanabe showed a certain degree of understanding, his cheeks relaxing somewhat into a smile as he answered. "I can't say I'll do anything, like, right away, but I will think about it."

"As for me, well... I don't think I can say," Amikura said. "But, like Watanabe-kun said earlier, I'm not going to tell Honami-chan about this. That's all I can say for right now..."

"That's plenty," said Kanzaki. I was sure he'd figured that he wouldn't get what he hoped out of any of them even if he tried to force the issue right now, anyway.

"By the way, what exactly are you and your team planning on doing from here onward anyway, Kanzaki?" asked Hamaguchi. "Like, specifically?"

"Specifically, hm? Well, in order to save the class, our first step is—"

Just then, the door suddenly flung open, causing Kanzaki to stop and stare.

"Hey there! We're comin' on in, dudes!"

It was none other than Ishizaki who had suddenly waltzed into the karaoke room without permission, and with him was Komiya. I wondered if anyone already in the room was thinking to themselves, "*Did someone call these two?*" but it didn't look like it. Clearly, the vibe in the room was now different from how it had been up until this point.

"Hey, what're you folks all doin' here together on our day off, eh? I wanna get in on this too!"

Ishizaki's eyes then turned to me for the first time during this encounter. He wouldn't have known that I'd be here.

"Huh? What's... Why's Ayanokouji here with you guys?" he asked.

"We should be asking you the same question," Kanzaki returned. "Why are you two here?"

"Why? I mean, there's like, lotsa reasons. Y'know?" Ishizaki let his eyes wander, looking over to Komiya, who looked somewhat awkward and embarrassed.

"Y-yeah," said Komiya, tapping the window in the karaoke room door. "I mean, we both came to do karaoke, and then we saw you guys. And we were thinkin' that it'd be way more fun to sing with a big group of people, instead of just two lonely guys."

"But we're not friends in the slightest, though." Amikura's blunt comeback cut straight into Ishizaki and Komiya.

"W-well, I mean, come on," said Komiya. "That's exactly *why* we're here, y'know? Like, our goal's to deepen the bonds of friendship through singin'. That kinda thing."

Their obvious, harebrained excuses were almost painful to hear. Kanzaki, not wanting to let this charade continue any longer, revealed Ishizaki and Komiya's purpose in coming here. "People from Ryuu'en's class have been bothering us in an entirely unreasonable fashion day after day, ever since the day the special exam was announced."

"Wait, seriously? This again?" said Amikura. There wasn't any sign of anything like anger in her voice. Rather, she crossed her arms, exasperated.

"Whaddya mean, 'unreasonable'? Yer exaggeratin'," complained Ishizaki.

"Barging into another group's karaoke booth without permission? You'd call that reasonable?" demanded Kanzaki.

"Hey, man, we just came here to check on our fellow classmates, y'know, as people in our grade. We were thinkin', hey, we wonder what those guys are singin', and it looks like fun, and thinkin' we'd join you. That's all." Ishizaki was throwing out painful excuses too now, to match Komiya's, but no one believed them.

"Unfortunately for you, this meeting we're having today isn't a study group," said Kanzaki.

“...Yeah, yer right.” Ishizaki scratched his head, just now noticing that there wasn’t anything that resembled study materials on the table. Ryuuuen’s class was going to be facing off against Ichinose’s class. Ishizaki and his classmates were at an enormous disadvantage in our grade when it came to academic ability, and from the sounds of it, they were focusing more on sabotaging their opponents than trying to actually study hard themselves. Judging from the way Amikura said “again,” it sounded like this sort of thing had been happening over and over ever since it was decided that their classes would be facing off.

“So, can you please leave?” Kanzaki added.

If Kanzaki and the others were studying, that’d be one thing. But there wasn’t any benefit to Ishizaki and Komiya in staying if everyone here was simply enjoying karaoke.

“Tch. Let’s hit the next one.” Finally, Ishizaki clicked his tongue, blatantly admitting what he was doing here, and left with Komiya in tow.

“What a bunch of jerks,” huffed Watanabe. “Well, no, I guess it’s Ryuuuen who’s giving all the orders, in the end. That’s what it comes down to.”

“Seriously. They should be taking their studies seriously, but all they can think about is dragging their opponents down,” Amikura sighed.

“This is just like what happened with finals last year,” said Watanabe.

Back then, although he was doing it to win, Ryuuuen had engaged in some pretty risky behavior, even for him. I had thought that surely he wouldn’t overdo it this time, but I didn’t know what kind of measures Ryuuuen would end up taking.

“Are they trying to pressure you into signing some unreasonable contract or something?” I asked.

“Don’t worry,” said Kanzaki. “We’ve already taken firm countermeasures. But it’s not as though I can say with certainty that we won’t have any trouble in the future, of course, so I intend to remain vigilant.”

Kanzaki stood up, and after making sure that Ishizaki and Komiya had really gone, he went back to his seat. “I apologize for that unnecessary interruption,” he said. “I’ll get back to the heart of the matter. Our first step in saving the class

is that we need to quickly ascertain what kind of mental state Ichinose is currently in. If we can't get her back in a stable condition, we won't be able to move forward or backward."

That was true. Right now, no one knew what kind of state Ichinose was actually in.

"It'd be nice if there was some way we could get a perfect understanding of what's going on," he added, "but..."

"I guess the only way would be for us to get close to Honami-chan, to be there for her, right?" said Amikura.

"And how would that be any different from before?" asked Kanzaki.

"Huh?" she said. "W-well, when you ask me straight out how it'd be different, that's kind of tough to answer..."

"It's precisely because we've continued to do things in this static, unchanging way that we've gotten to this present situation," argued Kanzaki.

"Hey, Kanzaki, come on, you don't gotta shoot her down so meanly," said Watanabe, interrupting Kanzaki's lecturing in a slightly angry tone. "This is a place where we can talk freely, isn't it? If someone's got the courage to come out and offer an idea, but it gets squashed right away, like you're tryin' to suppress 'em, it'll be harder for the next person to offer their opinion, y'know?"

"...But..."

"Actually, I agree with Watanabe-kun," Hamaguchi cut in. "I've refrained from saying anything myself until now, but Ichinose-san isn't the only big problem we've got. I think that your strong tone is one of the causes of our situation too, Kanzaki-kun." He spoke in a calm, measured manner, offering his harsh but honest opinion. "I appreciate the fact that you're doing something for the class, Kanzaki-kun. But if we just go around and around with no end in sight, it'll be meaningless, won't it?"

Though this was a small group, each of the members had more of a sense of individualism than I'd expected, and they each had their own opinions. That meant that while there were many students in their class that had blind faith in Ichinose, there were a number who had their doubts. That being said,

Hamaguchi and Watanabe weren't exactly in a position to stand front and center in that kind of stifling situation. That was exactly why they could speak freely now, with Kanzaki taking the initiative and stepping forward.

"I don't think that getting close to Ichinose-san is a bad direction," Hamaguchi added. "I can't imagine that Ichinose-san would simply tell us anything if we tried to force it out of her, and I think it's important that we observe naturally, and make sure of what's going on."

"You're telling us we should take our time? When we're in a situation where we don't have any more left? That's too easygoing," argued Kanzaki.

"No, I think that depends on how we approach this," said Hamaguchi. "Speaking on behalf of myself and some of the others here, we only know Ichinose-san as a leader. But Amikura-san is different. I think you have a lot of opportunities to hang out with Ichinose-san on days off, right, Amikura-san? That should open up more chances for us."

Amikura vigorously nodded in the affirmative.

"It's a benefit to have more opportunities," Hamaguchi went on. "It's just... I wonder if there could be disadvantages at the same time. After all, since Amikura-san and some other people are around Ichinose-san on a daily basis, Ichinose-san might be more wary of them. And I think there might be a part of her that'll make it hard for people like Amikura-san to really get in close and gain her trust completely."

For people who were close friends, there was still politeness. It wasn't as if even Amikura could just ask Ichinose straight out, after all.

"Y-yes, I know." Himeno, the person I had thought to be the least likely to speak, raised her hand before anyone else could respond. "Actually, I have an idea to deal with that, in an ideal scenario."

"Let's hear it," said Kanzaki.

"What about asking Ayanokouji-kun to check on Ichinose-san on a day off? I mean, it'd be fine to have him ask her lots of questions when he does so. Sure, normally, you'd have a tough time trusting someone from a different class, but if it's someone you like, you'd loosen up, right?"

"That might be a promising idea," said Hamaguchi. "I don't think Ichinose-san would dislike being invited out by the person she likes, and like you said, Himeno-san, that sense of wariness should—"

It seemed like he also knew that Ichinose was in love with me; he spoke about it like it was a matter of course.

"But, as stated earlier, Ayanokouji is from another class," Kanzaki interrupted him. "That's my biggest concern, and—"

"But you trust him, don't you?" Himeno said. "You invited him to such an important discussion as this, after all."

Her sharp comeback made Kanzaki stop mid-sentence, his mouth agape.

"Let's have him explore the things that we and our other classmates can't see," she added.

"W-wait, hold on a second," Watanabe said. "I get what you're tryin' to say, Himeno, but Ayanokouji's got a girlfriend. Remember? Karuizawa. He's got Karuizawa. There'd be a lot of problems with this, wouldn't there?"

"Honami-chan stands out from the rest of the crowd. So, if she met up with a boy all alone, then rumors might start going around," Amikura agreed. "So, at the very least, we need to get permission from Karuizawa-san. Prove it's not a date... Agh, but since it's a fact that Honami-chan likes Ayanokouji-kun, this probably wouldn't just be a matter of getting permission..."

These students had started offering my name without permission and getting excited all on their own.

"I mean, could we even go ahead with this plan without Honami-chan's approval in the first place, though?" said Amikura. "I understand it's for the sake of the class, it's just... I don't want to feel like we're taking advantage of her feelings."

It wasn't surprising that Amikura, who seemed to be particularly close with the person in question, would have complaints. Up until now, their class has rallied around Ichinose in both good times and bad.

"It's not like we're doing this selfishly as a countermeasure for a special

exam,” Kanzaki pointed out. “This is something we’re doing for Ichinose. It’d be absurd if we were to tell the very person in question that we’re worried about what’s going on in her mind, right?”

But it didn’t seem like Amikura was going to be so easily convinced. “I understand that you’ve wanted to change the class, Kanzaki-kun, since the Uninhabited Island Special Exam,” she said. “I’m not going to go so far as to say that’s a bad thing. However, I don’t think the things you’re doing—like secretly consulting with Ayanokouji-kun behind everyone’s backs, and conspiring with Himeno-san—are exactly praiseworthy.”

I supposed that was a natural way of thinking for someone from Ichinose’s class, which valued transparency.

“That’s because it was obvious that if I acted out in the open, I’d be met with opposition,” Kanzaki replied. “That’s exactly why I’m not doing this alone; I’ve got Himeno, and now Hamaguchi, to cooperate with me. That gives strength to my resistance.”

The fact was that, right here, more than half of the people present were on Kanzaki’s side. If Kanzaki had been alone, it would’ve been one against four, but instead, in essence, it was three against two right now. With allies on his side, Kanzaki could expect reinforcements to come to his defense here.

“Having her go on a date with Ayanokouji-kun is the obvious choice,” said Himeno, trying to conclude the discussion.

But Amikura’s expression was stiff, and she wasn’t going to change her position after all. “You don’t seem to have any hesitation in deciding that, Himeno-san. Are you really that dissatisfied with Honami-chan’s way of doing things?”

“I...”

“I can understand Kanzaki-kun, you know? He was always by Honami-chan’s side, offering his opinions all the time, and sometimes strongly asserting his own stance. But I don’t recall ever hearing anything like that from you, Himeno-san.”

“Himeno is—”

Kanzaki tried to argue on Himeno's behalf, but Hamaguchi stopped him with a wave of his hand. "These kinds of important things have to come out of your own mouth, otherwise they don't mean anything."

Having someone like him here, who could look at the whole situation and make good judgment calls from an objective perspective, was a huge deal.

"Well," said Himeno, "rather than saying I'm dissatisfied, I... It's that I don't like the stance of having everyone hold hands and get along. It's not a recent thing, either; that's something I've felt for a long time, since before I came to this school. I don't really like being with friends, and if I had to say, I feel like it's easier being alone."

Amikura probably wouldn't ever have had the slightest idea that Himeno had thoughts like that before.

"But I'm not really good at speaking up and saying anything, so I figured it was easier to just shut up and go with the flow. Whenever people asked me to hang out, I stayed quiet and went along, and if everyone was going to follow Ichinose-san, I thought it'd be easier to just keep my mouth shut and follow her. That's all."

Himeno had been content not expressing her opinions and simply letting herself follow along with the people around her.

"But still, deep down, I've thought about it," she went on. "I've always thought that Ichinose-san's way of doing things wouldn't be enough on its own to make it to Class A. But I couldn't do anything. If everyone else was going to stay quiet and follow, then I had no other choice but to follow, too. So, I just went with the flow." Himeno, who still had trouble making eye contact with people, continued to speak, staring at the monitor where karaoke videos continued to play. "But then I found out that Kanzaki-kun was serious about trying to change the class. And I found out that he didn't want to give up on graduating from Class A. That's why...I decided to take a chance on that."

This was all new to Watanabe, too. "So, you chose between the two options you had—to just take the easy way and end up in Class B or lower, or to graduate from Class A, even if you had to force your way," he muttered.

"...I see," said Amikura. "I understand how you feel, Himeno-san. I didn't

know any of that before.”

“That’s perfectly understandable,” Himeno replied. “I’ve never actually talked about it.”

But, turning things around, the same could be said of Ichinose. You couldn’t tell much of what someone really thought until you actually heard it from their own mouth. Though Amikura seemed somewhat dissatisfied with Himeno and Kanzaki’s methods, it looked like she was backing down a bit now, like she could understand some of where they were coming from.

Kanzaki turned to me. “On behalf of our class, I’m begging you. Please ask Ichinose about her state of mind, now that she’s resigned from the student council, and about her intentions for the future. And if she still thinks that we can win.” He bowed his head. “We want to know her true feelings.”

“Well,” I said, “I guess I don’t really have any reason to refuse going along with this...”

Kanzaki, who didn’t normally smile, bowed happily in gratitude.

“But, hey, what about the Karuizawa issue?” asked Watanabe.

“What do you mean, what about it? We just need to explain the situation and get her to understand,” said Kanzaki.

“Explain the situation?” Amikura repeated. “We’re in another class, remember? I’m not so sure Karuizawa-san will honestly accept doing something to help us. I mean, won’t she be suspicious?”

“I’m not worried about that,” I assured them.

In fact, even though this request had just fallen into my lap unexpectedly, it was a good opportunity for something that I’d been wanting to try.

4.2

AT AMIKURA’S SUGGESTION, we decided to enjoy a little bit of karaoke, but before that, I got up and headed to the bathroom. Although some of this

meeting had gone in an unexpected direction, the fact that Kanzaki and some of the others showed signs of growth during the discussion was a significant boon. All that remained was for me to invite Ichinose out at a later date in order to successfully confirm the circumstances behind her resignation from the council.

Normally, it would've been preferable for Kanzaki and his team to take care of this matter themselves, but I couldn't have recommended that they do so, as there was a risk it would only invite more confusion in their class if they handled it poorly. At the very least, I wanted them to remain friendly companions who could stick by Ichinose. I didn't regret taking this task on, but the hard part was going to be confirming things with Ichinose.

The special exam, and her leaving the student council. It was unavoidable that she'd be suspicious of me if I were to invite her out now, after two major incidents had happened in succession. Would it be better to just ask her straight out, directly, and get her to confirm things in her own words? No, it'd be better to check on Ichinose's mental and emotional state before deciding what to do. It would be meaningless for me to ask her if it ended up leading to a negative outcome.

"H-hey, Ayanokouji."

Watanabe had hurriedly followed me to the men's restroom. I had thought perhaps he was just in a hurry to do his business, but apparently that was not the case. We were in the hallway now, having taken care of our business and washed our hands, and he seemed to want something.

"Hey, um... You know how you're meeting Ichinose, right? Well, um, I kinda had a favor to ask..."

"A favor? If it's something simple, then sure," I replied.

"Well, maybe it's simple," he said. "I think so. But actually, wait. I dunno. Maybe it's pretty tough, after all...? I'm not sure."

My impression of Watanabe was that he was rather clear and outspoken. Now he had become unusually vague. But perhaps because he felt like it wasn't a good idea to be away from the booth for too long, he got to the point.

"Well, here goes. It's...it's about Amikura."

"Amikura? What, is something worrying you about her?" I asked.

I figured it was because Amikura was the person whose heart was probably shaken the most by the discussion we'd just had. It didn't look like she'd needed any care after it happened, but maybe Watanabe sensed something.

"Oh no, it's not like that. Well, okay, I guess maybe 'worried' is the right word in a sense, but not like that." Watanabe was completely incoherent, but I let him speak. "Well, she's... I was, like, wondering if, you know, there's a guy she likes right now, or something. I figured Ichinose would probably know... So, if it's not any trouble, could you maybe ask her for me?"

"I see," I said. I was slowly and gradually beginning to understand the circumstances, feelings, and behaviors regarding romantic love. I could grasp the meaning behind what Watanabe was telling me, even though he was stumbling over his words. "You're saying that Amikura is the girl you like, Watanabe."

"Whoa, hey, come on! Don't just blurt it out like that!"

"Don't worry. No one's around right now."

The only noise leaking into the hallway was the background music coming from the shops and singing from the karaoke booths. If anything, Watanabe's loud, panicking voice was more of an issue than what I'd said.

"St-still, dude!" he groaned.

I had to say, though, I hadn't known about this. I didn't notice that Watanabe liked Amikura.

"You've been playing it cool, though," I told him, "even though you were in a group with a member of the opposite sex, and someone you liked on top of that. During a school trip, no less."

"Dude, I'm not an elementary school kid, y'know," he replied. "I'm not gonna do something that'd make it super obvious."

Come to think of it, he'd said that he came to the mall with Amikura to do some shopping today, if I remembered right. That was rather interesting, and after establishing the fact that he liked Amikura, now I could see a connection.

"Did you ask her out on a date today, by any chance?" I asked.

If that were the case, that would mean that Watanabe was a rather capable person in his own right.

"Huh? Oh... Well, I guess I was trying for somethin' close to that," he admitted. "I was super excited, and got up early to get ready. Then we met up in the dorm lobby, and let me tell you, my heart was racing, like, a mile a minute. But..." Watanabe had a look of shame on his face as he thought back to what happened when he and Amikura left. "Once we started walking, I couldn't get the conversation going at all. Usually, when we're with a bunch of other people, the two of us can really get chatting, but all of a sudden, the words just wouldn't come. It was a little bit like hell until we got to the mall."

So, things were going well until he invited her, but afterward, things didn't work out so well...

"You didn't like being all alone with her?" I asked.

"No way, it's not like that, dude. But it's just, I got so frustrated with myself for not being able to speak up, and all these bad thoughts were running through my head, like, 'I bet Amikura's not having any fun spending time with me like this,' and stuff. Then, Kanzaki and Himeno walked past, and I heard them talking about meeting up with you." That might have been a lifeline for Watanabe, who had found himself in quite the predicament at the time. "So, I turned to Amikura and was like, 'Hey, we were in the same group on the school trip, wanna pop over and talk to them for a bit?' That's how I invited her to come along."

He must have made that decision so that he could escape for a moment, but not retreat completely. *Hm*.

"I see. So, that's how it happened," I mused.

While it was unfortunate that the two of them weren't alone anymore, there was nothing as painful as a date that was just no fun. Although I doubted that Amikura had considered their outing a date, necessarily.

"I never imagined that we'd get into this really important discussion, though, so I was a little scared, but...in the end, I'm glad I found out about it. I think I

understand what Kanzaki and Himeno are thinking,” said Watanabe.

Based on what I’d seen of Watanabe’s character thus far, if Kanzaki and his team had reached out to him earlier, they probably could have gotten him onto their side and made him an ally, like Hamaguchi. Most likely, there were still students like that lying dormant in Ichinose’s class.

“So, um... About what I said about Amikura, could you...maybe investigate a little for me?” he asked.

“Me?” I asked.

“I mean, you’re meeting Ichinose sometime soon, right? I just was hoping you could ask her casually about it,” said Watanabe.

“I don’t really know if I can ask Ichinose about that,” I said. “Even if I do, there’s no guarantee whatsoever that she knows anything about Amikura’s love life in the first place.”

“No way, dude, she knows,” Watanabe insisted. I didn’t know where he was getting this from, but he sounded fairly confident. “If Amikura likes somebody, or she’s dating somebody, Ichinose’ll definitely know.”

“Is this that so-called girl’s information network thing?” I asked.

“Yeah, exactly, dude. I mean, I can’t imagine Amikura is the type of person who’d go out with a guy without asking for love advice first. And she’d definitely talk to Ichinose about that, since they’re real close. And, well, if Ichinose really doesn’t know anything, then I think that means someone like me might have a chance.”

“I see. Because that would prove that there isn’t any guy out there that Amikura clearly likes yet, right?”

With a big smile on his face, Watanabe nodded. “I mean...the truth is, I think it’d be best if I could kinda get myself on her radar,” he said. “So far, there’s been no sign of that at all, so it feels like there’s not much I can do. If there aren’t any rivals out there at the moment, then I just gotta keep going.”

Watanabe’s analysis of the situation told him that there was no possibility that he was in the lead for Amikura’s affections, because he hadn’t gotten any

sense that he was being considered as an option. Well, I didn't know how much I could rely on a person's own self-analysis when it came to romance, but I did have a friendly relationship with him, thanks to everything he did for me on the school trip. I supposed it was hard for someone to ask a classmate to do this kind of thing, too.

More than anything else, though, I found Watanabe's positivity likeable.

"If I can bring it up casually, I'll ask," I told him. "But don't get your hopes up. It'd be inconvenient for you if I brought the question up awkwardly and ended up making them wary of us."

"Yeah, that's totally fine, dude, thanks!" said Watanabe, overjoyed at my response. He looked embarrassed but happy at the same time.

4.3

IT WAS JUST AFTER four o'clock in the afternoon. I had listened to everyone perform karaoke for a while, performing my duties as silent morale-booster in the group, and now we'd decided to finish up.

I was sitting alone on a bench on the second floor of Keyaki Mall. I had decided to stick around for a while today, regardless of whether the group disbanded early or late. Since I didn't have any particular objectives in mind at the moment, I thought about doing some Internet searches on my phone, but before I knew it, Kei had sent me a message and a photo.

I could tell at a glance that she was having fun. She was palling around with Satou, making the peace sign with her fingers. Apparently, she was planning on hanging out in one of the girls' dorm rooms today, chatting away until the evening. Aside from Kei and Satou, it looked like Mori, Ishikura, and Maezono were there as well. One of Kei's strengths was that, even if she couldn't spend time with me, she could easily get together with her close friends like that.

She was asking me when I was going to be back. After a bit of pondering, I replied that I'd return after eight o'clock. If I told her I'd be back earlier, after

all, there was a possibility that Kei would bail on her friends. It'd be better for her to enjoy the day without getting preoccupied by the idle thoughts of a day spent doing this and that with me.

"Now then..."

There wasn't anyone else close by right now, so there didn't seem to be any worry that someone would overhear a phone call. I took my phone in hand and dialed Ichinose's number, observing the students in the distance from time to time. There was nothing to be gained by dragging this matter out, so I wanted to make this appointment for tomorrow, if I could.

I heard the call ring in my ear for a while, but Ichinose never picked up.

Was she spending time with someone right now, and didn't notice, or was she taking a nap? Or was it possible that she noticed I was the one who called and was intentionally not answering? Had my contact with Ichinose on the night before the end of the school trip wound up doing some kind of damage?

As I looked through my call history, though, with those various thoughts swirling around in my mind, I received a call back.

"H-hello? I'm sorry, I couldn't get to the phone in time."

The voice on the other end of the line sounded nervous. There was no indication whatsoever from the sound of her voice that she seemed particularly displeased, though.

"Were you in the middle of something?" I asked.

"N-no, not really. I was just preparing dinner, and... W-well, anyway, it's pretty unusual for you to be calling me like this, isn't it?"

Now that she said so, I realized it myself. She might have been right about that. I hardly remembered ever calling Ichinose like this before, during her private time. On the other end of the line, I heard what sounded like a faint voice. I thought someone else might be there with her, but as I listened more closely, I realized that it was the sound of the TV.

"I know this is kind of a short-notice invitation, but if you're free tomorrow, could I meet up with you?" I came right out and asked her in a straightforward

manner, boldly inviting her out.

"H-huh? With me?" she asked.

"Does it sound like I'm inviting anyone other than you, Ichinose?"

"N-n-n-no, it doesn't, it's... But... Hm, well, you mean...just the...two of us?"

"If possible, yes, just the two of us." This wasn't the sort of situation where I should be using roundabout expressions, so I confirmed it directly.

Ichinose didn't reply right away after that, and a heavy silence followed for a few seconds before she spoke up again. "*I-I don't have any plans... What's up? Is there something I can help you with?*"

Something she could help me with, huh? I supposed that depending on how I answered, Ichinose certainly wouldn't be reluctant to help. To put it plainly, it'd probably be easy for me to meet with Ichinose if I said that I had something to discuss with her, or some kind of problem I was dealing with, or something like that. However, there was no way I could tell Ichinose that I'd been asked to do this by Kanzaki and his team. They had asked me to do some probing without Ichinose realizing it, after all.

"Does that mean, if I don't have any issues I need help with, the two of us can't meet up?"

"No, not at all, I... B-but, just the two of us, that'd be..."

"I want to see you."

"Huh...?!"

"But if it's too emotionally demanding on you, then maybe we shouldn't do this after all."

Even though I knew the risks, I was willing to try pulling back a bit. My purpose was to find out where Ichinose's emotions lay, to get a feel for them.

"...W-well, hold on. It's...it's okay," she replied. It wasn't like she wasn't being wary, but it didn't seem like there were any emotions out in front that she wanted to avoid.

"Are you really sure you're okay with this?" I asked. "I don't want you to force

yourself to do this."

"I'm not *forcing* myself. ...I want to see you, too, Ayanokouji-kun..."

"All right. In that case, how about we meet at ten in the morning in front of Keyaki Mall tomorrow?"

I didn't know how much time this would take, so I preferred to keep her tied down for the maximum amount of time possible.

"*O-okay. Ten o'clock it is,*" she replied.

"Well then, see you tomorrow. If something comes up, though, don't hesitate to get in touch with me any time."

If I wanted to have a lengthy conversation with her right now, I could have, but I preferred to avoid that.

"*Okay... See you tomorrow,*" said Ichinose.

And with that, we ended the conversation, albeit somewhat awkwardly. Through that call, I was able to set up a meeting with Ichinose. All that remained was to find out more about her mental and emotional state tomorrow. It would be ideal if I could find out what she'd been thinking about now, too, while I was at it.

After that phone call, I decided to swing by the bookstore. I still had some time left to spend on my own today, after all. Choosing to spend my time alone intentionally was a different experience from the time I had spent alone back when I didn't have any friends. This was yet another supremely blissful moment, a time when I realized that I could see things from a different perspective.

4.4

I ENJOYED MY TIME ALONE until evening. Then I stopped by the supermarket to buy a late dinner, told Kei that I was heading back now, and left the mall. The temperature outside had dropped considerably, but it was quite a bit more

bearable than I expected, even though I had spent so long in a heated indoor environment.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I saw that my message had already been read, and Kei sent a message back saying that she had been with her friends up until now, and they had just called it a night without having dinner. I replied saying that I was glad she had enjoyed the day to the fullest, and walked down the nearly deserted path toward the dormitory.

While I was walking, I spotted a female student from behind, standing in place. She didn't seem to be walking, and her gaze was directed up at the sky. It was dark, so I couldn't tell who this student was straight away, but as I approached, thinking that this person looked somewhat familiar, I immediately recognized her. There were no other students around; she was alone.



"This is a surprise," I remarked. "I had thought for sure you'd be back in your dorm room."

It was none other than Himeno, and she wheeled around after hearing me speak to her. "Huh? I assumed you would've headed back already yourself, Ayanokouji-kun."

"I thought I said earlier that I was going to do some shopping before I headed back to the dorms, though."

"Oh, yeah. I thought you said something like that... Still, aren't you out pretty late, though?"

Apparently, she had only been half-listening back then. That being said, considering it'd been close to four hours since the last time we saw each other, I supposed it was understandable that she couldn't help but wonder why I was still out.

"So, you're heading back now?" she asked, noticing the plastic bags from the supermarket I was carrying.

I nodded in response. "What have you been up to this late?"

"Hmm... Just spacing out. Oh, and I guess I went to the general store and stood in front of the movie theater for no real reason, too." Himeno seemed similar to me. Maybe she was enjoying her time alone. "By the way, if you want, maybe we could walk to the dormitory together?"

I was a little surprised by that suggestion, which seemed out of character for Himeno, but I couldn't think of any reason to refuse her offer.

"Phew, it really is cold out at night," she muttered. She shivered, as though she hadn't noticed it until now. "To tell you the truth, after we split up earlier, Kanzaki-kun asked me if I wanted to hang out with him and the others a little more."

"Is that so?"

"He said he thought it'd be important to have the chance to talk with just us classmates. But I refused his offer."

"Why?"

"Honestly, I don't really like that kind of environment, and I wanted to avoid it. Oh, I don't mean, like, I want to quit the group or anything. It's just, I don't like the idea of working with multiple people."

Although Himeno was learning to open up to others somewhat, perhaps she was still really, really struggling when it came to being with lots of people.

"I was just thinking to myself, 'Yeah, I feel more relaxed when I'm alone,' and then it was night," she added.

"Oh, yeah?"

"But the more time I spent alone, the more I thought about things. What you said especially made an impact on me, I guess, Ayanokouji-kun. I thought, like, 'Wow, that really hit me where it hurts.'"

From the sounds of it, she was concerned about the struggles she had revealed back when we were in the karaoke booth.

"It's like, I wasn't able to do anything, compared to what I'd imagined," she went on. "I had this unfounded confidence that I was doing something special by working with Kanzaki-kun, like it was a little amazing that I was able to notice that Ichinose-san was in danger, unlike everyone else, who was just oblivious. It felt like I got taken down a peg in that conversation."

"There's nothing I can say except I'm sorry," I replied.

"There's nothing you really have to apologize for, though. Actually, what you said was exactly right, Ayanokouji-kun." After letting out a deep exhale, her breath coming out as white clouds, Himeno turned to me with a wry smile on her face. "I thought I'd be able to do something amazing more easily, and yet... It's hard to act."

"It'd be hard for anyone," I replied gently. "The same goes for Ichinose, and even me. It's tough to change how things are." I didn't really want to comfort her, but it would have been unfortunate if she agonized about this too much.

"I'm still searching for the path we should take, but at this rate, I'm not confident anything is going to get better if I take action with Kanzaki-kun and Hamaguchi-kun like this," Himeno admitted.

"There's nothing wrong with being lost. It's just that this isn't a problem that can be solved by standing still."

"Yeah, you're right," she sighed. "We should have taken action already to save the class, but the invisible gears are already starting to kind of spin out of control. I can't help but feel like that."

The invisible gears are already starting to spin out of control... Hm. I supposed that, if you tried to do something that had never been done before, it was inevitable that anxiety would rear its head.

"I don't doubt that," I said. "But if I were to ask you if the gears turned well up until this point, you couldn't honestly say yes, could you?"

"Well... No, I suppose you're right," said Himeno.

They'd had healthy, sound class management, but they hadn't gotten results. In other words, the gears had not been functioning properly.

"The fact is that change is definitely coming to your class now, Himeno," I told her.

Not even I knew the answer as to where exactly they'd end up, for better or worse. It wasn't just the presence of Kanzaki and his team, but also Ichinose, who had quit the student council. Even someone like me, who was trying to take control of various things, found that there were things about the future that were uncertain and unpredictable. However, there were two possible outcomes. Life or death. In other words, either Ichinose's class would be saved, or it wouldn't.

Nevertheless...a thick fog was starting to spread over the path to that process, and it was impossible to see through it. The end of our second year was finally coming in March. By that time, the results would probably be visible even to Himeno's eyes.

"Ayanokouji-kun," Himeno said. "Do you think there's any chance left for us to get to Class A if our class changes?"

"Do you want to hear my objective opinion?" I asked.

"Yes. If possible."

"Well, if I were to give an answer to that question, I'd have to say...yes, albeit conditionally."

"Huh... I thought for sure you'd say it was impossible. So, conditionally?"

"The battle in our grade isn't so simple that anyone can get to Class A just by changing people's mindsets," I said. "The truth is, the gap between Ichinose's class and Class A is getting to be quite serious. To close that gap, the entire class will have to be prepared to take on an appropriate amount of pain and resolve."

"Pain and resolve...?" she repeated. "What does that mean, specifically?"

"Sorry, but I can't answer that right now."

"You can't answer, huh? I wasn't expecting that kind of response. I thought you'd say, like, you hadn't given it any thought at all, or that this was just something you came up with at random, or something."

"That would be the normal thing to think, yeah."

"Because you're talking about another class's problems, or like, our distress—I mean, the more our class suffers, the more your class will benefit relative to it, Ayanokouji-kun," she said. "Right?"

"Yeah, you're right," I agreed.

"And yet you're being kind to us, and helping us. Why?"

"I suppose that's because, regardless of whether we're friends or foes, I have this strong desire to see what's going to happen to Ichinose's class in the end."

"In the end...? You're talking like you can see what's coming in the future, Ayanokouji-kun."

No one could see into the future, but we could predict and prepare for it.

"That's why, for the time being, I'm going to lend you a hand in times of trouble," I said. "If you don't mind someone like me, that is."

Himeno interpreted the situation favorably and pumped both her arms in a small victory pose.

"I'm sure Kanzaki-kun would be really pleased. I feel really reassured by that myself."

"I hope you'll be able to show that pose off openly someday," I remarked.

"Huh? I-I'm suddenly feeling kinda embarrassed..."

With that, Himeno thrust both her hands into her pockets and averted her gaze for good measure.

4.5

AS I WAS WALKING BACK to the dormitory with Himeno, I saw Kei sitting on a bench, fiddling with her phone.

"Well, see ya," said Himeno. Having already sensed what was going on, she quickly left my side and started walking away hurriedly. Before leaving, she gave a slight bow to Kei, then went inside the dormitory building.

"What are you doing out here?" I asked Kei. "I thought you went back to your room."

"What am I doing? What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Waiting for someone."

"Correct. Okay then, who am I waiting for?" Kei held up a finger as she suddenly hit me with a pop quiz. "One, Ike-kun. Two, Minami-kun. Three, Kiyotaka."

"That's an extremely puzzling question," I said. "I mean, I think it's highly likely that the answer could be number one, but..."

"If you get it wrong, there's going to be a penaality," Kei singsonged.

"Before I give my answer, can I ask what the penalty is going to be?"

"Hm, let's see. I think I'll write the words 'I wuv Kei-chan' on your forehead in marker and have you go to class with it on."

"Okay, the answer is number three."

"So quick! You wanted to avoid the penalty that badly?!" Kei shot up from her

spot on the bench, looking a little bit angry, and then sidled up beside me. “So? That girl you were with a minute ago, that was Himeno-san, wasn’t it? Why was she walking with you, Kiyotaka?”

Kei was smiling, but I felt a fierce pressure emanating from her, demanding to hear an explanation right now.

“I told you I was meeting Kanzaki today,” I said. “Himeno was one of the people in that group I met up with.”

“Hmm? But Kanzaki-kun and the others weren’t with you just now, just her.”

“We split up earlier. Then, while I was on my way back, I happened to bump into Himeno, and we were casually chatting. That’s all.”

“Hmmm? Hmmmm? Well, I’m your girlfriend, so I suppose I’ll believe my boyfriend’s statements for the time being. Hm?” Though that’s what she said, it didn’t seem like I was entirely free from doubt. “It looked to me like you two were kinda friendly, though.”

“I doubt that. You wouldn’t have been able to see that much in this darkness,” I answered.

“Uh... Y-yes, I suppose you’re right. Well, it’s like I was able to sense it somehow! Whatever. It doesn’t matter!” Kei wrapped herself around my arm, as though trying to claim the spot next to me as hers. “Let’s talk about something fun.”

“All right,” I answered.

“Okay, how about we go shopping together tomorrow at Keyaki Mall? Christmas is close,” said Kei, inviting me out with a meaningful grin. “*You understand what I’m trying to say, right?*” the look on her face was asking me.

“You mean, because Sudou’s romantic confession of love ended in failure,” I realized. “So, we’re shopping for your Christmas present, right?”

“That’s right. Getting a surprise gift isn’t bad, but going shopping with my boyfriend to pick out what I want isn’t bad either.”

It would be a good thing for me too, actually, because I was sure that she’d be more pleased with something that we decided on together than something I

struggled to pick out myself.

"I'd like to say yes to that, but unfortunately, I can't tomorrow," I said. "It'll have to be next week."

"Huh? Do you have other plans again, by any chance?" she asked.

I had informed Kei in advance that I was meeting Kanzaki and the others today. Kei didn't have any connection to Kanzaki and his crew, and she didn't know why I was meeting them, so while she did look puzzled when I told her about it, she didn't seem particularly bothered. But...

"Yep, that's right," I said.

"Can't you make just a little time for me? What kind of thing do you have going on tomorrow?"

Spending time with Ichinose. It would've been easy for me not to tell Kei about that, and deceive her instead. But the disadvantages of keeping that secret were immense, just as Kanzaki and the others had discussed in our conversation earlier. Ichinose was the sort of person who drew so much attention that if I were next to her, disquieting rumors were bound to start circulating. And on top of that, Kei had lots of friends, and those students would be her eyes and ears.

"I'm meeting Ichinose," I replied.

"...Ichinose-san?" Kei's reaction was clearly different from the time when I told her I was going to meet Kanzaki. She stopped dead in her tracks. "Who else is going to be there? Like, Kanzaki-kun, Himeno-san, those people?"

"As of right now, we're not planning on anyone else being there. Just Ichinose."

"Okay, what? I'm a little confused. You're meeting up with a girl, alone, just the two of you, on your day off?" I could tell that she was clearly in a bad mood, but I supposed that was understandable. If the situation were reversed, a normal guy would've reacted similarly.

"That's right," I told her.

When I looked at Kei to see how she was taking this, she met my eyes with a

glare, as though she were trying to make me feel guilty.

"And?" she asked.

"And what?"

"Normally, in this kind of situation, you'd explain your reasons," Kei lectured me. "Like, you'd say, 'Yeah, we're going to meet up, just the two of us, but don't get the wrong idea. It's just such-and-such,' or something. You absolutely do not want to make your girlfriend feel anxious, right?"

"That's certainly true," I said. "There are several reasons why I'm meeting up with Ichinose, and one of them is that Kanzaki and the others asked me to."

"...Kanzaki-kun and the others asked you to? Really?" Kei was a little relieved at the mention of Kanzaki's name.

"It's not public knowledge yet, but Ichinose has resigned from the student council," I added. "There's a lot of confusion over that right now."

"W-wait, hold on a minute. Is that true? I don't really get this. Why did she?"

"It's strange, isn't it? Kanzaki and the others want to know the truth behind it. Being a member of the student council is in itself a positive thing for one's class, after all. So, it's not surprising that her classmates are upset that she's leaving the student council at a time when they're trying to get as many points as possible, since they've dropped down to Class D."

Even from that brief explanation, Kei could probably imagine some of the anxiety that Kanzaki and the others were feeling.

"But they're afraid to ask Ichinose the reason directly," I went on. "They can't bear to hear their leader tell them something like she's giving up on trying to get to Class A."

"So...they want you to ask her the reason why in their place, then, Kiyotaka?" asked Kei.

"That's exactly it."

"I understand that situation, but... Why would you get involved with Ichinose-san's class, Kiyotaka? Isn't it better to just let things be? I mean, if you help them out, they might become our rivals again."

Her questions were entirely reasonable. This wasn't the sort of thing that I should let Horikita and the others from her class hear about.

"There are reasons to help an enemy when they're in trouble," I replied. "But I can't tell you about those yet."

"You can't tell me...? You think I might tell someone?"

"It's not like that. I'm aware of how tight-lipped you are. I just don't feel like telling anyone what I'm trying to do at this stage, is all."

I deliberately chose to speak those words in a harsh, cold tone, causing Kei's expression to stiffen slightly. But Kei was Kei, after all; it was only natural that she couldn't just take what I had said in stride. She seemed to hold herself back for a moment, but then she immediately started to hit me with her feelings.

"Look, I know you have a lot on your mind, Kiyotaka," she said. "I'm sure that you're helping the class in ways I don't know about, and I'm trying to understand that, yes, it makes sense for you to do what Kanzaki-kun and the others are asking, to find out about what's going on with Ichinose-san. But... but... It's... I don't like it. You saying you're meeting up with a girl on your day off, just the two of you... I just don't like it. Can't you just do this some other way, like when we're at school, or during lunch, or something?"

Kei pursed her lips and looked off into the distance, sulking.

It would have been easy for me to say that I was sorry, and that Kei was the only thing that mattered to me. I had already learned that it was important in romantic relationships to tell the other person not to worry. In that case, what would the opposite be like? Even if I could assume what the answer to that might be, I couldn't actually say that I understood unless I tried to find that answer for real.

"In that case, are you going to get in the way? You can just barge in when I'm meeting Ichinose on our day off," I told her.

"Th-that's..."

"You won't, will you? There'd be no benefit in it, even if you did try something like that. In that case, this conversation is over. We'll go shopping for your Christmas present together next week. So, there shouldn't be a problem."

Simply by not speaking kind words, I had caused the feeling in the air to change and turn extremely depressing in an instant. The happy Kei who had been waiting for me under the cold sky had vanished.

"Yeah, I guess not," said Kei. "You have your own thoughts on the matter after all, right, Kiyotaka? I'm not qualified to say anything." It wasn't just her facial expression that was off. It was even like her emotions were escaping somewhere far away. "I'm going to stop by the convenience store for a minute before going back. You head on inside first."

With that, she ran off in the direction of the store without looking back at me. However, while her pace looked fast as she left, it also seemed slower than it could be, and I could tell from looking at her back that she was expecting me to run after her. All I had to do was hurry, after all, tell her that I was sorry, and say that I'd think of some other way to meet up with Ichinose. If I just did that, she would probably go back to the way she'd been feeling moments ago.

But I decided to take my eyes off her back and instead head back inside the dormitory. Thanks to this, the rift between us would grow deeper. How would Kei react, and what kind of behavior would she exhibit? And how would I feel? And what would I do?

I figured that this would be a good opportunity for me to experience those things.

Chapter 5: How to Spend a Day Off

IT WAS SUNDAY, the day after I'd had my discussion with Kanzaki and the others, and experienced a little friction with Kei. The time had come for Ichinose and me to meet, as we had promised to do the day before. I headed down to the lobby a little early, but I didn't see Ichinose in the area. I thought there might've been a possibility that we'd bump into one another by coincidence, but there was no sign of that happening. I turned around and looked back at the elevator, but it didn't seem to be moving.

"I guess Kei isn't following me after all," I mused.

Even if Kei was worried about me meeting Ichinose, she wouldn't necessarily do something like that. Well, actually, no, it might've been premature for me to assume that Kei wouldn't do anything just yet. Kei could always head over later, or she could have already gone ahead to where Ichinose and I planned to meet. Or, I supposed, I couldn't rule out the possibility that Kei might just audaciously barge in on our meeting when we were already in the middle of talking.

Analyzing Kei's behavioral patterns thus far, I couldn't reduce the probability of something like that happening to zero. If it *did* happen, I figured I'd just let it happen, but... Judging from how she was acting yesterday, I doubted she'd do anything too reckless. It took a certain amount of courage to stand by and watch something you didn't want to see, after all.

I exited the dormitory building. The sky was completely clear at the moment, but unfortunately, the weather forecast called for rain starting in the afternoon, so I'd brought an umbrella with me just in case. I wondered how Ichinose felt as she greeted the morning. The things she desired, the things she wanted. It seemed clear to me that it wasn't just one thing. To have the skills of an outstanding leader, to have a successful romantic relationship, to become strong in spirit... If I were to count the wishes on my fingers, I might not be able to do it on one hand. Scratch that, I might not even have enough fingers if I did it with both hands.

Just that one night on the school trip hadn't been enough to bring about any tangible change in my relationship with her. I had no way of knowing what Ichinose, who was still feeling anxious and unstable, was thinking, except by meeting her in person.

Wrapped up in thoughts about the future, I ended up arriving at the meeting spot a little before the appointed time—and found that Ichinose was already there, waiting for me, holding an umbrella behind her back. She noticed me before I called out to her, and she slowly waved her free hand hello.

“G-good morning, Ayanokouji-kun!”

I didn't get the sense she was depressed. If I had to say, I felt like she had a kind of youthful, vibrant nervousness, innocent and pure. Unlike that night when I had caught her off guard with a surprise visit, it seemed like Ichinose had prepared herself well for this, both in terms of her outward appearance and her emotions. She made eye contact with me at first, but when I continued to gaze into her eyes try to discern her true feelings, she quickly averted them. I could tell that she had lowered her gaze, looking at my mouth, nose, or neck, to make it more difficult for me to pick up on her deeper emotions.

“Sorry that I made you clear your schedule for me like this,” I told her.

“Oh, no, no, it wasn't any trouble at all,” she insisted. “I didn't have any plans to begin with, anyway. Really.”

Even if she was only saying that to be polite, I still appreciated it, as the person who had invited her.

There were still a few minutes before the mall opened, and since we couldn't go inside, the two of us lined up outside the entrance. We were next to each other, but we weren't too close, nor were we too far apart. From an uninformed onlooker's perspective, it'd probably be difficult to judge whether we were waiting separately for the mall to open, or waiting together.

“I haven't had that many opportunities to come to the mall before it opens, but still, I'm surprised no one's here yet,” I observed.

“It is especially cold today,” Ichinose said. “I wonder if maybe everyone is still relaxing in their rooms.”

She had a point there. I supposed it wasn't necessary for anyone to wait in line early in the morning for the mall to open unless there was a special sale going on that day or something.

"It really is cold, isn't it?" she added in a very tiny voice, almost like a mutter under her breath.

The conversation stopped there for the time being, since I figured we'd probably have to wait until after we got inside before we could really talk.

In my daily life, I'd been spending more and more time with my lover, Kei, and it wasn't like even that daily routine was always filled with conversation. There were some points when Kei and I shared our time together talking, but it also wasn't unusual for us to spend ten or twenty minutes at a time in companionable silence. At first, I'd felt the same kind of awkwardness that I was feeling right now with Ichinose, but before I knew it, that awkwardness with Kei had disappeared, and I had begun to feel comfortable with the silence sometimes.

It wasn't so much an issue of whether or not I was used to the silence. It was more that slight moments of silence could feel strangely heavy when you were with someone who wasn't close enough that you could say you were really intimate—where there was still that distance between you and them. It wasn't like I couldn't stand the continued silence, but I wondered if it would be better for me to break the ice and say something, as the person who had invited her out.

Ichinose might have been thinking the same thing by chance. However, neither one of us was able to take that first step, because we couldn't really speak casually with each other. A *trait we have in common*, I thought to myself. If I threw something out there, we could go back and forth two or three times and get an actual conversation going.

Just as I was thinking about that, a certain male student popped into my mind.

"Oh, by the way, on the school trip we just went on, I had Watanabe in my group," I said.

"Yes, I heard that," replied Ichinose.

"I hadn't ever talked to him before, so I didn't know him, but Watanabe's friendly and easy to talk to. He's a good guy."

When I told Ichinose what I had honestly thought about him, she looked really happy, as though my complimenting him made her feel good, too.

"Yeah!" she said. "I think all our classmates like him, guys and girls alike."

He wasn't the type to get as carried away, like Ike, and he could read situations well, though not as well as someone like Yousuke. I'd only seen part of Watanabe, but I was sure that he was the same way in his class.

"We've all been at the same school for close to two years now, but just because we're in different classes from one another, there's so much about other students that I don't know," I remarked.

"I feel the same way," said Ichinose. "I don't know much at all about the other classes. It's totally different from how things were in elementary school and junior high. Or rather... I guess this is what happens when we have to seriously compete against one another."

If we had normal friendships, we could show each other our weaknesses, and help one another. However, at this school, those normal concepts didn't apply. That was the commonly held impression that most students here seemed to have, Ichinose included.

"Socializing is hard, too," I said. "Even with my own classmates, I can't really say that we're actually opening up to one another yet. By comparison, I think it's amazing how you can become friends with anyone so quickly, Ichinose."

"Huh? Oh no, I'm not that amazing at all."

I didn't get the impression she was being humble about it. It seemed more like she really didn't realize just how highly skilled she was.

"Is there, like, a special trick to it?" I asked. "Like a method for opening up to anyone and becoming friends?"

No matter how much I learned about building friendships, I was still an extremely long way from standing level with those at the top. I had yet to master the sort of skills that people like Ichinose or Kushida had. I already

understood what I needed to do. I knew what to say, and I knew the words to use. But I still wasn't as good as Ichinose or Kushida. The slight differences between our cumulative experiences, our vibes, and even our body language and gestures led to an enormous difference in the outcomes.

"Hmm... I have to wonder if there is one," Ichinose mused. "If there is, I don't think I know, either."

She couldn't break it down and explain the theory behind it precisely because, for her, it was a skill that came naturally. Even if I were to observe her and try to learn it, it wouldn't be so easy for me to understand it, absorb it, and then put it into practice.

Somehow, we managed to keep the conversation going for a little while longer. Shortly afterward, when ten o'clock rolled around, the automatic doors that had been closed finally opened.

"Shall we?" asked Ichinose.

"Let's," I replied.

And so, we were the first to enter Keyaki Mall, and we were enveloped by the central heating circulating through the building.

"How long can you stay out today?" I asked Ichinose.

"Oh, until whenever is fine. I don't have any other plans today."

There were several questions I wanted to ask her today, so this was a good opportunity. If I had a time limit, after all, then I'd need to plan what to talk about within that time, and maneuver accordingly. I wanted to know more about her reasons for resigning from the student council, in particular, as that was a critical issue Kanzaki and his team had asked me to look into. So, I supposed it was a good thing that I was able to make sure I had enough time to take care of Kanzaki's request. But...on the other hand, I couldn't help feeling a sense of unease.

Putting the question of romantic issues aside for a moment, Ichinose was, fundamentally speaking, not a thickheaded person. Even if she didn't necessarily have a first-rate sense of deduction, she definitely had excellent perception skills, better than the average student. If she wasn't the sort of

person who was reasonably perceptive, after all, she wouldn't have been her class's leader in the first place. I had to assume that, even in her current mental and emotional state, chances were high that she already had some idea of how her classmates viewed her from the way they looked at her, the words they used, the emotions they expressed, and so on. If that was the case, I could not assume that I'd been blessed with this opportunity to meet her purely by chance.

It was likely she had at least guessed what my intentions were when I invited her, and made some inferences. Depending on certain factors, she might even be aware that her classmates had something to do with my intentions here. It'd be best for me to go into our conversation today with that kind of mindset.

"Um, so, what are we going to do now?" asked Ichinose.

My ulterior motive was to extract information, but I still hadn't told her what our ostensible purpose was yet.

After thinking about what kind of plan I could come up with to share time with Ichinose today, I arrived at my conclusion.

"I haven't really decided on a clear goal," I said, "but... Okay, I think I've got it. Could I ask you to tell me how you spend your days off, Ichinose?"

"How I spend my days off?" she repeated.

"Yeah. I wanted to find out tips on how best to spend my time on an everyday basis in a way that'll increase my ability to make friends with people. That kind of thing."

"Huh? Is that really something you can understand this way?"

"I guess I just said what popped into my head... Is that okay?"

I thought about proposing a second plan if she refused, but Ichinose nodded, not looking bothered in the slightest.

"I'm not sure if I can be of any help to you at all, but if you're okay with me, sure, why don't we give it a try?"

She readily agreed to my request, having apparently taken it in a positive way. It looked like the first round of negotiations was a success.

"Hm, well... So, are you really sure it's okay for us to just do what I do on my days off?" she asked.

"Of course," I replied. "Whether it's shopping, going to the movies, going to a café, whatever, I'll go with you."

Perhaps none of those examples applied in her case, though, because Ichinose chuckled. "I'm afraid I might not really meet your expectations," she said. "I hope that's okay."

She seemed like she had been feeling somewhat awkward ever since we met up this morning, but now there was a natural smile on her face.

"Well, let's get to it, then!" she declared.

And with that, Ichinose started walking, getting on the escalator to the second floor without any hesitation.

5.1

THERE WERE A VARIETY of retail facilities within Keyaki Mall, most of which even I had set foot in by now. However, there were still several facilities that I hadn't experienced yet. One among them was the fitness center on the second floor.

"I try and come here on weekends and holidays," Ichinose told me. "I'm not very athletic, so I was hoping to improve a little, if possible." She took out her student ID card as we arrived in front of the gym. "You haven't been to this gym before, have you, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Right, I haven't," I replied.

"Okay, then this was a great choice!"

"I have to say, though, I'm pretty surprised you go to the gym, Ichinose. How long have you been coming here?"

"I tried the free trial sometime around mid-September, and I became a full member at the start of October, if I remember right," said Ichinose.

Which meant she had been going to the gym for over two months now, huh? I'd had no idea.

"Did you start out all by yourself?" I asked. "I'm not particularly good at just jumping into things, I guess..."

I supposed I wouldn't mind coming alone if I had joined and already started, but doing it by yourself the first time or two was a high hurdle to clear.

"It's tough for me too," she replied. "That's why I started with friends. I mean, even if you don't have the courage to do something all alone, if there's two of you, you can do things pretty confidently. So, it's a good thing we're together today, right?"

I nodded in response, and then I followed Ichinose as she led me inside the facility. Ichinose greeted the affable female staff member standing at the reception, and after presenting her student ID, turned to where I was standing behind her to explain things.

"Do you have your student ID?" she asked me.

"Yeah."

Apparently, if you presented your student ID, you could easily access the free trial without having to fill out detailed forms.

"Okay, Ayanokouji-kun, I'll see you in a little bit," she said. "The staff will explain what you need to do from here."

One of the male trainers took over showing me around. He provided me with the full explanation, going over things like how to use the lockers, the changing rooms and showers, and so on. Then, I was asked to change. It seemed as though you didn't need to bring stuff with you to the gym; you could even arrive completely empty-handed. After removing my personal clothes, putting them in the locker, and putting on rental gym clothes, I headed for the workout room toward the back.

It looked like Ichinose wasn't finished changing yet, because there was no one else in sight. Well, the mall had just opened for the day, so that was only natural, I guessed. Still, it was a little awkward for me to be the first one here, since I was only on a free trial. A male trainer seemed willing to teach me

various things, but I declined his offer. I thought it would be better for me to learn from Ichinose, since we were spending the day together and this was a good opportunity.

Still, since I had no idea what I was supposed to be doing, I just randomly looked around at the machines. I didn't feel particularly uncomfortable, as I was already extremely familiar with the workout equipment itself—when I was in the White Room, we had all the latest equipment for developing our bodies.

Although the manufacturers and model years of the equipment here differed slightly, it didn't seem like I'd have any problems using any of it. As I was thinking about those things, surprisingly enough, gym-goers started appearing one after another. I had thought the place would be more inactive, but it was quite popular.

"Sorry to have made you wait, Ayanokouji-kun," Ichinose said. "Oh, it looks like some of the boys have already started."

Though I was a little surprised when I saw Ichinose dressed in her workout clothes after she finished changing, she was right.

"I think two or three people just came into the women's locker room, too," she added.

"I noticed there are adults here, so I guess even non-students can use this gym, huh?" I said.

It wasn't like everything was exclusively meant for the students, after all, whether you were talking about the movie theater or the supermarket or whatever else; this gym was no exception.

Ichinose nodded. "I often see Mashima-sensei and others here too."

I see. I supposed even teachers were no exception. Places to work out were important to people who lived on school grounds too. I'd shied away from these sorts of facilities all this time, finding them difficult to approach, but if students with whom I was very well acquainted, like Ichinose, were coming here, then maybe I could come here, too. As I was beginning to think about that, Ichinose began to thoroughly and politely explain the machines to me.

She gave a bit of a demonstration of what the machines were like in motion. I

deliberately refrained from saying that an explanation was unnecessary and decided that I'd just quietly listen to her instructions, pretending that I didn't know anything. Ichinose had acquired a fair amount of knowledge, but perhaps because it still hadn't been that long since she started going to the gym, she only seemed to have practical experience with a few of the machines. After Ichinose had been instructing me on how to use the equipment for about ten minutes, the number of students in the gym started to gradually increase. Now, excluding Ichinose and I, there were about seven guys and girls working up a sweat.

"Okay, I suppose it's probably time we start on someth—oh, Mako-chan, good morning!" Just as we were about to get started on our workout, Ichinose spotted a familiar face, and called out to her.

"Hu—wha—Honami-chan?!"

The person who had just emerged from the locker room in her gym clothes was Amikura. She'd known that I was going to be out with Ichinose today, so she seemed genuinely surprised to see her here at the gym.

"Wh-why are you here at the gym?" asked Amikura. The question in her mind must have just slipped out of her mouth unintentionally because she was flustered.

"I started coming to the gym on holidays and weekends, remember?" Ichinose said. "Well, I figured I'd show Ayanokouji-kun around a bit, too."

"Oh, I see," replied Amikura.

Amikura never would have guessed that we'd come here together, apparently. Since there was no way that Ichinose could know what Amikura was feeling right now, though, I played it cool, a nonchalant look on my face.

"Yep, there you have it," I said. "Sorry to barge in like this."

"...You're not really barging in or anything, though..." said Amikura. She shot me a look using only her eyes that seemed to say, "*Don't say anything unnecessary, okay?*" "Anything unnecessary," of course, meant pretty much everything we had talked about when we met up at karaoke the other day. I wasn't going to say anything, of course. I didn't know how fully the message

would get through, but I tried to respond to Amikura in kind, using my eyes.

"You know, Ayanokouji-kun, you really, really don't seem like the type of guy you see at the gym," Amikura added.

"Really?" I asked.

"Yeah, I guess it's like, it's hard to imagine you doing this sort of thing. Or, like, you seem like the sort of person who doesn't like places where people gather."

While I wanted to say that was simple prejudice on her part, she was correct. I was somewhat resistant to the idea of working out in front of ordinary students, after all. Furthermore, I had this idea in my head that a gym like this was more the kind of place where people would get together and have fun with their friends than somewhere to work out in silence, which made me feel reluctant to come. I had to admit that I had kept my distance for those exact reasons.

"Hey, um, can you come here for a sec, Honami-chan?" Amikura must have noticed something, because she pulled Ichinose away by her arm, putting some distance between me and them. Then she whispered something into Ichinose's ear. The two of them looked over to me for some reason.

"...?!"

I thought Ichinose must have been shocked by whatever she was whispering about, since she reacted with a start, but then she ducked down and hid behind Amikura for some reason.

"You didn't realize, Honami-chan...?" said Amikura. She looked somewhat embarrassed about something, just as Ichinose did.

"What...?" I asked.

"Oh, well, it's, um... I mean, I guess that it's just a little embarrassing to be dressed up like this if you're not used to it. You know?" said Amikura. She gave me another pointed look, as if to say, "*Read between the lines. You understand what I'm getting at, right?*"

"I see," I replied.

Apparently, she was talking about how it was embarrassing to be seen by

boys while wearing gym clothes. However, the simple fact was that the conditions of the gym made it necessary to place restrictions on clothing, calling for clothing that allowed for ease of movement, sweat absorption, and so on. Whether you felt embarrassed or not, it was better not to bring the concept of shyness into a place like this. Apparently, Ichinose herself hadn't realized this fact, but Amikura had brought it to the forefront of her mind.

Judging from the look on Amikura's face, it was easy to see that she felt like she had really messed up after seeing Ichinose's blatant reaction. As a teenage girl, it was understandable why she'd feel that way, but still—this was a gym. I wanted Ichinose to remember that it was best to be practical and not worry about it.

"Well, at times like this, the best thing to do is to work up a sweat, right?" I said. "Teach me a bunch of different things. I'd like to try."

Once you started worrying about how you looked in front of the opposite sex, you'd lose sight of things, so I tried to get her to think about something else. After what I said, it seemed like Ichinose made up her mind about something.

"O-okay, let's see," she said. "Hmm... W-well... What should we do, Makochan?"

"Why are you asking me?!" sputtered Amikura.

Apparently, Ichinose's feelings of panic hadn't yet subsided, and so she turned to Amikura for help. The two of them discussed between themselves in very hushed tones, almost like they were whispering to each other...and then nodded almost simultaneously, having reached a mutual understanding.

"We're still beginners, so would it be okay if we started with the treadmill, since we're used to using that?" Ichinose asked me.

"Of course. I don't mind at all."

The two girls got on a pair of treadmills, which seemed like the standard thing you'd find in fitness centers, and they each started running at the individual settings that suited them. These machines were different from what I was used to, of course, in terms of the manufacturer and so on. But since I'd used these sorts of things time and time again ever since I was little, I wasn't at a loss here.

A treadmill was a standard aerobic exercise machine that was indispensable for working out indoors. Ichinose and Amikura's settings were almost exactly the same, so I figured I'd set mine to around their level, too.

"This is your first time coming to the gym, right?" Amikura showed concern for me. "Make sure you don't push yourself too hard, okay, Ayanokouji-kun?"

I responded with a gentle wave of my hand, telling her that I was okay. Then, I got on the treadmill and started running for a while, silently. At first, it seemed like Ichinose was unable to push past her nervousness and shyness, but gradually, those feelings must have faded a bit. After about thirty minutes had passed, she seemed to have gotten used to it, to some extent. Once the thirty-minute time that Ichinose set had passed, her treadmill stopped, and she looked up.



"Phew...! I'm beat!" Ichinose seemed far more fatigued than Amikura, perhaps because, as she herself had said earlier, she wasn't very adept at exercise. She was taking deep breaths, her shoulders rising and falling. "I'm going to go rehydrate."

She gave us a wave, letting us know she was going. Come to think of it, I did recall that there was some sort of device installed by the locker room which allowed you to fill up bottles with water. Since it was just Amikura and me here now, I decided to chat with her a bit.

"You and Ichinose were at it for a long while. You're both pretty good at this," I remarked.

"Oh no, not at all. Wow, though. You picked the same settings we did, Ayanokouji-kun, and you're not tired at all."

"I'm a guy, after all. Guys have a higher baseline stamina than girls," I replied.

"Oh, right. Still, I have to say this is a surprise. I figured you and Ichinose might meet up at the mall, but I didn't think I'd bump into you at the gym this morning."

It seemed like Amikura had not even imagined that she would suddenly encounter Ichinose and me in this place.

"So? Did you...manage to get anything out of Honami-chan?" she asked.

"Nothing yet," I replied. "We came to the gym right after we met up. Then, we saw you, and here we are."

"I see. But you know, Honami-chan seems like she's really having fun, so that's good." As Amikura towed off her sweat, her eyes creased happily, as though Ichinose's happiness was her own.

"I guess you can understand those kinds of things when you're best friends with someone, huh?" I remarked.

"Oh yeah, you can tell. She usually has a smile on her face, but today, it feels like there's this outburst of purity to it."

Now that Ichinose wasn't around, and I was all alone with Amikura, I thought I'd challenge myself to try and casually extract information from Amikura, in

order to fulfill my promise to Watanabe.

“It’s almost Christmas,” I remarked.

“Yeah. You’re going to be spending it with Karuizawa-san, right, Ayanokouji-kun?” Amikura answered with a question, turning things around on me before I could get anything out of her.

“Hm? Well, that’s the plan, more or less.”

“Hey, um... I’m just going to come right out and ask... What are you going to do about Honami-chan?”

“What am I going to do?” I repeated.

“I mean, you know how she really feels, right? So, are you, I mean, you know?” Perhaps Amikura was hesitant to express her thoughts straight out, because she was somewhat vague in her wording.

“What do you think I should do, Amikura, from your perspective?”

“Huh? You’re asking me?!”

“Well, since you’re asking me this, you must have at least some idea of what you want me to do, right?”

Amikura looked somewhat at a loss. Perhaps she’d started to sweat again, because she lightly dabbed her forehead with the towel that she had around her neck.

“I... What I want most is for Honami-chan to smile, I guess,” she said. “That’d be best, speaking as her friend. But you have Karuizawa-san right now, Ayanokouji-kun. I think the situation is a little different if it means you have to break up with someone, you know? I guess I think what would be best is if she could fall in love with someone else, and be happy with that person.” She made revisions to her response as she thought about her ideal scenario.

Just like Amikura said, Ichinose’s current affections for me were indeed troublesome. But it was possible that this situation could be resolved in an instant if her affections were directed toward an unrelated third party instead.

“You’re right,” I agreed. “I don’t really know very many guys myself or anything, but someone like Watanabe seems like a good fit for Ichinose. He’s

easy to get along with.”

I tried throwing out Watanabe’s name, going along with Amikura’s train of thought. Depending on what kind of reaction I got out of Amikura here, I might be able to learn what impression she had of him. Amikura appreciated Watanabe enough to go shopping with him on a day off—that alone might be enough for me to explore that possibility.

“By Watanabe, you mean Watanabe-kun, right? From our class?” said Amikura.

“Yeah. We had lots of opportunities to talk when we were in the room during the school trip. Doesn’t he get along well with Ichinose?”

“Hmm... Good question.” Amikura gestured like she was lost in thought for a moment. It was an ambiguous pause that could be interpreted either as her affirming or denying what I said, and it was difficult to determine which.

“Personally... I think that Honami-chan could do a little better, actually,” she concluded.

“I see. So, you’re saying Watanabe’s not good enough.”

“I don’t mean to say anything bad about Watanabe-kun by that, okay?” Amikura clarified. “I mean, I think for your average girl, he’s plenty good enough.”

“I see. What about you, by the way, Amikura?” I asked. Since I still hadn’t gotten a clear answer, I decided to press the issue, pushing on ahead with enthusiasm. If I took too long with this, Ichinose would be back before I could get anywhere.

“Me?” she asked.

“You seem like you know a lot about love.”

“Oh no, not at all. It’s... I guess it’s just, I should say I’ve had an unrequited love for a long time, is all.”

“Oh? So, you do have someone you like.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s all it is. I mean, I *am* in high school.”

Who was it? It'd be best if I could find that out.

"I've had this unrequited crush for almost five years now. When will I move on to my next love, I wonder?" she muttered to herself.

Five years. That meant she'd had those feelings since before she came to this school. From the sounds of things, there was no need for me to press any further, but I wondered if this was good news for Watanabe. On the plus side, it at least meant he didn't have any rivals for her affection at this school, but...

I had thought I'd at least be able to get some additional information out of Amikura, like what kind of person she was into, but Ichinose was already coming back, rehydrated. Since there was no way Amikura was going to let Ichinose know that she was discussing her love life behind her back, she hurriedly moved away from me, flustered.

"Sorry to have made you wait for me," said Ichinose.

"Oh, no—no worries. You feeling okay now?" replied Amikura.

If I hounded her with questions now, it would only make me look suspicious. I decided that I'd try questioning Ichinose a little later, when I could get a bit more information out of her.

5.2

FOR ABOUT ANOTHER HOUR, I continued to experience what the gym had to offer alongside Ichinose and Amikura. Just as we were getting to a stopping point, Amikura said that she was going to stick around for a while longer, most likely because she'd picked up on the mood. Ichinose and I decided to go on ahead, saying that we'd get changed and meet back up at reception. In the meantime, I picked up a pamphlet about the gym so that I could consider joining officially.

While spending thousands more points each month was a tough pill to swallow, it wasn't a bad idea to work up a sweat now and again. I'd gained a new recognition of how far my physical abilities had declined. I couldn't even

compare to how I'd been when I first started school here, since I had hardly done any voluntary physical activity at all for the past two years. I concluded that it would be a good idea to raise the level of my physical abilities to some extent, even if I wasn't able to return to the level I was at previously.

After we finished changing, Ichinose and I left the gym and headed back into the mall.

"Did you get a pamphlet?" asked Ichinose.

"Yeah. I'm giving some serious thought to going to the gym for real," I replied.

"Oh, okay, I see. If that happens, we...might see each other more often, then."

"Yeah, we might."

"I see..."

"What are we going to do now?" I asked. There was no way her routine could be over just with the trip to the gym alone.

"Well, I guess I often take a peek in bookstores and places like that," she said. "And after that, I'll stop at the general store or something. But I'm a bit more worn out than usual today, so I think I might want to take a little breather. Is it okay if we stop by a bench or something and take a break?"

Even if your workout routine was the same as usual, a change in environment could change the level of physical exhaustion you'd feel. It was also important to choose to rest, rather than forcing yourself to stick to routine.

"You sure you don't want to go to a café or something?" I asked.

"No, it's okay. I mean, I'm sure we'd probably draw attention." It sounded like Ichinose had been thinking about my situation when she made her suggestion.

"It makes me happy that you're thinking of me, but I really don't mind," I said. "It's all right if we go to a café or something, okay?"

"Really? ...Well, if you're all right with it, Ayanokouji-kun, then I don't mind at all."

If we avoided being seen, that could make us look even more suspicious. Having tea in a café with a member of the opposite sex from time to time was

just a common part of everyday life, after all. It was precisely because she was fixating on it that it seemed like something out of the ordinary. So, I urged her to just do the kind of thing she'd usually do, and we headed to the café.

Still, out of consideration for me, she chose to go to the smaller café on the second floor of the mall rather than the one on the first floor, where people tended to gather. We both chose whatever drinks happened to catch our fancy and took our seats at a table.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"A question? Sure, ask me whatever."

"Does the reason you invited me out today have anything to do with my resignation from the student council?" She asked this question very timidly, but it seemed like she was sure there was a connection. I figured she probably must have guessed something was up when I suddenly asked her out on her day off.

"If I said it had nothing to do with that, I'd be lying, yeah," I answered.

"I thought so. I'm happy that you gave me an honest answer, though." Ichinose averted her eyes as usual as she spoke, but her mouth relaxed into a smile.

"I mean, that's because I was so surprised that you quit the student council," I added. "I thought there was a good chance that you would've won in the election against Horikita."

Ichinose had been making contributions to the student council since early in her first year of school. On top of that, there was her character and her abilities. Horikita had entered the student council one term later. On the other hand, her older brother had held the position of student council president before, plus she had influence that came from currently being in Class B. Taking those things into consideration, people would probably say that they were evenly matched candidates.

"If we did hold a student council election, who would you have supported, Ayanokouji-kun?" Ichinose asked. "Actually, forget it... That's a stupid question. I'm sorry."

Whether I liked it or not, Horikita was currently my classmate. It was highly

beneficial to have one of your own classmates as student council president, for the betterment of your class.

"Personally, I had planned on looking at things impartially," I told her. "I didn't feel the need to support Horikita simply because we're classmates. If Nagumo said that he was going to endorse Horikita, I was actually going to back you, Ichinose."

That was honestly how I felt, but Ichinose probably interpreted it as flattery. While she did look happy about what I'd said, she seemed to feel even more apologetic.

"But...if we did have the election, I'm sure I wouldn't have won," she said. "I'm no match for Horikita-san."

It sounded like Ichinose hadn't felt like she could beat Horikita even before the fight. However, that wasn't because Horikita was somehow superior to Ichinose in terms of ability; it was nothing more than Ichinose losing on the mental level.

"It's probably better that I resigned after all, Ayanokouji-kun, since that way, I won't embarrass you."

"You never know how a competition ends until it's over, though," I said.

"Just hearing you say that makes me happy," said Ichinose. "Thank you."

"But even before the election came up, you had already decided to resign from the student council, right?"

"That's right."

"Did that one incident from the school trip have something to do with it? If so, then—"

"That's not it," said Ichinose firmly, interrupting me. She was holding on to the paper cup in her hand so tightly that it looked like it was about to crumple. "I was already thinking about it before that happened. I'm not qualified for the student council. I don't have the ability, I'm not popular, and, more importantly...I have a past that I can't erase."

For an instant, as she talked, Ichinose's face in profile closely resembled what

I'd seen during the school trip. But she didn't start crying, like she had back then. Apparently, she had no intention of remaining weak.

"But...but I haven't given up on everything," she went on. "I know that some people in my class are worried that I've even given up on trying to get to Class A, but it's not true."

"Meaning you plan to keep trying for Class A?" I asked.

"On that night during the school trip, you said, 'If you don't have the courage to take that first step, I can lend you a hand.' When you told me that, it helped me come to a decision." Ichinose made eye contact with me and smiled. "I can still fight. But I realized then that I couldn't win that fight wearing two different hats at once, you know? I decided that continuing to serve on the council was a luxury I couldn't afford—or really, I guess, it would just be a distraction."

So, that was what led her to resign from the student council, then.

"Oh... But I guess maybe the reason I quit actually *was* because of what happened during the school trip, after all, then," she said, a little sheepishly.

"That's what it sounds like," I said jokingly.

Ichinose chuckled in response to my lighthearted reply, the line of her eyes curving happily. "I'm planning to tell everyone in my class the things I just told you about, Ayanokouji-kun—about me quitting the student council, and what I was thinking up until I resigned—at the beginning of the week. It wouldn't be good if things were misunderstood, after all."

"That's good," I replied.

If her classmates still didn't know what Ichinose was really thinking and feeling, and continued to fumble around looking for answers, that would hinder them in their showdown with Ryuu'en's class. After that time of instability throughout the school trip, Ichinose's ability to digest what happened and process it quickly was a major strength of hers. She had lost her position in the student council, which was one of the weapons in her arsenal, but what she'd gained was greater than that. I figured it was safe to say that the situation that I had some apprehension over had been resolved, at least temporarily. I felt like I could probably give Kanzaki a good report.

"Oh, that reminds me," I said. "This is completely unrelated, but there's something I wanted to ask you. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. What's up?" she asked in return.

I wanted to push a little harder and do some more legwork for Watanabe. "Do you know what type of guy Amikura likes?" I asked.

"Huh?" Ichinose had been lifting her cup to her mouth, but her hand froze when I asked that question. Up until moments ago, Ichinose had often averted her eyes from me in our conversation, but now, she looked straight into my eyes and wasn't looking away. If anything, I had to say I felt like I'd been struck with an urge to flee.

"Why are you asking me that?" asked Ichinose. Her voice hadn't changed. She didn't sound angry or anything. But still, I wondered why the feeling I was getting from Ichinose as she sat in front of me, which shouldn't have varied from how it was moments ago, was now different.

"Well... I mean, if you're asking why, it's just that I was kind of curious for some reason, is all," I said.

"For some reason?" she repeated. "You want to know Mako-chan's type for 'some reason'? That really doesn't seem like you, Ayanokouji-kun."

As she spoke, the already heavy air seemed to get even heavier. I found myself stumbling over my words, whether I liked it or not. However, I couldn't let her sniff out Watanabe's part in this so easily.

"I mean, it crossed my mind since we were on the school trip together and everything, but Amikura is cute, and she seems popular."

"Yeah, I think so too. Mako-chan is cute. So, how does that tie into asking her type?"

"It...doesn't," I admitted.

"Mm-hmm. This isn't like you, Ayanokouji-kun, you know that?" She told me once again that I was acting out of character. More importantly, though, there was no sign of her taking her eyes off me.

"Oh, it's... Well, yeah, you're probably right about that," I conceded.

I wondered where in the world the peaceful vibe we'd had until moments ago had gone. Ichinose, still holding her cup near her mouth, was pressing me for answers, her expression no different from usual.

"Why do you want to know Mako-chan's type?" she asked.

"No reason in—"

"—in particular?" she said, finishing my thought.

"I mean, it's not like there's 'no' reason at all whatsoever, I guess. That's why I'm asking."

I abandoned trying to maintain eye contact and averted my eyes, looking over at the café employees. Oh, it looked like they'd just gotten an order or something, because they were making a drink with chocolate in it.

Without paying any mind to the fact that my eyes were wandering, Ichinose continued to question me. "Did you meet up with Mako-chan somewhere before you met up with me?"

"...Wait, what?" I asked.

"When we bumped into her at the gym today by coincidence, you two shared a strange look. Like what they call having a conversation with your eyes."

If Ichinose was this sure of the truth, then denying anything would only make things worse.

"You noticed," I admitted.

"I could tell. Because I...I'm always looking your way, Ayanokouji-kun, and thinking about you. So..." At that point, Ichinose finally averted her gaze from me. She must have realized that she had worked herself up into saying something really embarrassing.

She started over. "This is just a theory on my part. Mako-chan and everyone else in my class must have been really worried after hearing talk of me resigning from the student council. So, they came to talk to you for help, didn't they? They asked you to come check on me, if at all possible. Right?"

Ichinose had just recovered mentally and emotionally, and showed it by proving to me that she had a firm understanding of what was going on. She

really was paying attention to what was happening around her.

“Bravo. Exactly correct.” She was so good that I honestly wanted to give her a round of applause, but I decided to refrain from doing so.

“But still, I don’t get it. Why would you want to know what type of person Mako-chan likes, then?” asked Ichinose.

Even if Ichinose was able to deduce that I’d had a discussion with Amikura shortly before, it was completely understandable why she wouldn’t see how that would lead to me asking what type of man Amikura liked.

“Why do you think?” I decided to try asking Ichinose, to see if she could think it through and guess correctly. Or rather, this was the best way I had left to conceal Watanabe’s presence. It would probably be better to work backward starting from Ichinose’s suspicions, and then just fabricate a suitable answer based on those.

“Hm, it could be that...Ayanokouji-kun is interested in Mako-chan, so... No, that’s probably not it,” said Ichinose, thinking aloud. “Yeah, I’m not fond of that answer, so I’m not going to think about it.”

Although she had thrown that idea out as an option, she quickly shot it down herself. More importantly, though... That was a really bold thing of her to say, even though it was just the two of us here. Ichinose still had feelings for me. She wasn’t even trying to hide her intentions in that regard. Or perhaps she wasn’t actually thinking too deeply about it, and she had muttered those words unconsciously? Even though I was observing her closely, I couldn’t tell what Ichinose’s true intentions were, because the fog was too thick; I couldn’t see through.

“So, if it’s something other than that, then... There’s a boy who likes Mako-chan, and he asked you to find out. Yeah, that might fit. He probably figured that I’d know her type,” reasoned Ichinose. She was getting so many bullseyes that it was almost a little scary. “So, in other words, it’s a boy who is aware of the relationship I have with Mako-chan. And, on top of that, it’s a student from my class who has contact with you, Ayanokouji-kun. So—”

“All right. I’ll come clean,” I said.

Sorry, Watanabe. No careless attempt at deception was going to work against Ichinose today, when she was so sharp. If I hadn't stopped her right then, she was going to start naming names any second.

"There's a guy who likes Amikura, and he asked me to find out," I admitted. "I thought that you wouldn't be able to figure out who that guy is, but I'm seeing now that might've been a little presumptuous on my part."

I wasn't saying that the act of indirectly exploring what someone liked in a member of the opposite sex was bad. However, whether it would please Amikura was another matter.

"Sorry. Just forgot about this," I added.

"Oh no, it's okay," said Ichinose. "It's natural for people to want to know about the person they like, and I know it takes a lot of courage to ask someone directly. Mako-chan is a really, really good girl. I honestly don't know what her type is, though. I've never asked. But, at least from what I've heard, I don't think that there's anyone at this school that she likes."

If there wasn't "anyone at this school," that implied that there was someone, just not someone here. That tied back to what Amikura was saying earlier.

"Apparently, there was a classmate she liked back in junior high," Ichinose went on. "I don't think they ever dated or anything, but I think she's always cared about this person, and I don't think she's fallen for anybody else yet."

So, that was the state of Amikura's love life. Most likely, not even Watanabe had envisioned this situation. The fact that she'd been thinking about this boy for such a long time might prove a surprisingly high hurdle for Watanabe. Even so, that didn't necessarily mean he had no chance at all. If he could build a good, close relationship with her over the year starting now, I figured he'd probably have a fairly good chance.

"I'm afraid that's all I can tell you, but I hope it's helpful," said Ichinose.

"Plenty. Thanks, Ichinose," I replied.

"Watanabe-kun really has come to depend on you a lot, hasn't he, Ayanokouji-kun?" she said happily.

“I never once mentioned Watanabe.”

“Oh, that’s right. Sorry, sorry.”

I supposed that the biggest reason I had failed to keep Watanabe’s name hidden was because I had too few friendly acquaintances in their class, rather than because I had mentioned his name earlier in the morning.

5.3

AFTER THAT, we enjoyed ourselves around Keyaki Mall for a while. Like Ichinose had said earlier, rather than actually doing any shopping, we just wandered around looking aimlessly at the stores. Half of the day was spent showing me a clear overview of her routine. Then, when it was time for lunch, we both left the mall.

“It’s already started to rain, huh?” I remarked.

While I wouldn’t say that it was pouring or anything, it looked like it had been sprinkling for a while now.

“Looks like it,” said Ichinose.

Since we had both brought umbrellas with us, we each put them up and started walking.

“Sorry to have taken up your day,” I told her.

“Oh no, nothing to be sorry for,” she replied. “I’m happy to know that there are people who care about me.”

The sole reason I had told her I wanted to meet and invited her out was so that I could extract information from her. It wouldn’t be unreasonable at all if she was mad at me about it.

“Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun.”

But Ichinose didn’t call me out over it or insult me. Far from it—she offered me words of gratitude.

"No need to thank me," I said. "I'm sorry about what I did. Thinking about my choices now, I should have asked you up front, instead of doing things in such a roundabout way."

"Oh, stop. It's because you took the roundabout way with me that...we were able to spend time together today, after all," Ichinose muttered shyly. She looked embarrassed, and her cheeks were turning red. "Karuizawa-san isn't angry, is she? You talked to her about today, right? Though, I'm sure no matter what the circumstances are, she probably really doesn't like the idea of you spending the day with another girl."

She was worried about Kei, even though Kei was in a position that got in the way of what Ichinose wanted. Was that how Ichinose truly felt? Or was that just her being polite?

"You might be right about that," I replied.

As we walked on back toward the dormitory, we saw that small puddles had already begun to form on the path, and our shoes splashed in some as we walked along. A sudden, unexpected silence. There was a heavy feeling in the air, and, unlike this morning, I didn't know what it was.

"Can I ask you something?" Ichinose asked. "Was it you who asked her out, Ayanokouji-kun? Or did Karuizawa-san ask you out?"

She was looking at me searchingly. I couldn't give her the answer she was hoping to hear.

"I did," I replied.

"I see. So, you fell for her and asked her out... I'm jealous."

Before, I had never thought that there'd be a time when I'd be with Ichinose like this, having this kind of talk. However, Ichinose seemed like she was okay walking alongside me now. Or rather, like she was prepared to accept it. Usually, in a situation like this, one person would already have sorted out their feelings for the other person, settling the matter, burying their emotions. Now, I wasn't being conceited here, but after calmly looking at Ichinose, I could tell that she still had strong feelings for me.

If that was the case, then what was the reason for her current psychological

state? Was it simply a show of courage on her part? Or was she on the verge of giving up? Neither of those assumptions were making things click together in my head. Strangely enough, Ichinose's eyes seemed to have more of a sparkle to them after she asked about Kei.

"So, there weren't any awkward misunderstandings or anything?" she asked.

"It didn't go as smoothly as I hoped," I said. "I tried to explain it to her properly, but I think I made her a little mad."

"I see. If you want, Ayanokouji-kun, I can tell her what's going on. Would that help?"

"You don't need to worry about it, Ichinose. It's my fault for not explaining it to her better beforehand."

"But..."

Well, I supposed that my cold war with Kei might continue for the foreseeable future. There was another period of silence between Ichinose and me, and things stayed that way until we parted ways. We eventually reached the dormitory lobby, and once the elevator came down, we both got onto it.

Ichinose waved goodbye to me when we reached the fourth floor. "I had a lot of fun today. Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun."

"See you later, Ichinose."

In those few seconds before the elevator doors closed, Ichinose and I met each other's eyes, not looking away, until she disappeared from sight.

When I returned to my room, I contacted Kanzaki via the chat app and gave him my report. I told him that Ichinose had not given up hope of reaching Class A, and that she had resigned from the student council so that she could concentrate more on that fight in the future. As an addendum, I also included a note that Ichinose intended to tell people about her resignation from the student council tomorrow on Monday, and so on.

The message I received back from Kanzaki was a question. He wondered whether, from my point of view, those things seemed to be true.

At the very least, I hadn't sensed any falsehoods. More importantly, though, I

was able to catch a glimpse of an unusual assertiveness from Ichinose that I hadn't seen before. Whether that would lead to good luck or bad luck was unclear at this point, but I had a feeling that from now on, I was going to see a different side of Ichinose.

I told Kanzaki to watch over and support her, while at the same time looking for friends who could express their opinions to her. Perhaps he felt relieved for the time being, because he sent me back a message conveying deep gratitude.

"Still no word from Kei, though, huh?" I thought aloud.

I could have told her that I was done with my plans for the day now, but I'd meet her at school tomorrow anyway. If I provided her with an explanation then, I should be able to supplement it sufficiently. With that thought in mind, I decided not to contact Kei today, and just leave things be.

Chapter 6: Approaching the Special Exam

A FEW DAYS HAD PASSED since things settled down with Kanzaki and the others over the matter of Ichinose's resignation from the student council. Day by day, the second-years were studying continuously for the upcoming special exam. Perhaps it was because the students with a lower level of Academic Ability bore a heavier responsibility this time, but it certainly felt like there had been a substantial change in the environment compared to previous written exams. As soon as lunchtime came, while many students headed to the cafeteria as usual, more than half remained in the classroom, taking out lunchboxes they'd brought themselves or lunches they'd purchased from the convenience store. There was a litany of groans and complaints from the students around me.

"Ughh, ugh... I'm so incredibly sleepy. I wanna go to bed..."

"I wanna do something fun, I wanna do something fun, I wanna do something fun, I wanna do something fun..."

"Ugh, aren't people being kinda noisy in the hallway? They're really messing with my ability to concentrate. Can someone please go make them quiet down?"

...And so on. Apparently, some of the students even had concerns about what was going on outside the classroom, and more and more people couldn't help but moan to themselves over the various things that they desired, but lacked. In particular, many of the students seemed short on sleep, and Sonoda was one of those students.

She held her head in her hands, and then gave herself a shake, trying desperately hard to stave off the feeling of drowsiness. "I'm sooo sleepy."

"Come on, let's just hang in there a little bit more, okay?" Mii-chan, who was sitting next to Sonoda and had been tutoring her, tried to give her a pep talk. "We'll take a break after we get through this...!"

On the other hand, though, there were some students who were showing surprising progress.

"Satsuki, you're finished already?!" exclaimed Ike.

"I dunno, I guess I just suddenly felt really motivated, or like I was just going with the flow. I've been feeling good," said Shinohara.

Ike and Shinohara were seated next to each other, studying together as a couple. Between the two of them, it seemed like Shinohara was the one who was seeing an unprecedented improvement.

"Well, I guess that's probably because I've been going to all these study sessions lately," she said. "I really feel like I'm paying for all the times I skipped out on doing that before now, though..." She kept on letting out sleepy yawns, but even so, she looked like she had a positive attitude. "I really feel like I'm getting better, though, little by little."

"I-I'm still nowhere close..." sighed Ike.

"Well, let's just do our best together then, okay?" Shinohara said.

"You're so dependable. That's my girlfriend for you!"

When he tried to give her a hug, Shinohara brought her textbook down on top of his head. "After you finish."

"Ugh..."

"Come on, you can't just keep doing stupid stuff over and over forever. Look at the problems and solve them."

"Wow, you're pretty motivated, Shinohara-san," remarked Yousuke, who had been watching from close by.

"Well, I've pretty much just been a burden to the class all this time," she said, "but in this special exam, I get a chance to take advantage of the fact that I've been a burden, right? I need to contribute to the class at least a little. Besides, I don't want to get expelled."

The real problem was that if students didn't improve their abilities, they would go down in the rankings of who was needed in class. It had already been proven that, when push came to shove, those who didn't put in hard work saw

repercussions for it.

"It looks like you're really doing your best too, Ike-kun," Yousuke said. "But don't push yourself too hard, okay? If you wear yourself out and collapse before the exam, it'll all be for nothing."

"O-okay," said Ike.

It was obvious, but I figured that students who weren't eager to study certainly wouldn't want to do something like study too hard. However, it was important to be able to make an effort in accordance with the importance of the situation. You could find whatever reason suited you; it didn't matter if it was a boyfriend or a girlfriend. That was a shortcut to unlocking that effort, just like how Sudou's driving force had been Horikita. Up until now, many students had had difficulty making that effort, but thanks to the entire class coming together like this, it was possible they could make it happen slowly but surely.

"Still, though...there really is a lot of noise in the hallway, isn't there?" someone complained.

During this time when the students wanted to concentrate on their studies, there must have been a lot of people coming and going in the hallway, because the sounds of voices and running footsteps were constant. When your concentration was heightened, that kind of hustle and bustle was like an uninvited guest.

"I'm going to go check it out," I said. "I'm sure a lot of students are wondering what's going on."

Even if I couldn't stop the noise, I could at least investigate what was causing it. If the restless students understood the cause of the situation, that should produce a slightly stabilizing effect on them.

"Okay. I was thinking about asking you to do that," said Horikita.

I had figured it would be best for me to go and check it out, so the students who were studying wouldn't be bothered.

ONCE I STEPPED OUT into the hallway, I saw students from Ichinose's class running down the hall, their faces red with anger. Not only that, people from Ryuuен's class were headed in the same direction. With that, the cause of the commotion became immediately apparent. A crowd had formed in front of a certain classroom, and Ishizaki and Albert were trying to forcefully create a path through, scattering the crowd.

"Come on out, Ichinose!" Ishizaki shouted into the classroom. "Ryuuен-san's comin'!"

Shibata, who was already out in the hallway, went to stop him.

"Hey, what the hell, man?" he yelled. "What do you think you're doing, just barging in? We're in the middle of somethin' right now!"

"In the middle of somethin'? Don't care. Come on, bring out Ichinose, right now." Ishizaki aggressively grabbed Shibata by the shoulder and tried to force him out of the way, but Shibata resisted.

The person giving Ishizaki orders was none other than Ryuuен, standing behind him with a fearless grin on his face. Still, it probably wasn't a good idea for anyone to haul off and just attack someone else right out in the open. It was lunch now, a time of day when lots of people were coming and going, and there were a lot of surveillance cameras in the hallway, so the school administration would soon get wind of any problematic behavior.

Could it be that students from Ichinose's class had sensed what Ryuuен and his people were doing and hidden Ichinose in a classroom? The situation seemed like it had been locked at a standstill for a while, but it was quickly beginning to change. The door to the classroom opened and Ichinose emerged, accompanied by several girls who seemed to be trying to stop her, telling her not to do this. Not only that, but other major players, like Kanzaki and Hamaguchi, showed up as well.

"Well, well," Ryuuен called out with his usual attitude. "You finally came out. It's the dumbass leader who quit the student council."

The announcement about the student council's new composition had just been made today. Ichinose's resignation wasn't surprising at all in itself, as

everyone already knew about that. The reason that was provided for her resignation was, at least ostensibly, so that she could give her undivided attention to her classwork. But whether that was the truth or a lie didn't matter to Ryuuен at all.

Ryuuен had decided that he needed to use this information, this weakness, as a means to shake Ichinose up, so he'd come over as quickly as possible to do so. Apparently, even the timing was deliberate. He had decided it would be more effective if he could get people's attention. In fact, there were many other students who had come over to check out the commotion and see what was going on, even students from other classes. I clearly met the eyes of Hashimoto from Class A, and then he quickly blended into the crowd of students.

"It seems like this has turned into quite the commotion," said Ichinose.

"Well, yeah," sneered Ryuuен. "You weaseled your way into the student council real early on to try and earn yourself some points. So, it's only natural that these fine folks here want to hear about how you're feelin' now, since you couldn't even manage to keep that up anymore. Right?"

"Mm-hmm," Ishizaki grunted in agreement, casually unfolding his arms.

Looking a little distressed, Ichinose reiterated the reason for her resignation. "I've already said that it's so I can focus on my classwork."

But, just as whether something was the truth or lie didn't matter to Ryuuен, he also didn't care at all what response she had actually given to his question. "You were really kicked out, weren't ya? I bet they said that they can't let incompetents be on the council."

"It if seems that way, then maybe you're right." Ichinose, realizing that trying to offer Ryuuен a serious reply would be pointless, instead just gave his words back to him.

Ryuuен chuckled, continuing his verbal onslaught. From the beginning, he'd had no intention whatsoever of letting anyone show her sympathy. "Heh heh. Or maybe it's that they've realized your past crimes are gonna be a problem, is that it? I mean, the student council's gotta be pretty damn sloppy to let a cunning little shoplifter on board. Hell, I can understand why you'd wanna run away."

Some people might have had their own thoughts in response to the word “shoplifting,” but it was something that Ichinose had now come to grips with after hearing it again in the recent past. She didn’t show any signs of being upset, because she had, at least temporarily, built up a tolerance thanks to what happened with the student council.

“I don’t know what people might be saying about me, but it’s not good to cause trouble for other people,” she told Ryuuen.

“Nah, it ain’t like that. A lot of people wanna know the truth about why you quit the council, don’t they?” Ryuuen kept on trying to provoke her, as if saying, *“Come on, expose the truth right here and now.”*

Kanzaki, as a friend, couldn’t just stand by silently and listen any longer, and he wedged himself in between the two of them. “That’s enough, Ryuuen. Ichinose’s reason for resigning is just as you heard from the student council’s official notice.”

“I don’t give a crap about the ‘official’ reason or whatever,” Ryuuen scoffed. “Come on, since she’s quittin’ now, it just makes her look all suspicious. Anyway, when you lose to me in the next special exam, yer finally gonna be fallin’ over that cliff, after all.”

It was a statement that was very typical of Ryuuen, as he couldn’t imagine anything like losing to Ichinose. Ichinose’s class, which was in decline, would no longer have the opportunity to rise back to the top. Furthermore, the gap between Ichinose and Class A would be doubled, which would further increase their hopelessness. Even the students from Ichinose’s class who weren’t feeling much of a sense of crisis at the moment were probably soon going to realize those facts.

“It’s too much of a pain in the ass to beat you in every single exam, so I’mma go ahead and suggest that your class withdraw,” said Ryuuen.

“And I’m going to ask that you stop making these ridiculous comments,” Kanzaki replied. “We have no intention of giving up on Class A. We are making every effort not to lose, and that includes this special exam.”

“Effort, huh?” Ryuuen snorted. “Yeah, it’s def true that the only thing yer class has got goin’ for you is how stupidly serious you all are. No wonder you

can't give up hope for this special exam, then, since I guess it's possible you could win—if you could talk to your textbooks about their feelings."

It was entirely unthinkable that Ichinose's class would decide to withdraw just because of this altercation. Most likely, Ryuuken figured that if he could just shake them up a little more, that would be plenty. According to what Kanzaki and the others had said, there had already been numerous attempts at sabotage during their studies.

Since Kanzaki stepped into the conversation, Ichinose had remained silent throughout. It seemed like she just didn't have anything to say back, but the expression on her face wasn't one of gloom.

"Ryuuken-kun," she said. "Have you had enough now?" She was acting no different than usual. She glanced over at Kanzaki, soothing his tension with a smile, before turning back to reprimand Ryuuken and his followers. "You're free to say whatever you like to me, but I'd like you all to please not bother everyone else. They're working hard and trying their best. Also, please be considerate of the students who are going to eat now."

Whether or not people saw what Ryuuken was doing here as simply putting on a show was difficult to say, but the fact that the corners of Ryuuken's mouth had turned up ever so slightly into a smile seemed to suggest that he had decided that he had been effective enough in inflating the crowd's interest and suspicion around Ichinose's departure from the student council.

"Well, well. Apparently, we're in the way. Well, I'm gettin' hungry too, so we're pullin' out, boys," he announced.

He had only been here for a few minutes. It was incredible how Ryuuken could cause such a commotion simply by showing up. Even a bad reputation kept people talking about you, after all. Among all the second-year students, that power of his was undeniable, and he showed it.

With the departure of Ryuuken and his followers, nearly two-thirds of the crowd of students that had gathered dispersed all at once. I noticed that Hashimoto wasn't around anymore, either, and the usual calm lunch break vibe had returned. Now, the students in Horikita's class should be able to regain their moment of calm and manage to eat and study.

“Oh, Ayanokouji-kun!”

As people were exiting, Ichinose noticed me, smiled, and then walked up to me.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “There was probably a lot of noise and fuss because of me, wasn’t there?”

“It wasn’t your fault at all, though, Ichinose,” I replied. “It was simply a matter of Ryuuen stirring up a commotion, is all. You okay?”

“I’m all right. To be honest, this was convenient for us.”

“The fact that Ryuuen made incendiary comments so openly?”

“Ryuuen-kun will probably continue to try and sabotage us until the special exam happens. For us, the advantages of that outweigh the disadvantages.”

She didn’t mind even if Ryuuen and his people interrupted their studies—it seemed like she wanted them to try and interfere.

“Ichinose, I think it’s about time,” said Kanzaki.

It felt like Kanzaki had been watching the situation as it unfolded, and he didn’t want us to get into a lengthy conversation. Most likely, discussions and study sessions for the upcoming special exam were being actively held in their class during lunch, just like in Horikita’s class. I could see that composure and confidence peeking through in Kanzaki’s expression.

“I’ll catch up with you later, Ayanokouji-kun,” said Ichinose.

And with that, she returned to her classroom like normal, not appearing upset or bothered in the slightest.

“...Catch up with you later?” I repeated.

I was a little curious about her choice of words, but for the time being, the first thing I needed to do was go back to the classroom and explain the situation to Horikita.

HASHIMOTO, after witnessing the whole kerfuffle, quickly strode through the halls and made his way to the school cafeteria. He connected with a group of three people who were already seated and had just begun to have their lunch.

"Hey, Princess," he said. "You sure we don't have to do anything this time? I think that, at this rate, it might not be a good idea for us to go head-to-head against them."

Sakayanagi put down her chopsticks and looked over at him. "You seem quite concerned about Class B, Hashimoto-kun. Just leave them be for now."

"Though they were originally Class D, now they've become Class B," he said. "And on top of that, we don't have a big enough lead over them that we can really laugh it off. If we lose this time, the gap between us will be less than two hundred points. Then just one big special exam might be enough for them to turn things around on us."

Sakayanagi didn't seem concerned in the slightest, but Kamuro, seated across from her, felt a little differently. From her perspective, between Sakayanagi and Hashimoto, Hashimoto's line of thinking was easier to understand and agree with.

"What does that have to do with what was happening earlier?" she asked.
"The thing you disappeared off to go see?"

"I saw an example of how things can be done," Hashimoto said. "Ryuuuen's been makin' new moves to drive Ichinose's class into a corner."

"New moves?" Sakayanagi repeated. "I really do not think so, no. The shape has remained exactly the same; it's only the color that has changed."

"Even so... To be honest, I'm a little jealous of them," said Hashimoto.

That was how Hashimoto truly felt. And his feelings included criticism of Sakayanagi. Sakayanagi didn't appear displeased with him at all, though; she met him with a smile. "You are extremely limited in what you can do in a special exam like this one—a highly specialized written test. There are few things that can be done on the outside. All one can really do is sit at one's desk, look at one's textbook, and face oneself."

"I get that, I do, but that doesn't mean we can't still do somethin'," argued Hashimoto.

"There are many students in our class who do not struggle with their studies, and all of them are either studying independently or working together in teams. Do you think that there's really anything for me to instruct them to do? Trying to push people beyond what they can handle can backfire," Sakayanagi pointed out.

Hashimoto bit his lip a little in response. He clearly did not think the same way she did.

"You seem quite displeased that I am not doing anything," she added. "In that case, would you prefer that we behave like Ryuu-en-kun, watching our opponents twenty-four hours a day, putting pressure on them, and even sabotaging them? I can't imagine that would be efficient."

Hashimoto let out a quiet sigh, so small that it could go unnoticed, and then spoke up once more, arguing against her. "You're right, it might not be efficient. And on top of that, yeah, if you think of it as cheaply imitating Ryuu-en, then I get that chances are low you'd go for this kind of plan, Princess. But still, it's way, way better than doing nothing at all, isn't it? I mean, having your concentration interrupted when you're tryin' to study is a huge pain, after all."

"Okay, sure, that might make sense on the surface," said Kamuro, half-interested, as she tore off a piece of her bread, "but in the end, if Ichinose and her classmates are struggling because of Ryuu-en's sabotage, won't they just hole up in their dorm rooms or something? What's the point if all you end up doing is changing where they study?"

"You can understand why if you look at the fundamental reason people study and work outside their rooms," Hashimoto argued. "You can't slack off in your studies when you're out in public, in front of people, and on top of that, since you can take breaks when you need to, you can concentrate more. Right?"

"It is most certainly true that students may not be able to achieve their full potential in their studies by staying in their respective dormitory rooms," Sakayanagi agreed. "Especially those who aren't accustomed to studying on their own. It might be easier for them to study in a place where they can

contact other people, outside their rooms.”

“So, that’s why Ichinose and her classmates are continuing to study out in the open, even though they know they’re in a place where they can be messed with, huh?” As she spread some jam on a piece of bread and popped it into her mouth, Kamuro nodded in understanding.

“However, you are forgetting something crucial, Hashimoto-kun,” said Sakayanagi.

“Something crucial?” he repeated.

“Such acts of sabotage would require a great number of people to carry out. Additionally, conducting acts of gray-area sabotage out in the public eye does not leave a good impression on those who see it. Could you see to it that we could engage in such a vulgar, lowbrow thing as interfering with an opponent’s studies in such a way that Class A would come out of it unscathed?”

“...Well, that’s...”

At the very least, it would look a long way from the kind of behavior appropriate to Class A, the rulers.

“Besides, we would lose a great deal of study time if we were to engage in such tactics, unfortunately,” Sakayanagi continued. “Not only would we be unable to reduce the opposing class’s scores by a truly catastrophic degree, but we would also lose the opportunity to score that many points ourselves. And, while I’m sure the next idea that might come to your mind will be to ask the first-years or third-years to engage in sabotage on our behalf, there are no guarantees that they would do work worth the price. And we would need people to monitor their work. Lastly, considering the fact that, even if we are being charitable, this special exam will not result in a significant fluctuation in Class Points, it would be a highly inefficient plan.”

Hashimoto was continuously being shot down, but he didn’t give up, and he kept wondering if there was any way he could pull it off. “Okay, so in that case, there’s no problem if I personally do something, right?”

“I would not recommend it,” replied Sakayanagi. “Ryuuuen’s manner of doing things is the sort of strategy that you could call essentially wrong by nature.”

Ryuuen's class was continuing to try and sabotage Ichinose's class, though it was unknown how effective those attempts were. In doing so, they were limiting how many people in their own class could study, and also how much time they had to study.

"Furthermore, it is the same whether we're talking about one person or ten people," she added. "If your harassment against the opposing class becomes public knowledge, the matter won't end with people deciding that it was your fault exclusively. Class A as a whole would lose face if that were to happen. Am I wrong?"

How many people would believe Hashimoto if he did claim that he'd done it alone and entirely on his own initiative, without consulting anyone else? The more effective Hashimoto's sabotage was, the more likely it was that people would determine Sakayanagi had ordered him to do it behind the scenes.

"The way you're talking is basically the same as saying that Ryuuen's strategy is useless, then, ain't it?" said Hashimoto.

"It is not the 'right' strategy," Sakayanagi said. "However, even though it would be a useless strategy for us, there is significant meaning in Ryuu-en-kun adopting this strategy of sabotage. Out of the four classes in our grade level, the students in Ryuu-en-kun's class have the least desire to learn, and there are few people in his class who are particularly capable in their studies. Even if, as a hasty stopgap measure, they were to seriously devote themselves to their studies and spend a long time at their desks, they would likely not be able to reach the same level of academic prowess as Ichinose-san's class. Not by a long shot. That is precisely why he's betting on making Ichinose-san's class fail, rather than on improving his own."

In response to Hashimoto's continued insistence that something should be done, Sakayanagi offered a solid response, explained in theoretical terms.

"Okay, so, you're saying that we can win the way things are, then?" asked Hashimoto.

"If all goes well in this special exam, we will win," she replied. "However, when taking into consideration the rules of this particular exam, it's the opposing side that has the initiative in determining the outcome. The rules

appear to be structured in such a way that even the lower-level classes can fight the upper-level classes; it's the lower-level classes who hold the privilege of being able to score high this time, unlike us. I cannot make any absolute guarantees when we are fighting a battle conducted in this way."

Because of how the rules were set up, even if Sakayanagi's class got the best-possible results and achieved a perfect score, they couldn't match a perfect score by Horikita's class.

"While our chances of defeat are low, good things could come from defeat as well," Sakayanagi added. "In the event that Horikita-san's class scores higher than we do and wins, that would be an opportunity for us to gather information."

"...Gather information?" asked Hashimoto.

"Someone with talent may emerge from among the low-level students. In the event that that happens, we could improve the accuracy of our list of priorities to be eliminated. In that sense, too, Ryuuken-kun's strategy is, in the end, an entirely foolish one, because it blurs the picture in that regard."

Both classes would be notified about the test results of the other, down to the last detail. That meant that if a student performed remarkably well, they would inevitably be noticed.

"You still seem like you disapprove." Kitou, who had remained silent up until this point, directed the aggressive comment at Hashimoto.

"Well, I mean, I understand what Princess is saying," Hashimoto said. "It's just... I'm wary of Class B. It's not a bad thing to think that they might catch up to us if we're not careful, is it?" He didn't say so in as many words, but the prime candidate in his mind was unmistakably Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. He figured that people with first-rate potential like Kouenji were opponents that couldn't be ignored. "If we just lose this special exam, we'll still be okay. But our final exam at the end of the year is gonna be a showdown with Ryuuken. When it's time for that one, we'll be risking an even bigger fluctuation in Class Points than before. Are you saying we can be absolutely, positively sure that we won't lose that one?"

"Regarding the final exam, an appropriate strategy will be required," said

Sakayanagi. "There is no possible way that I could lose unless there are special conditions put in place that give privileges to a specific class, as in this particular exam. Of course, though, I'm sure that Ryuuen-kun would give a similar answer."

Neither Sakayanagi nor Ryuuen had even one iota of doubt about their chances of victory when they got serious about something. However, at the end of the year, one of them was most definitely going to be broken down, and that would have a major impact on the competition to reach Class A.

"Sorry, I got a little pushy back there," Hashimoto apologized to Sakayanagi. "I'm gonna go cool off."

And with that, Hashimoto left. Afterward, he took off his indoor shoes and put on his regular ones, walked out of the front entrance, and then headed toward the dormitory. Then, a lone male student approached Hashimoto. Neither one addressed the other, but they began to walk side by side.

"Seemed like you had quite the fight back there," said the other student. He spoke as though he found the situation amusing. He had been watching them from the other side of the glass in the cafeteria, so he had some idea of what had happened.

"I'm a realist, but I'm also a romantic," said Hashimoto.

"Those are mutually exclusive. What do you mean by that?"

"A realist is someone who accepts things the way they are. Normally, you wouldn't think Sakayanagi would ever fall behind Ryuuen. She'd sidestep all of his tricks and come out on top. The predictable pattern is that she'll demonstrate the dignity of Class A, all proper like."

"Yes. I'm sure that most people would think the same thing."

"But in manga, novels, and dramas, things don't work out that way, do they?"

"So, in other words, you're saying that Sakayanagi-shi will lose?"

"The way things are, the idea that Class A is going to stay way ahead of the competition just isn't viable. The story doesn't make sense," said Hashimoto. "It would be more exciting if they got knocked down off their pedestal around the

end of the year, and the classes were running side by side. Then, starting in our third year, it'll be a three-way race between Sakayanagi's class, Ryuu'en's, and Horikita's. And then, finally, it'll end with Sakayanagi losing to one of them, getting dragged down from Class A... You get the idea."

Students who'd been assigned to Class A would certainly find a fantasy like that hard to accept.

"I see. You certainly are a romantic, then," said the other student.

"Horikita or Ryuu'en. I need to be ready for whichever class pulls off a miracle upset," said Hashimoto.

"That is most definitely a very 'you' way of thinking, Hashimoto-shi."

Fortunately, Hashimoto was in a position to have some amount of information about Class A.

"However, I don't just need to keep an eye on what's going on behind me. I gotta be vigilant about what's in front of me, and to the side, too. And besides, it's not like I can just trust *you* with anything either, can I, Kaneda?"

Once his name was spoken, Kaneda responded with an unsettling grin, touching his finger to the rim of his glasses. "It's exceedingly reasonable that you would suspect me of being Ryuu'en-shi's puppet," he said. "You've been that way all this time, and I'm sure you must continue to be so, Hashimoto-shi. I admit that I've been off in my calculations in that regard."

"I do things for me. You do things for you. We use each other. It's the best relationship," said Hashimoto.

Kaneda held out his phone to Hashimoto, showing him what he had typed on his screen. Once Hashimoto nodded, having committed what he saw to memory, Kaneda erased everything he had typed. Then, Kaneda stopped walking alongside Hashimoto and casually left.

"So, do I follow Sakayanagi, or do I follow Ryuu'en?" Hashimoto muttered. "Or do I go with Horikita's class? It's about time to decide."

Hashimoto looked ahead to the end of the year, and further beyond, to his third year at school, continuing to think about what he could do for his own

sake.

6.3

AFTER SCHOOL on the same day that Ryuuen's class caused that mess bothering Ichinose's class, Horikita had invited me to come join a study session. She invited me as though it were a matter of course, with boilerplate wording, but I declined, of course. Kei had very obviously been aware of me since this morning, but wasn't talking to me, and I didn't have anything that could really be called "plans" for the rest of the day. That was precisely why I could now take the time to solve some annoying problems that had been thrust upon me.

The word "shoplifting" had been thrown around an awful lot lately, and one particular incident could be pointed to as the origin. How and why had Kiryuuin Fuuka been falsely charged with stealing?

You could understand why she could state with such certainty that she didn't have a single friend, if you looked at how she talked and acted. It wasn't just her classmates who clearly disliked her. It seemed like the entirety of her grade disliked her personality. But that alone wasn't the kind of thing that'd make someone randomly hit on the idea of incriminating her like this.

It might have been a strategy someone could have considered, without caring whether it was right or wrong, if Kiryuuin had been perceived as an obstacle in the way of getting to Class A back when her class was in its first year. But what was the point in deliberately taking a risk like that now, when the winner had already been decided? The most likely possibility that I could think of was that this was a form of indirect harassment from Nagumo, carried out in such a way that the orders didn't appear to be coming from him. Perhaps Nagumo was so starved for intense competition that he was aiming to provoke Kiryuuin into fighting him seriously.

However, considering the way she had strolled right up to the student council the other day, prepared to throw punches, I couldn't say for sure that was definitely what was going on here. If so, that would have been a perfect time

for Nagumo to reveal to her how he did it, and then demand that she have a showdown with him. That was probably why Kiryuuin was also feeling unsure about her best move here.

There were several options I could take as I proceeded with my investigation. One was to take a fresh look at the case against Nagumo, who was my prime suspect. Another was to hear Yamanaka's story, the person who had tried to plant something in Kiryuuin's bag. Finally, I could also ask for information from a third party who I could trust, in order to better understand how things actually stood with the third-year students.

That being said, though, I had extremely few points of contact with the third-years. The only people I had contact information for were student council members like Nagumo and Kiriyama—which meant that the only way for me to get the information I needed was to walk around on my own and get it directly, on foot. I had absolutely no intention of just fumbling around in the dark and wasting time, of course; I was going to act with purpose. Right now, I was looking for a certain someone who seemed likely to have the most useful information for me, and who also wasn't connected to the person who had framed Kiryuuin.

I found some third-year students who were alone, and I tried to gather information. From them, I learned that the person I was after had headed toward the gymnasium, and so I headed there immediately. However, I made it all the way to the gym without seeing her at all on the way. At any rate, it appeared as though club activities had already begun. I could see my classmate Sudou thoroughly practicing the basics, while at the same time shouting a whole lot louder than anyone else.

"Not here," I thought aloud.

Since other club members were beginning to gather in the gym, one after another, I decided to leave so as not to disturb them. Though I tried questioning other students headed toward the gym, I couldn't get any new information. I had been unable to meet her here in the end, but when I got back to the main entrance and looked for my shoes, I discovered that hers were still there—she hadn't left the building.

So, she disappeared, but she's still in the school building, hm? It was nearing five o'clock in the evening now, a time when only a few students remained at school, save for those in clubs. Though I ran the risk of standing out somewhat, I decided to head to the area where the third-year classrooms were located. If I couldn't meet her, I couldn't meet her. I looked around all four of the classrooms, but I still didn't see any sign of her.

I figured it might be wiser just to quietly wait at the main entrance and lay an ambush. Just as I was starting to think about that, though, I overheard someone saying that the person I was after had apparently gone to the faculty room.

Arriving at the faculty room, I finally succeeded in spotting her. She was talking with a teacher in the hallway, heading into the office. Since teachers were often coming and going around this time, when classes were over, I decided to simply wait some distance away so that I wouldn't be spotted. After approximately ten minutes had passed, the student I was after finally appeared again, just after exiting the faculty room.

I always thought of her as a cheerful person, but today, she had a rather morose look on her face as she walked on ahead, downcast. She crossed the hall without noticing I was there watching from outside the faculty room. I missed my chance to call out to her, but after hesitating a little bit, I decided to follow a short distance behind. I was thinking I'd say something when she was putting on her shoes by the main entrance. However, she didn't head for the main entrance straight away. Instead, she went up the stairs and toward the roof.

There's no access to the rooftop... Maybe she's meeting up with someone here? I wondered. Just as I was thinking that, though, she stopped, and after a moment I could hear the faint sound of sobbing. Apparently, she hadn't come here to meet with someone. She came here to avoid seeing anyone.

It was a strangely quiet school building. Even though she was trying to hold in her cries, they still stood out.

If someone else passed by who didn't know what was going on, they'd likely think that I was the one who made her cry. I could just have walked away right now without her noticing me, but I had business to take care of.

“Excuse me?” I called out to her with only a couple short words, trying as much as possible not to startle her. But she must have been thinking that no one would be nearby at all, so it was obvious that she was extremely shocked.

“Huh?!” Asahina gulped.

“Wh-wha—Ayano-Ayanokouji-kun?!”

“I’m sorry for startling you,” I said.

“S-sorry. H-hold on a minute!”

“There’s nothing you really need to apologize for...”

She was still in shock. It was a little late for this, but she tried to hide her face from view, and hurriedly wiped away the tears that were streaming down her cheeks.



"If this is a bad time, I'll come back I—"

"I-it's all right. Really, it's okay!"

She tugged at my sleeve to keep me from leaving. That was entirely unexpected. Perhaps she was instinctively wary of the risk that, if she allowed me to leave, I would go around telling people that she had been crying.

I waited quietly for a few minutes until she regained her composure.

"...Okay. I'm all right now," said Asahina quietly. She cleared her throat and added something else, sounding embarrassed. "I'm sorry."

"You're apologizing again," I said. "But I'm the only one who did something wrong; I startled you."

"That's different. It was because I made you see something that must've been awkward for you."

I didn't want to carelessly get involved in any unrelated issues, so I didn't pester her about why she had been crying. However, perhaps me not saying anything had the opposite effect and made her self-conscious, because Asahina began telling me the reason herself.

"This morning, my friend, Succhii... I mean, Moeka... She left school. Suchi Moeka from Class C."

"Getting expelled this close to the end of school? It wasn't some kind of a penalty on a special exam, though, right? Like, she dropped out voluntarily?"

There shouldn't have been any special exams for the third-year students happening yesterday or today.

Asahina shook her head, denying that it had been voluntary. "They said it was because of some serious violation. She had done something that violated the rules, so this was her punishment. I wanted to know what happened, so I tried asking the teachers, but they insisted that they couldn't tell me anything."

So, that was the reason she'd gone to the faculty room. For someone from Class A like Asahina, it shouldn't matter if someone was expelled from Class A. However, from the sounds of it, it went without saying that they had a friendship that crossed class boundaries.

"Did you not talk to her about it?" I asked.

"Moeka was expelled yesterday, and when I found out about it this morning, she wasn't in the dormitory anymore," Asahina explained. "I didn't even get a message from her or anything... I've been asking around in Class C since this morning, since I figured that one of the kids in their class must know something, but I couldn't find out anything at all. I feel like everyone's totally uninterested in people that get sent away from school."

So, was it that no one knew the reason Suchi was expelled? Or were there people who knew, but were hiding it? Horikita Manabu's generation, Nagumo's generation, the younger Horikita's generation, and then the first-year students, such as Nanase and Amasawa... Those four grades were the only ones I knew anything about, but it seemed clear that there were more expulsions in Nagumo's grade. Even so, there was no doubt that an expulsion unrelated to a special exam was a somewhat disturbing occurrence. The fact that the school was withholding information was probably just because they had determined that it was a profoundly serious violation, and there were potentially negative repercussions to discussing it.

"This is just my own speculation," Asahina went on. "I have no idea what kind of violation it was. But even so, I think I have a hunch what the reason was. I'm sure that the students in Class B and below are coming up with all sorts of ways to try to break into Class A. And I'm sure that, with that in mind, Moeka ended up doing something she shouldn't have."

"But Asahina-senpai, in your grade, isn't it Nagumo-senpai who's in charge of everything?"

You got into Class A if you were recognized by Nagumo. Otherwise, you were eliminated. That was the path to survival for third-year students, at least from what I had seen on the surface so far. However, the dejected look on Asahina's face suggested that there was another way.

"Is there some kind of loophole that allows people to move up to Class A?" I asked.

"...A loophole? Well, no, rather, it's... Ayanokouji-kun, how's your relationship with Miyabi?"

"How is it? Well, not good, basically. That's how it's been. That hasn't changed, even now."

"This is something that kids in other grade levels don't know about..." began Asahina.

"Oh, I see. I won't tell anyone."

Asahina looked relieved at my assurance, and started to tell me how things actually were with the third-years. She probably wanted to vent because her friend had been expelled.

"Around this time last year, when Miyabi became student council president, people were saying that Class A's victory was set in stone, and hope for people in Class B and below just vanished. That's why everyone was so happy when Miyabi publicly promised in his campaign that, if people had the ability and achievements under their belt, he would pull them up into Class A."

But things weren't so easy as all that. In this school's system, only a few students could do something like move to another class, even if they scraped together enough Class Points. In the middle of our conversation, Asahina exhaled deeply, trembling a little.

"Moeka, too," she added. "She held out hope that we could somehow graduate together from Class A."

But not only had that dream not come true, she got expelled before graduation.

"Did Nagumo-senpai say anything about Suchi-senpai's expulsion?" I asked.

"Nothing," Asahina replied. "Or more like, he probably doesn't even care. It's possible that he didn't even notice anything, although the teachers put out an announcement."

Meaning that he wasn't even paying any attention to the small fry that were headed out the door. I didn't dislike Nagumo's way of thinking.

"If you don't mind, could we go someplace else? I'm getting kinda cold," said Asahina.

I supposed that was probably because the adrenaline had been pumping

when she rushed to the faculty room earlier; now that she'd settled down, she must have been feeling the cold. Unlike the classrooms and the faculty room, which were well-heated, the hallways were rather chilly, after all. The temperature was beginning to drop rapidly as evening approached, too.

Since I had a lot of questions that I wanted to ask Asahina, I decided to go ahead and take this conversation to a café in Keyaki Mall, even though it was a little far away.

6.4

ASAHINA HELD THE CUP of hot tea she'd ordered in both hands and brought it to her mouth with apparent relish.

"So, continuing where we left off earlier," I said. "You're saying that dissatisfaction with and opposition to Nagumo-senpai have been growing more and more day by day, then?"

"Yes. Not even I know how many people, exactly. That kind of specific information hasn't been given to Class A. I just heard a little bit about it because I was close with Moeka. Ayanokouji-kun, you don't know about the contact that Miyabi has with the third-year students, do you?"

"I assumed there was some kind of method he was using to bind the grade together, but I don't know anything concrete, no," I replied.

"Okay, let's start with that point first," said Asahina. She looked a little concerned about our surroundings; she took a quick look around to check that no one was nearby before she started explaining. With that established, she went on to tell me the particulars of the contract.

For the first time, the details of the contract through which many of the third-year students were tied to Nagumo Miyabi were made clear to me. The terms of the contract were as follows:

Students would transfer 75 percent of the Private Points they earned every month to Nagumo Miyabi personally.

Students would comply with Nagumo Miyabi's instructions and not engage in hostile actions against him.

Students would have the right to win tickets, provided that they were recognized for scoring a significant number of points on their own merits.

Funds were to be handed over monthly on the day before Class Point finalization.

If anyone disobeyed Nagumo, even after winning a ticket, they would be stripped of their rights.

Students who observed the aforementioned five conditions would be entitled to compete for a twenty-million-point ticket.

There was one more thing, too.

"Apparently, Miyabi is planning to set aside tens of millions of points to hold some kind of lottery at the end," Asahina said. "He said that he thinks there'll be around two or three tickets available, and he's going to let students who signed the contract play."

That meant that even if students weren't able to contribute meaningfully, they would still have a chance to get into Class A in the end. So, when Nagumo, the leader of Class A, had gotten into a position where his place was completely secure, he urged the students in the lower classes to sign a deal. Since it was impossible for an individual to accumulate twenty million points on their own, Private Points were instead funneled from a vast number of people, and Nagumo converted those points into tickets to transfer classes, which he then offered back to the students. For students in Class B and below, their chances of graduating from Class A in the normal way were pretty much zero. But via this redistribution of wealth, their chances increased by a few percentage points.

In fact, some students, such as Kiriyama, had already earned that right, which suggested it was fair to assume Nagumo's policies were having some effect. The 75 percent rate was extremely high, complete exploitation, but that was important given Nagumo's proposition of granting tickets to as many students as possible. At the same time, it was advantageous for Nagumo. It might also serve as a deterrent, preventing the seeds of rebellion from taking root, because opponents wouldn't be able to deal with large sums of points.

"So, he coerced classes B and below into this situation, then," I observed.

"Yeah. Only Miyabi knows exactly how many people have signed the contract, but I think that most everyone has, probably. And even though it's not by contract, everyone in our class is giving 50 percent of our points to Miyabi, too."

So, only the students of Class A, whose victory was assured, could freely use the full amount of their Private Points every month. That was a natural right given to them, but the students in the lower-level classes likely felt disgruntled about it. It was precisely because Nagumo understood this that he coordinated and controlled things so carefully. Among the third-years, Class A's lead was massive—it wasn't even close. Therefore, even if the burden Class A students were shouldering was only 50 percent of their income, Nagumo was still getting more from that than from the 75 percent he received from all three of the other classes.

With so much power and authority that he could even freely determine the results of special exams, Nagumo was a king who controlled everything.

"I just so happened to be assigned to Class B originally, along with Miyabi," Asahina added. "Miyabi worked really hard to raise us up to Class A, and he created the environment that we're in now. I know that I'm not qualified to say anything, since I've only been benefiting from these advantages that have been given to me, but..." It seemed like she hesitated to speak, afraid of being judged, but she continued to struggle until she could pull those heavy words out from the back of her throat. "Even if it was indirectly, Moeka was expelled because of the environment that Miyabi created. When I thought about that, the tears just started coming..."

That must have been the reason Asahina was sobbing earlier, when I saw her crying in the school building. Although there didn't seem to be any direct connection between Kiryuuin's case and what happened with Suchi, I figured that the word Asahina had used, "indirectly," might just be applicable in my situation.

"Asahina-senpai, could you help me?" I asked.

"Help you? What do you mean?"

"What is your relationship with Yamanaka-senpai from Class 3-D?"

“Yamanaka-san?” Asahina repeated. “I mean, we can at least talk to each other normally, but it’s not like we’re especially close friends. So, I’m not sure that I can really help you in this case...”

What Asahina had said just now about them not being especially close was, if anything, convenient for me.

“Actually, it’d probably be harder to get an answer to what I’m looking for if I were asking someone who was close to her, or a best friend or something,” I said. “It’s more important that I talk to someone who can speak objectively about Yamanaka-senpai from the perspective of a third-year student.”

“Really?” asked Asahina.

I took out my phone and showed her Class 3-D student Yamanaka Ikuko’s profile. She was a typical Class D student; all her abilities were average or below. She had no special talents to speak of.

“Does she have a wide social circle?” I asked.

“Hm, I’m not so sure about that. I think that she gets along well with her classmates, yeah, but she’s not the type of person who has a wide circle of friends. She’s not really popular with everyone.”

I didn’t want to rely on Asahina’s evaluation alone, but it seemed safe for me to conclude that, based on what I’d heard, Yamanaka didn’t have anything more to offer than her OAA showed she was capable of.

“I’d like to ask that you please keep what I’m about to tell you off the record,” I said.

“Oh wow, this is kind of funny,” Asahina said. “We both ended up talking about secret stuff.”

“You’re right about that.”

I told Asahina about the incident with Kiryuuin in which she was framed for shoplifting. At first, Asahina was surprised, but she quickly began to understand what was going on.

“I see. That’s why you wanted to come talk to me, Ayanokouji-kun, since you’re investigating what’s going on with the third-years.”

“You were the only person I could trust, Asahina-senpai.”

“That makes me kind of happy. Because I’m around Miyabi so often, people usually doubt me.”

Well, it wasn’t unreasonable for someone to assume that she was colluding with Nagumo, if you thought about it normally.

“From your perspective, Asahina-senpai, how does this case look?”

“Hm, let’s see... To be perfectly honest, I’ve spoken with Kiryuuin-san so few times over the past three years that you could probably count them on one hand, so I really don’t know all that much about her. But she’s probably the sort of person you imagine she is, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“I figured as much.”

“I’m not going to say that she hasn’t offended people at all, but even so, that doesn’t mean someone should think about trying to frame her for shoplifting as revenge. That’s uncalled for. More importantly, though, if word got out that you did something like that—tried to frame someone for shoplifting, I mean—you’d probably get expelled, wouldn’t you?”

“Truthfully, Kiryuuin-senpai immediately noticed Yamanaka-senpai trying to pin the crime on her, and her attempt to frame Kiryuuin-senpai ended in failure. If the issue had been reported to the school immediately, then there’d be a non-zero possibility Yamanaka-senpai would have been expelled, just as you said.”

In other words, this case had been entirely baffling, right from the very beginning.

“But... Oh, yeah, that reminds me,” said Asahina. “I think something else might be connected.”

“Something else?” I asked.

“Yeah. It probably happened right after she was accused of shoplifting, I think. I saw Kiryuuin-san trampling on another student after she knocked him down. She had a really threatening look on her face. It happened when she was on her way back to the dormitory.”

"She knocked him over and stepped on him?" I asked.

Kiryuuin was normally elegant and graceful, or at least composed. It was a little difficult for me to picture that happening, but...



"I wonder if maybe he was trying to stop her from meeting with Yamanaka-san," Asahina said. "I remember Kiryuuin-san shoved him and told him to 'get Yamanaka-san.' I think she was pretty furious. She was shouting things like, 'Spit it out, tell me,' and stuff."

I didn't know what reason that student might have had for trying to protect Yamanaka, but even so, I felt sorry for him. He must have been really scared.

"By the way, who was this student that approached her?" I asked.

"If I remember right, it was Anzai-kun. He's in Class D too."

I'd gotten a new name. Had he been manipulating Yamanaka to try and sabotage Kiryuuin? Or was he simply trying to protect Yamanaka from Kiryuuin, as her classmate? I couldn't come to a decision yet.

"I'd like to talk with Yamanaka-senpai," I decided. "Could you call her for me, Asahina-senpai?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. It might be a little difficult, though..."

"Please," I added.

The truth was that I should attempt to ask the person who had tried to frame Kiryuuin directly, Yamanaka. Asahina-senpai contacted her via chat, and apparently, her message was immediately marked as read by Yamanaka-senpai.

"Seems like she's at Keyaki Mall right now," Asahina said. "Can I tell her that you want to meet her, Ayanokouji-kun?"

When I nodded to tell her that was no problem, she typed a message and sent it.

"She saw my message, but hasn't responded yet. Let's hang on for a second." Asahina stared down at her phone for a while. After a few minutes had passed, she got a message back. "If you don't mind waiting, she can come in about thirty minutes."

"I don't mind, I'll wait," I answered.

Once I told Asahina that, she confirmed that Yamanaka-senpai would be coming here.

"Thank you very much. It's a big help," I told her.

"I didn't really do anything major," she insisted. "Besides, I'm curious about what the truth is, too."

Since I had some time, I decided to talk to Asahina-senpai for a while, asking her questions about her life at school so far, special exams, and so on.

6.5

IT WAS NOW just a few minutes before Yamanaka was supposed to come meet us. I'd just reached the bottom of my cup when a lone male student approached me.

"Hey, Asahina, is this guy Ayanokouji?" he asked.

"Huh? Tachibana-kun? Yes, he is, but..."

"Sorry. I'm gonna butt in for minute," he announced.

The student—Tachibana, apparently—aggressively pulled out a chair and sat down. He didn't have anything in his hands. He immediately put his arms on the table, leaned forward, and started talking to me.

"What do you want with Yamanaka?" he demanded.

Tachibana Kento. He was a student in Class 3-D, a classmate of Yamanaka's. I had been expecting Anzai to appear, but apparently, I was meeting another new student instead.

"Hey, hold on a second, what?" said Asahina. "Why are you here...?"

"I'm assuming you were contacted by Yamanaka-senpai," I said. "Did she ask you to come here and check things out?"

"Huh? Hey, I'm the one asking the questions," replied Tachibana. He didn't seem to be dropping the aggressive act, perhaps due to the fact that he was my senpai. Most likely, he was superior to Anzai both physically and mentally.

"Well, I suppose you can guess why I'm here, since I was sent as a standin. It's

regarding the matter of Kiryuuin-senpai,” I explained.

“What do you have to do with any of this?” he asked.

“I’m not directly involved. I’ve been asked by Kiryuuin-senpai to ascertain the truth,” I replied.

“What, are you a detective or something? Look, in that case, just tell her what’s already been said.”

“That Yamanaka-senpai was ordered to frame Kiryuuin-senpai for shoplifting by Nagumo-senpai, correct?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, is that true, Tachibana-kun?” Asahina piped up. “I can’t imagine that Miyabi would make someone do something like that.”

“You can’t imagine it?” Tachibana scoffed. “Nagumo’s the type of guy who makes people do stuff like that without a second thought. He treats us like slaves and uses us like extensions of himself.”

From the sounds of it, Tachibana definitely seemed to be separate from the faction that supported Nagumo, at the very least. It wouldn’t feel out of place if he called himself part of the anti-Nagumo faction.

“We have no choice except to obey, no matter how much we dislike it. Same goes for Yamanaka.” Tachibana let out a deep, quick exhale, like he found this all boring, and then cocked his head to the side slightly. “If you understand, then don’t ever get involved with Yamanaka again. Got it?”

“I’m terribly sorry, but I’m afraid I can’t agree to that,” I told him. “Nagumo-senpai doesn’t admit to having been responsible.”

“You can doubt it all you want, but it’s the truth. We can’t defy Nagumo, after all,” said Tachibana.

“I’ve heard as much. It’s because of the contract you have with Nagumo-senpai, right?”

Tachibana shot Asahina a glare that seemed to say, *“You told him that much?!”* Then he turned back to me and said, “In that case, you know.”

"Considering that the method is collecting Private Points and redistributing them in the form of large sums of funds so that students can transfer classes, though, any other class could have pulled off the same idea," I pointed out. "Why do so many people really need to bother to follow Nagumo's orders?"

"You don't get it," Tachibana huffed. "Us students in Classes D and C, we didn't exactly have a lot of Class Points before he came hounding us to sign the contract. Even if our entire class all worked together for an entire year, we never would have been able to come up with twenty million. The chances of us graduating from Class A were zero. But if we signed the contract, then he'd even let us win special exams, up to a point. That meant that we'd be able to get Class Points. What choice did we have except to sign? Besides, if the entire class ignored Nagumo's contract, then that would've meant we had to fight him every step of the way. What would happen then? Our remaining Class Points would've been taken away, and we would've ended up getting a total of zero Private Points every month."

Nagumo, not passing up a good opportunity, had put his own class's strengths and advantages to the best possible use.

"If Nagumo approves of you, that means that on top of having a stable life at school, you'll even get the chance to graduate from Class A. Only idiots like Kiryuuin could refuse something like that," he said.

So, by coming under Nagumo's control, they could maintain their Class Point totals to some extent. Even if they were being exploited, having 75 percent of their monthly income taken away from them, they were still getting some pocket money each month. Also, due to the nature of the contract itself, once it was signed, it was difficult to break the terms. Even if one or two people did break the contract, they'd probably be discovered due to someone reporting them.

"So, even if Nagumo were to spend a large sum of money, no one could complain," I remarked.

"Well, no, but... That's not to say that people wouldn't be annoyed over it," said Tachibana. "You're right, though, people couldn't complain. Things are still okay for the people who've got skills. But for people like me, who have to rely

on someone else to have any hope of getting to Class A, the lottery is our last shot.”

Even if they were going to be endlessly exploited for Private Points until graduation, they would bet on the lottery. If there were only a few tickets, meaning that there was only about a one-in-a-hundred chance, even that wasn’t so bad, huh?

“So, are you saying that the attempt to pin the crime of theft on Kiryuuin-senpai in this instance was another instruction that was given?” I asked.

Tachibana, after casting his eyes downward for a moment, nodded silently. “I’m one of the people tasked with acting as a go-between. He said that if we could get Kiryuuin nailed for shoplifting, he’d acknowledge us.”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand, regarding this ‘go-between’ business,” I said. “The more people that you insert into the situation, the more you risk having the truth get out that you tried to frame her for shoplifting. Besides, if you’re having a large number of people handle one task, that means that each person’s individual contribution is reduced proportionally, obviously.”

It would’ve been less time-consuming and risky for Nagumo to simply approach Yamanaka alone from the very beginning. After all, she was a girl who had no other options; her back was against the wall. Why was there the need for Nagumo to pass the baton to Tachibana, and then have Tachibana pass the baton to Yamanaka? That point got stuck in the back of my teeth; nothing was clicking into place here. If you were to ask me if everything Tachibana was saying was trustworthy, I would’ve told you no. Basically, it *looked* like he was telling the truth, but he was speaking far too candidly.

“I’m sure that Student Council President Nagumo must have forbidden you from talking to anyone about this,” I remarked.

“O-of course he did,” Tachibana responded. “But, I mean, you can’t blame us for being forced to name names against our will when we’re in trouble. Neither me, nor Yamanaka. We... Well, I’m just saying this myself, but I guess it’s like we don’t need to feel responsible for it...”

So, he was saying that, after being pressed for answers, they had quickly and readily confessed to what they’d done. When he had first shown up here, he

acted completely confident and aggressive, but I wondered if there was perhaps a part of him that didn't want to be poked and prodded about this, or if I was just seeing a weak side of him coming into view.

"Tachibana-senpai," I said. "You may not have been the direct perpetrator of this incident. However, if this matter becomes public, the school will likely judge you in a similar fashion. Are you prepared for that?"

"Huh? There's no way that Nagumo would let something like this go public," he said.

"No, it's true that Nagumo-senpai might not, but Kiryuuin-senpai is angry. You can understand from what you've seen of her over the past three years, no? That, if she wanted to, she would bare her teeth at her opponent, no matter who they were?"

"Well, that's... Anzai was pretty scared, too..." said Tachibana.

"You received orders from Student Council President Nagumo. And you chose Yamanaka-senpai as the girl who would approach Kiryuuin-senpai, and proposed what she should do. You were enticed to do it because you were told that, if you were successful, you'd receive recognition. That is the whole truth. Can you swear to it? That it's all true?"

I put my phone in video-recording mode and directed the camera at Tachibana's eyes, holding it close to his face.

"L-look, I already told you that..."

"Can you swear to it?" I repeated.

I brought my phone even closer to his face, pressing him for an answer, but Tachibana pushed it away with an aggressive show of force and made me stop recording. "I told you it's the truth, didn't I?" he barked.

"In that case, there's no need for you to be so flighty. Why don't you want to be recorded?"

"That's... I mean... Look, just cut me a break! I'm out of here!"

"H-hey, hold on a second, Tachibana-kun!" Asahina tried to stop him, but he left without looking back.

"I felt like he was about to say something just then... I wonder what it was," she mused.

"Don't worry. I was able to get a rough idea from his reaction," I replied.

"R-really? Does that mean you know who ordered Tachibana-kun and the others to do what they did?"

Tachibana had obediently followed his orders and carried them out. Then, when his plan failed and Yamanaka was hounded by Kiryuuin, Nagumo's name came out. Even though they risked destabilizing their own position, Tachibana and his people had refused to admit anything other than the truth that they were presenting.

"Thank you very much for everything today, Asahina-senpai," I said. "I think this will help me solve the mystery in the near future."

"Y-you're welcome. If you understand it all, Ayanokouji-kun, then I'm glad, but... Could you tell me?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to refrain from doing so right now. I don't want to carelessly get you involved in this, Asahina-senpai."

It seemed like she was very concerned and curious about this whole issue, but it was best that I kept it to myself for now.

6.6

ALTHOUGH IT HAD TAKEN some time, I was able to get valuable information that would lead me to the truth of the shoplifting incident. Thanks to Asahina's help, my time hadn't been wasted, but that was precisely why I wanted to stop for a moment. The fact that I had gotten to the verge of solving the mystery without a hitch, on the very same day that I set out to conduct this conversation, could be attributed to my good fortune—including some unintended coincidence, of course.

But that was exactly why, personally, I wasn't satisfied with this explanation.

It wasn't like my collaborator, Asahina—or Yamanaka or Tachibana, for that matter—had mixed lies into their accounts, or anything like that. What would happen if I just reported the results of my investigation, as I had them now, to Kiryuuin? And what were the intentions of the person who had concocted this whole narrative? What were they after? I felt like there was a possibility there could be effects felt in the third semester, depending on my decision now and the outcome of this situation.

I decided to send Kiryuuin a message, though I left out the crucial part of my investigation into the matter. Then, I suggested what action we should take next. The only question that remained now was whether Kiryuuin would be on board, but since she was hoping for resolution, I figured that she would accept without any problems.

After returning from Keyaki Mall, I arrived in front of the dormitory.

As I had expected, I hadn't gotten any calls or texts from Kei, and she didn't appear to be waiting for me in the lobby or anywhere else, either. I wondered if Kei would continue to keep her distance from me right now, and thereby diminish her relationship with me. No, I didn't even need to think about that. As long as she was a parasite attached to a host, she wouldn't be able to escape on her own power and take action independently.

The elevator descended and stopped at the first floor. I got in and rode it to the fourth. *Rather than thinking about Kei, let's proceed with sorting out Kiryuuin's case for now*, I thought to myself. However, while that was going through my mind...

"Welcome back, Ayanokouji-kun."

When I disembarked the elevator, I saw Ichinose standing there, wearing her coat. She looked a little cold, but she had a warm smile. Apparently, she had been waiting just outside my door for me to come back to my dorm room.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Hm? Oh, I just wanted to see you, Ayanokouji-kun. It's not a bother, is it?"

"Not at all. It's just, you were probably waiting a long time, weren't you?"

Normally, I would've been back by five o'clock, but it was already after six

now, thanks to the detours I'd made to see Asahina and another third-year student.

Ichinose must have been curious, because she took out her phone to check the time. "Oh, wow. When did it get this late? I didn't even notice."

I thought she might just have been saying that out of concern for me, to be nice, but it didn't feel that way.

"How long have you been waiting here, anyway?" I asked.

"Um, since a little after school, so...just after four thirty, I think," she replied.

She had been standing out here for at least an hour and a half. She had told me before that she would talk to me later; I guessed that was because she was determined to come visit me in person.

"You could have contacted me ahead of time," I told her. Even if we couldn't meet up right away, I could have at least told her when I was going to be heading back to the dormitory.

"Oh no, it's all right," she said. "I didn't want to bother you, Ayanokouji-kun."

I didn't think it was a problem of "all right" or not, really... Anyway, if she herself wasn't bothered by waiting, then there was nothing more for me to say.

"So, hey, um... It's not like I had anything in particular that I needed to come tell you or anything, but, uh..." Ichinose spoke apologetically, essentially asking for my permission to visit me. "I was wondering, have you patched things up with Karuizawa-san?"

"No, not yet," I replied.

When I told her that, Ichinose nodded in understanding, replying with "I see." Was she happy? Sad? Or something else? The look on her face could have been either of those feelings, but at the same time, I couldn't tell how she truly felt.

"In that case... Um, could I be a little selfish for a moment?" she asked. "If you don't mind, I was thinking that I'd like to have a little chat with you, Ayanokouji-kun. I mean, if it's really okay with you, I mean. But..."

I figured that, since she had taken the time to wait, she hadn't come here simply to say hello.

"If you don't mind, Ichinose, then I'm fine with it. Do you want to come inside my room?" I asked.

"Is that okay?"

I didn't really have any reason to deny her. Kei hadn't contacted me, and I didn't have anything I really needed to spend my time on for the rest of the day. Besides, this wasn't the sort of situation where I could make her stand outside and talk. More importantly, there was no way I could let Ichinose get any colder standing out here, so I turned the key and then opened the door.

"I'm feeling kind of nervous. Sorry to barge in like this," said Ichinose as she came inside.

Once she stepped through the door, she must have immediately noticed what was different from the last time.

"The last time you came to my room was on that rainy day," I remarked.

"Thank you for everything back then," she said. "I was completely soaked, and I still just barged into your room and everything..."

I took off my shoes first, and then Ichinose took off hers and neatly lined them up next to mine. After I turned on the light and the entire room brightened, allowing us to see what we were doing, Ichinose spoke up once more.

"Oh! You know, it's like it turned into a really cute room." She was transfixed by the changes to my bed and everything around it.

It wasn't like there were any especially major changes. I hadn't bought new furniture or remodeled. It was just that there were plushies, a hand mirror, and cushions around the place, which looked a little out of place in a guy's room. There were a lot more accessories around the room compared to before. Those were all things that had been brought here and left behind by Kei, who often came in and out of my room.

If someone unfamiliar with this school were to see that, it would be easy for them to get the mistaken idea that Kei and I were living together. If you looked in the kitchen, you could easily spot things such as matching cups and chopsticks in assorted colors. Ichinose understood full well that I was dating Kei,

and she must have assumed that the state of my room would have changed. In fact, there wasn't any sign of confusion on Ichinose's face at all.

"Sit down wherever you want," I told her. "I'll fix you a hot drink. Cocoa okay?"

It was the same drink I'd made her before, on that day, and she smiled warmly and happily. "Yes. Thank you."

The best way to warm up a cold body was from the inside out. That being said, it was getting rather cold in my room, so I turned on the heater and dehumidifier.

"I think the room should warm up real soon," I said.

Nodding, Ichinose took off her coat and placed it by her feet.

"Girls really are amazing," I said. "You're always wearing skirts like that going to and from class. Aren't you cold?"

"Oh, definitely, it is cold. But I guess maybe I'm just so used to wearing skirts that I don't really pay much attention to it."

Noticing a framed picture of me and Kei, she approached it, took it in her hands, and stared at it for a long time. "Can I ask what it was that made you fall in love with Karuizawa-san?" she asked me.

"Are you interested?"

"I am. I haven't had much contact with her. I only know what I heard—that she was dating Hirata-kun in our first year of school. I never thought that the two of you would end up going out, Ayanokouji-kun."

Many students, even those in Horikita's class, were still puzzled by me being with Kei. I was sure that, for students in other classes, it was probably difficult to figure out how it happened.

"It's not like I don't want to answer the question, but it's difficult to," I answered. "It was the first time I've ever been in love, and even if I wanted to talk about it in detail, I can't. It could just be the natural progression of us learning together in class, I guess."

Since I was unable to say anything specific, I weaseled my way out of the

question using words that sounded like they made sense.

"Karuizawa-san really is a cutie, isn't she?" said Ichinose.

"I won't deny that."

Once the water in the pot came to a boil, I poured the hot water into a cup and mixed the powder in with a spoon. Thus, the cocoa was ready.

"Here you go," I said.

"It's nice and warm." Ichinose's hands must have been cold. She wrapped them around the cup and let out a deep breath—*phew*. "I selfishly dragged you all over the other day, like to the gym and stuff. Didn't you hate it?"

"I was the one who originally came to you, Ichinose," I pointed out. "I wanted to know what you did on your days off. And besides—" I opened my desk drawer and took out a sheet of paper. "It was such a good experience that I'm actually thinking of turning this in on my next day off."

"Oh, a gym membership form..."

I had already filled the form out, entering my name, student ID number, monthly plan selection, and so on.

"I've always led a pretty self-indulgent life," I said. "I thought I'd start getting my body moving a bit."

"I see. That makes me kind of happy to hear."

I had often seen a depressed look on Ichinose's face up until, and throughout, the school trip. However, ever since we'd spent that day off together, I felt like she smiled much more than before, noticeably so.

"I'm sure we'll have more opportunities to see each other at the gym moving forward, so I'll be looking forward to it," I told her.

"Yeah! Me too, I'm looking forward to it... So, we can hang out at the gym now." Ichinose took a sip of her cocoa and smiled, her eyes curving into pleased crescents. "Hey, um, to tell you the truth..." She trailed off shyly.

"Hm?" I asked.

There must have been something on her mind, because Ichinose was looking

into my eyes. “Actually, I wasn’t waiting outside your room just because I wanted to see you, Ayanokouji-kun. There is something I felt that I really had to tell you... Um, if you’d like, you can sit next to me.” She gently patted the open space on the bed.

Since I could tell that this was a serious matter, I sat next to Ichinose to fulfill her wishes.

“The reason I decided to meet you this past Sunday, Ayanokouji-kun, was so that I could give myself closure,” she said.

“Closure?” I repeated.

“To bring an end to my feelings for you, Ayanokouji-kun.” Ichinose, determined, didn’t even make a pretense of averting her eyes from me. “You have someone you love, Ayanokouji-kun. You’ve got Karuizawa-san. I told myself, ‘I can’t destroy the relationship these two have.’ That’s why I thought that day would be our first and last date.”

There was no hint of sadness on her face as she spoke; nothing like a sense of tragic resolve. Was this what Ichinose had been thinking about during that time we spent together at the gym?

“So, that’s the end of it?” I asked.

Ichinose nodded firmly. “I thought it was the right thing to do. That we shouldn’t see each other in our private time anymore.”

If so, that meant this moment we were having right now was a contradiction. Even if it wasn’t a day off, this undeniably fell into the category of private time.

“But I was wrong. That thinking wasn’t right. I knew that nothing had changed,” said Ichinose. I still didn’t know what conclusion she had reached. However, this change in thinking of hers was probably the reason that the bright, cheerful Ichinose I saw today had come back. “I thought about what I should do, I suppose. What I should do from here on...”

Her smile looked the same as it always did, but at the same time, somehow different. Until now, I had thought of Ichinose as being easy to read, as someone whose emotions always showed on her face, and as someone relatively easy to understand. I had seen instances where she skillfully put on a

poker face during exams and such, of course, but even so—that's what I had thought of her, in her private life, at least. Now, however, Ichinose was often wearing a face that made it impossible for me to read her true intentions.

"So, you know what?" she said. "On that day, there was one thing I decided, in the back of my mind. That I wouldn't ask you about your girlfriend Karuizawa-san when I was with you, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Because it made my heart hurt," she said softly. "It made my chest tighten. I knew that it would hurt if I asked you." She was choosing her words carefully, trying to convey what she wanted to say to me. "But when we finished at the gym, I just couldn't bear it anymore, and I asked you. I asked you about which one of you fell in love first."

She certainly had asked me that. I knew what Ichinose was feeling at the time, her state of mind.

"Did it hurt?" I asked.

"Strangely enough, it didn't. It was that moment when I realized that my thinking wasn't right."

"So, what did you realize? What was the conclusion you came to?"

"You want to know? I'll tell you." Ichinose slowly took a deep breath, and then looked into my eyes as I sat beside her. "That I still love you after all, Ayanokouji-kun."

Ichinose wasn't running away. She didn't even want to just catch me and let me go. That's what I saw in her eyes as she looked at me.

"In that moment, I was able to reaffirm that I love you, Ayanokouji-kun," Ichinose repeated.

Her thinking had been that she should give up, move out of the way, and treat what had happened as our first and last date. She had accepted that. However, she had then arrived at the opposite conclusion.

"At the same time, I thought about something else," she said. "I can't just stay in the dark. I need to change from the ground up."

So, that moment had been what changed Ichinose, who before had kept her head in the sand.

"Hey... May I touch your face, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

"It's not like a prize is going to come out, you know."

Ichinose laughed softly at my joking response and nodded. Then, she reached out with her right hand and touched my cheek. She oh-so-gently pulled me toward her, so that I was now face-to-face with her.

"I've never done this kind of thing with anyone," she breathed. "I've never felt like this about anyone before. It feels like my heart is always racing, I'm so nervous, and somewhere inside my heart, there's this pain... But right now, I'm so incredibly happy. Just having the person I love right next to me fills my heart with joy."

Ichinose was telling me the truth, completely vulnerable and unvarnished. There was something I wanted to ask her about.

"I remember I asked you about something on the school trip," I said. "I asked you if there was something you wanted."

"Yes. I wanted... First, to be in Class A," she said. "That was a goal I wanted to reach with my friends. I had lost sight of that then, and I was about to lose heart. I was telling myself, 'It's impossible now.' No, that's not quite right—I *did* lose heart. I even thought, 'Well, it's inevitable, I'm going to get expelled, it's understandable.'"

"And now it's different?" I asked.

"Now it's different. I want to stay here. I want to aim for Class A. I want to achieve that goal." The hand stroking my cheek was filled with strength. "Then, there's one more thing I want. The person I love... Ayanokouji-kun."

"I know you know this, but—"

"Yes. You have Karuizawa-san. I understand, Ayanokouji-kun. I'm not going to ask for anything more right now. But..."

"But?"

"It'll be different in the future. I'm going to become the kind of person who

can make you turn your head and look at me, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Ichinose was looking straight at me, determined, refusing to avert her eyes even though her cheeks were turning red. She wasn’t going to take that last step, though; it would have been a violation of morality in this situation, where the other person already had a lover. If she had tried to take that step, I would have stopped her from doing so, but she kept herself firmly in check. That was likely due to her core sense of righteousness.

“Watch me from here on, Ayanokouji-kun,” she told me.

“I was already planning on watching where you went, even if you didn’t want me to,” I replied.

“So... The end of the school year,” said Ichinose.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “When that time comes, we’ll meet again, just the two of us, and I’ll tell you my conclusion.”

“My resolve was broken once before, back then, but that’s not true anymore,” said Ichinose. “I’ve recovered.”

I didn’t need to question her on that. As I sat next to her, I could practically feel the passion and strength coming off her in waves. I didn’t know what the outcome would be, but Ichinose had most definitely accomplished a major emotional change. It was rooted in an intense dependence on another person, though it was very different from Karuizawa Kei’s. That dependence, which could end up being a double-edged sword, undeniably gave Ichinose a great deal of strength.

It was only natural that people wanted the person they loved to respond to their feelings. Even if it was only fleeting, you wanted to hear that person quietly whisper, “I love you.” You wanted them to touch you, and to know what came after. But Ichinose wasn’t going to beg for that. It was clear that she was determined to win that commitment from me herself. Slowly, she pulled her hand away.

“I’m going to head back to my room,” she announced.

“I’ll walk you.”

"Oh no, it's okay. I'm all right from here. Ayanokouji-kun, you need to patch things up with Karuizawa-san as soon as possible, okay?"

"I'll take care of it," I promised her.

Coat in hand, Ichinose put her shoes on, walked over to the front door with light, graceful steps, and opened it. Then, after giving me a gentle wave goodbye, she closed the door behind her. A still silence followed, along with the slight, subtle lingering scents of cocoa and citrus. What kind of world would Ichinose go on to create from here, I wondered? How would that world affect the people around us—and would it bring about a change in my own thinking?

I found I was looking forward to life at this school even more.

Chapter 7: The Expected and the Unexpected

AT LAST, there were only two days left in the second semester. Today was finally the day for the Cooperative Comprehensive Written Test special exam, in which we would directly compete against Class A. Though there were special rules, it was just like a normal midterm test or final exam, so there wasn't much worth noting in the exam process. Many students who were at or below a C in Academic Ability had gathered in the classroom in the morning, focused on improving themselves and studying diligently until the very last minute.

Students like Keisei and Horikita, who had already caught up on studying everything they needed to well in advance and had focused on guiding the others, were looking around at their fellow students, giving them appropriate advice and making thorough final checks. Many students were probably thinking that the hardest part was what was coming: the exam itself. But they were wrong. As they say, it's 80 percent planning and 20 percent work, and most of the work in preparation for the exam had already been completed. How you approached your studies leading up to an exam, and your ability to concentrate on them—compared to those things, the exam itself was only about one-fifth of the load.

And before they realized it, it'd be over. Most things weren't that big a deal.

The exam procedure was based on a sheet that Horikita had submitted to Chabashira-sensei last night, which gave the order in which everyone in class was going to take this exam. Since anyone was allowed to solve as many problems as they wished (within the allowable range) out of the one hundred total problems, there may have been more than a few people who felt that the order in which we solved problems wasn't that significant. But in fact, it was extremely important.

Every person had ten minutes, including the time it took to enter and exit the room. That was plenty of time to devote solely to the act of solving problems, but it was most definitely not enough time to read and understand what all one

hundred of the problems were saying. If a student with a low level of academic ability was struggling hard to read and understand the problems, not only would it be impossible for them to find five problems that could be solved easily and enter the correct answers in time, but that student would probably make obvious mistakes due to how flustered they'd be feeling as time ran out. The order in which problems were solved was *the key* in reducing the likelihood of that happening.

Less than five minutes remained before the bell was due to ring, which would signal the start of the exam. Everyone in class was feeling incredibly tense—Kouenji alone seemed the same as usual. He looked like he was just freely doing whatever he felt like, carefully checking out his hair with his hand mirror, occasionally browsing the Internet on his phone, and so on. Earlier, Horikita had confirmed that Kouenji still hadn't answered whether he'd take this exam seriously or not. He had only replied that he had earned the right to do whatever he wanted.

Horikita understood that even a carefully constructed strategy, one that she'd taken great pains to decide on, could fall apart if Kouenji were to disrupt it on his own, and so she had come up with a clever proposition. She had asked Kouenji to be the last student to solve problems. She told him that, by that point, ninety-eight of the one hundred questions would be filled in, leaving only two problems for him to solve. If Kouenji, who was originally in the B range of Academic Ability, didn't answer those questions, we would only lose out on four points. It was unlikely that would be a majorly painful loss.

Furthermore, since those were the last two problems, if Kouenji left them blank, it was possible that we could play it off as him not being able to solve them, rather than intentionally leaving them blank. Thus, we wouldn't be in violation of the rules. So, there was no risk over whether he felt like solving the problems, left them blank, or answered incorrectly.

Kouenji had readily agreed to Horikita's proposal. If Horikita's class won, that meant that they would see an increase of fifty Class Points, so there likely wouldn't be much resistance on his part to answering those questions correctly. In fact, if Horikita's class lost the exam because he didn't make a move, thus losing fifty Class Points, he'd only be losing the extra Private Point income that

he wanted.

It was precisely because you couldn't predict what Kouenji would do using a commonsense perspective alone that Horikita had no other choice but to use this strategy.

The questions featured on this test were certainly not at a difficulty level that you could call easy. Though we couldn't be optimistic, the conditions for success were favorable for us. Class A also wanted to get as high a score as they possibly could. The pressure put on the Class A students with a lower level of academic ability would be great. The leader of their class, Sakayanagi, probably had some scheme in place, but because each student would be in a separate room when they were answering questions, combined with the nature of the school's surveillance, any unconventional plan of attack would be impossible. It would be safe to assume that it was not feasible for students with a low level of academic ability to earn a large number of points, nor could they engage in a risky balancing act such as passing around a cheat sheet.

In other words, what all of the classes could do was raise their current strengths to the highest possible level, and order their students in such a way that they maximized their abilities. Or, I supposed, in the case of people like Ryuuuen, they could indirectly harass opponents outside of the exam. There were also some reckless strategies, such as entering into a secret contract to deliberately lose points, but all of the results for this test were going to be disclosed. If you were to make an obvious mistake, there was a risk that you'd be outed as a traitor—and, more importantly, there was no guarantee that you'd be able to win by bribing one or two people anyway.

In a school full of students who were essentially giving their best, it was most definitely a kind of accident that there were people like me and Kouenji mixed in among them; people who hadn't been properly, accurately evaluated in OAA. You couldn't scoff at the fact that students could get a few points added to their score because they had been judged as having low academic ability, when that evaluation wasn't based on their actual academic ability. All things considered, you could see that there were several conditions that favored Horikita's class.

Under the direction of Chabashira-sensei, who had appeared just as soon as the bell rang, we were brought to the special building, where we waited. Then,

following the turn order set by Horikita, each student went into the neighboring classroom one by one, solving problems on their tablet. We would repeat this process until we got to the last person, Kouenji, and then we would be finished. In this room, under the supervision of the teachers, we couldn't bring in any outside materials, nor could we use our phones. Chatting was also forbidden, so everyone waited for their respective turn in silence. All that remained was to see whether the students could demonstrate the fruits of their labors up until this point, without succumbing to nervousness.

7.1

AFTER THE SPECIAL EXAM was over—the long period of waiting included—the students felt relieved, for the time being.

They were met with words of appreciation from Chabashira-sensei for their efforts. “Good work, all of you,” she said. “The results will be announced tomorrow, and as of today, classes are now over. Your winter vacation starts the day after tomorrow, but don’t get too carried away. That’s all for today.”

All that remained now was to wait for tomorrow’s closing ceremony. Released from this period of great pressure, many students now freely let their hair down and relaxed. Some students were reviewing what they had done, how many problems they had each managed to solve, but Horikita hadn’t taken the initiative to organize people’s comments and start grading. Even if we could predict how many points we were getting, there was still the problem of our opponent. At any rate, it seemed like Horikita had decided that there wasn’t any point to that, since the results would be announced tomorrow.

“Hey... Um...” Kei came up quietly next to me and called out to me in a small voice.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

Kei addressed me fearfully, or perhaps like she was confused. “Um... Well, I was thinking,” she began, “it’s probably about time I forgave you, and—”

But almost as soon as she started trying to speak to me, Horikita also came over to where I was sitting. “Ayanokouji-kun, could I have a minute?” she asked.

“Sorry, Horikita-san, but can’t it wait until later?” said Kei.

“If I could put it off for you, I would,” Horikita replied. “But unfortunately, it’s a student council matter. I’ve been summoned by Vice President Kiriyma—I mean, no, Former Vice President Kiriyma. He wants us to meet in the student council office right away.”

As if to prove what she had said was the truth, Horikita showed me a message she had received on her phone. I also noticed Kushida standing some distance behind Horikita, smiling.

“Sorry, Kei,” I said. “Let’s talk when this is over. Text me whenever.”

“O-okay. See you...”

I exited the classroom with Horikita and Kushida, leaving Kei behind.

“Just when I was thinking, ‘Okay, the special exam is over,’ now we have student council business again,” Horikita sighed. “And apparently Nagumo-senpai is there, too.”

“Those two aren’t student council members anymore, though,” I pointed out. “They don’t need to comply with the rules anymore, do they?”

“It’s not like that,” said Horikita. “Even if they’re no longer associated with the student council, they’re still upperclassmen. Besides, this meeting is about Kiryuuin-senpai’s case, apparently. Remember that one?”

“I see. So, that’s what’s going on.”

I’d been expecting this, after the messages I exchanged with Kiryuuin last night. However, the fact that Kiriyma had gone through Horikita to tell me to come was a surprising development. The original plan had been for just the four of us to meet: Kiriyma, Kiryuuin, Nagumo, and me, at Kiryuuin’s urging.

“Hey, I don’t really understand what you two are talking about,” Kushida cut in. “What’s the matter with Kiryuuin-senpai?”

“Oh, that’s right. Kushida-san, you haven’t—”

"I'll do the talking about this," I said. "Besides, there's something I should tell you too, Horikita."

"Something you should tell me?" she repeated.

"About testimony I received from a third party regarding this shoplifting incident."

By the time we arrived just outside the student council office, I had finished my conversation with Horikita and Kushida. I saw two first-year students waiting outside: Aga, from Class 1-A, and Nanase, who had recently joined the student council alongside Kushida. So, in addition to the minimum required members I had expected, the entire rest of the student council had been brought along as well, hm? It seemed like developments drawn up by someone else were being incorporated into this case, too.

"I guess this is my first job for the student council, or something," said Nanase, holding her notebook with great care. "I hurried over here to take notes."

"Is that for keeping meeting minutes?" I asked.

"Yes. I heard that the secretary's job is to make a record of things."



"Yes, I know, but shouldn't there be a notebook used for keeping meeting minutes in the student council office?" I asked.

"Huh? Really? I went out and bought this one, though..."

From the sounds of it, she was so enthusiastic about serving on the student council that she ended up doing something rash.

"Well, it's not a big problem, but if you have a receipt, submit it at a later date. I will reimburse you," said Horikita. Out of the student council's budget, I presumed.

"Y-yes, all right," said Nanase. "I'm sorry."

"Well then, let's head inside right away, shall we?" suggested Horikita.

From the looks of it, Nagumo had already arrived, and was waiting inside the student council office with Kiriyama. He wasn't in the student council president's chair, where he usually sat; instead he was standing upright.

"Sorry about this, Horikita," he said. "I'm sure you second-years are worn out after the special exam."

"I do not mind," Horikita said. "Anyway, you mentioned that this is related to Kiryuuin-senpai's case...?" Acting as though she didn't know anything, she pointedly didn't mention that I had explained the matter to her.

"Yes," Nagumo replied. "I got a call from Kiriyama. He told me that Kiryuuin is filing a complaint against the student council, so he said we needed to set up a meeting."

"Filing a complaint against the student council...?" repeated Horikita.

This was the first I had heard of it. Filing a complaint against the student council. Why had Kiryuuin chosen to go with a method like that, I wondered?

"Anyhow, Kiriyama, why'd you ask for Ayanokouji, too?" asked Nagumo.

"Because he was one of the people who was present at the time," Kiriyama replied. "I deemed it necessary based on the thought that he would be bothered if gossip happened to spread and he didn't know anything about what was going on."

"Oh, well, that's fine, then," Nagumo said. "Anyway, I have to say, I'm kind of lucky to be able to observe Suzune's first performance." He urged Horikita to sit in the president's chair.

"...Thank you." Horikita gave a polite bow and proceeded to sit down.

"I see that, in the end, you chose Kushida as your vice president," observed Nagumo.

"Yes. I considered asking Aga-kun, a first-year student who'd joined the student council, but I decided that Kushida-san, who possesses a more in-depth understanding of the school, would be a more appropriate choice. Is there a problem?"

"Nope. I don't have any complaints about your choice of appointment."

Along with Horikita, who had already taken the student council president's seat, Kushida, the newly appointed vice president, sat down as well. The two of them had serious looks on their faces, and they didn't exchange any jokes.

"You know, though, Kiryuuin's really got nerves of steel, eh?" said Nagumo. "Showing up late, even though she's the one who asked for this."

It was another few minutes before Kiryuuin Fuuka entered the room for the deliberation; she was the last person to arrive.

"Sorry to have kept the new student council president waiting," she said to Horikita.

"Please have a seat," Horikita told her.

"No, thank you. I'm going to stay standing as we talk. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," Horikita replied. "Understood. Now then, getting right to business, I would like to ask you a few questions, Kiryuuin-senpai."

"Ask away."

"It seems that you've decided to file a complaint against the student council. I was wondering if I could ask about the nature of your complaint." Horikita was continuing to act as though she hadn't been told anything.

“Complaint?” Kiryuuin cocked her head to one side, apparently puzzled, but Kiriyma promptly pressed her to drop the act.

“You are already drawing this out longer thanks to your tardiness,” he said.
“Please do not waste our time; just get on with it.”

“Dear me, so impatient. Well, whatever. All right, allow me to explain what happened once again.”

While shopping at Keyaki Mall after school, Kiryuuin had almost been framed for shoplifting by Yamanaka from Class 3-D. Fortunately, though, just as Yamanaka was about to slip the item into her bag, Kiryuuin noticed and stopped her. So, the shoplifting incident had gone off the rails.

“I can’t believe for a second that Yamanaka was acting on some personal grudge,” said Kiryuuin. She gave Nagumo a pointed sidelong look. “When I pressed Yamanaka for answers, she confessed that she had been instructed to commit this crime by a certain individual.”

“And who was this individual?” asked Horikita.

“The former student council president right here with us now. Nagumo Miyabi.”

The first-year students serving on the student council, who were hearing about this for the first time, looked over at Nagumo, completely taken aback.

There had been several incidents centered around Kiryuuin Fuuka. No, rather, I supposed that they were *circumstances* that presented cause for concern. Had Yamanaka done this of her own volition, or not? If it was the former, then the student council would need to hear what had happened and hand down punishment. If it was the latter, then they would need to find the real culprit.

I decided to see if Horikita, as the student council president, could navigate this initial voyage in her new career without incident.

“We have now heard from Kiryuuin-senpai,” said Horikita. “Nagumo-senpai, do you have any objections to what she has said?”

“Of course I do. Unfortunately, Kiryuuin, I didn’t give Yamanaka any such instructions. If an incident like this became public, my credibility would take a

hit. There isn't a single benefit to me in it."

"I'm not so sure about that," argued Kiryuuin. "I know that you've always wanted to have a serious fight with me. But throughout these past three years, you've never been able to. Are you saying you don't resent me for that? Maybe you were trying to incite me into coming to you for a fight."

So far, they were talking in circles, just like the last time.

"It's true that I was interested in having a showdown with you," said Nagumo. "But any interest I had in you has long, long disappeared, since you were so stubbornly unwilling to do anything."

Kiryuuin chuckled. "Ha ha ha. Is that really true, though?"

Neither one of them was willing to accept what the other was claiming.

Now Horikita stepped in, addressing Kiriyama, who she had selected as a relevant third party. "Kiriyama-senpai, you are Kiryuuin-senpai's classmate, and you have supported Nagumo-senpai for quite some time as vice president. After hearing both sides make their case, what are your thoughts?"

"I can understand why Kiryuuin would feel indignant, having almost been framed for shoplifting," said Kiriyama. "That being said, I can't imagine that Nagumo was involved in this incident. If Nagumo were serious about framing Kiryuuin for a crime, I'm sure he would have chosen a better and more effective method."

"You don't think you might just be overestimating Nagumo?" Kiryuuin placed her hand on her hip with a faint smile, trying to needle Kiriyama.

"Considering what Nagumo has accomplished at this school, it is obvious that I am not overestimating him," Kiriyama insisted.

"Okay then, in that case, why did Yamanaka-senpai try and cause this incident?" asked Horikita. "Did Kiryuuin-senpai do something to warrant Yamanaka-senpai developing a grudge against her without realizing it, and was that what spurred Yamanaka-senpai to action? If so, why then did she try and pin the blame for her actions on Nagumo-senpai? What do you think about that?"

"While I do not know the truth, it's certainly difficult to imagine that Yamanaka did this on her own," said Kiriyama.

"So, you're saying that she didn't act alone," replied Horikita.

"Yamanaka belongs to an exceptionally low caste among the third-year students," Kiriyama said. "It is entirely conceivable that she could have, for example, been manipulated or coerced into action in exchange for Private Points as a reward, even by someone other than Nagumo."

Kiriyama's only argument was that it wasn't Nagumo or Yamanaka, but rather, a third party lurking in the shadows.

"If that's true, we'll need to start making some moves if we want to find the true culprit," said Horikita.

"Yes, you're right," Kiriyama agreed. "But it will be difficult to identify the culprit. At the time when Yamanaka was forced into giving a confession by Kiryuuin, she still didn't speak truthfully, and instead gave Nagumo's name. That sort of thing is only possible if there is a commensurate level of preparation."

"Do you know any reason why she would have done so, Kushida-san?" Horikita posed the question to Kushida, who had been listening to the conversation.

"For a third-year student like Yamanaka-san, doing something like trying to pin blame on Nagumo-senpai would only be a disadvantage," Kushida said. "And yet, she said his name. In that case... That means she was extremely focused on protecting the real culprit, I think."

"Exactly. It means that she is afraid of the real culprit—even more so than of Nagumo, whom she should fear the most," said Kiriyama.

"I don't understand," said Kiryuuin. "I can't think of any student that she would fear more than Nagumo. Can you? You're just trying to push the issue to convince me that there's some other secret mastermind out there, aren't you?"

From Kiryuuin's point of view as someone who continued to suspect Nagumo, Kiriyama was just another person on Nagumo's side. Even the fact that Kiriyama was essentially giving up on the idea of trying to find the real culprit, saying that

it would be difficult to identify them, only served to heighten Kiryuuin's feelings of distrust.

"I think that you're the one making assumptions here—you're assuming that I must be the one who did it," said Nagumo.

"Well, obviously, because there are no other candidates," argued Kiryuuin.

"I'd like to ask that you both please be quiet for a moment," said Horikita. "It is clear that having the two of you discuss it between yourselves will not solve the issue."

Just as Horikita said, Kiryuuin and Nagumo's circular argument was getting nowhere.

"Kiryama-senpai." Horikita turned to the former vice president. "If you were to decide what to do on this matter, how would you settle it?"

"I would say we should avoid any further inquiry or investigation into the matter," Kiriyama replied. "However, even if her attempt ended in failure, what Yamanaka did was an unforgivable act. I would apologize to Kiryuuin once again and pay her as much in damages as possible. I don't think there would be any issues with that kind of response."

"So, then, you're saying that there would be no need to report this to the school?" asked Horikita.

"If Yamanaka committed this crime on her own, then I'd say yes, we should report it. However, even if we were to report the issue to the administrators in this case, if the real culprit is not found, Yamanaka alone will bear all the blame. Am I wrong?"

"That's certainly true," agreed Horikita. "Even if the school did launch an investigation, that wouldn't necessarily mean that the culprit would be brought to light..."

They had concluded that Nagumo was innocent, but I wondered if this was an appropriate point of compromise.

"All I want is an apology from the real culprit," said Kiryuuin.

"I don't expect we'll be able to arrange that," Kiriyama responded with a

shrug. “Or do you perhaps think you can get to the real culprit? I don’t recall hearing a single bit of news on that front over the past few weeks. Did you get some useful information from Anzai, the student who you threatened with behavior that was close to assault?”

It wasn’t believed that Anzai had been injured or anything, but there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that he had been attacked, and in a way that might present a serious problem. Though there was some room for sympathy for her, Kiryuuin would be in trouble if she were charged with that offense.

“Ayanokouji-kun,” said Horikita. “I heard that you encountered Asahina-senpai the other day. Is that correct?”

At this point, Horikita changed the subject of the conversation, turning it toward the events I’d just told her about. Nagumo, who had been asked to remain quiet earlier, turned his gaze toward me at the mention of Asahina—someone who he had a close relationship with.

“I just heard about what the situation was for the third-year students through Asahina-senpai, more or less,” I replied. “Stuff about the kind of contract that Nagumo is forcing the third-year students into, what kind of relationship they have. I tried to find out what kind of feelings she had regarding all that.”

“En route to the student council office, I received a report from Ayanokouji-kun with that information,” Horikita added. “In talking with Asahina-senpai, he also explored the matter of Yamanaka-senpai in detail.”

“Oh? I’d expect no less from you, Ayanokouji,” said Kiryuuin. “I know you’re the kind of guy who’ll follow through—that’s exactly why I asked you for help.”

I had already reported this matter to Kiryuuin, but she was putting on a show, deliberately acting as though this was the first time she had heard of it.

“You used Ayanokouji, Kiryuuin?” asked Nagumo.

“Do you disapprove, Nagumo?” she asked in return.

“No. It’s just, if that’s the case, then—” Nagumo must have had something on his mind, because he looked as though he was going to continue speaking, but then he suddenly shut his mouth. “Sorry. Don’t pay me any mind. Continue, Suzune. This is your first agenda item as student council president, after all.”

Nagumo decided against doing anything rash, and once again assumed the position of watching over proceedings.

"From what I've been told," Horikita continued, "Ayanokouji-kun was unable to meet Yamanaka-senpai, and someone else appeared before him instead. That someone was Tachibana-senpai, another student from Class 3-D, like Yamanaka-senpai. Why did he show up, as someone who shouldn't have had any relation to this? It seems possible that he came to prevent Yamanaka-senpai from telling the truth."

"You're saying that there's a connection between Yamanaka and Tachibana?" Nagumo asked her, acting as though he didn't know anything about it.

"Ayanokouji-kun said that when he asked Tachibana-senpai about the truth of the matter, he got the same answer from him that Yamanaka-senpai gave," Horikita explained. "Tachibana-senpai insisted that she was instructed to put the item in Kiryuuin-senpai's bag on your orders, Nagumo-senpai."

"I don't even need to say this, but I never had any conversation like that with Tachibana," Nagumo said. "In fact, I don't remember even hearing a word from him over the past month or so. Maybe Tachibana is the real culprit."

"Well, of course you'd say that." It was inevitable that Kiryuuin would respond that way to Nagumo, too.

"Kiryuuin-senpai, do you have a deep connection with Tachibana-senpai?" asked Horikita.

"Absolutely not. I can definitively state that I have no more of a connection to him than I do with Nagumo."

"So, in other words, if we were to consider him a possible culprit, he would have even less motive than Yamanaka-senpai," said Horikita.

"Does this mean that Tachibana-senpai was given orders, then, like Yamanaka-senpai?" asked Nanase, who had been taking notes up until this point, recording the minutes in her notebook.

Though Nanase had posed that question to Horikita, she didn't answer it, and instead remained silent. I was sure that everyone must be surprised by that, as they would expect Horikita to answer right away.

"Surely that's not the end of the report you received, is it?" said Kiryuuin.
"Let's hear the rest, Ms. President."

However, Horikita still didn't respond, not even to Kiryuuin's urging. That was understandable, though. It was because I hadn't told Horikita the next part, the vital piece. I had given her the same amount of information I gave to Asahina, who had been there with me when I met Tachibana the other day. If Horikita asked for my help, I would lend her a hand. But before that, I wanted to see where Horikita's train of thought would lead her, what she'd deduce from it.

"Nagumo-senpai says that he is not the culprit," Horikita said at last. "On the other hand, Yamanaka-senpai and Tachibana-senpai have both consistently claimed that they got orders from Nagumo-senpai. That is a clear contradiction."

"One side must be lying, then," said Kiriyama.

"It is normal to think so," replied Horikita. "But first, I'd like to try believing what both sides claim."

Nanase's pen stopped moving. "But wouldn't it be difficult to believe contradictory statements?" she muttered.

"Normally, yes. But what if neither side was actually lying? I think that if we considered a certain condition, that would remove the contradiction."

From the sounds of it, Horikita had produced one possibility through the course of this conversation.

"The real culprit told Tachibana-senpai that they wanted him to do this one job on Nagumo-senpai's orders," Horikita theorized. "It's precisely because Tachibana-senpai and Yamanaka-senpai believed what the real culprit said that they've continued to stick to their story. However, the culprit requested a criminal act. Normally, you would imagine that they would want to meet with Nagumo-senpai directly, to make sure the culprit was telling the truth."

It was normal to think that they would want a guarantee, or a firm promise that they would receive something in return.

"However, they didn't do that," Horikita went on. "And why was that? I think it was most likely because the real culprit was also someone who Yamanaka-

senpai and Tachibana-senpai thought of as trustworthy. Someone who speaks for Nagumo-senpai. And someone with power.”

There was only one such person in this school who could make the kinds of statements that Horikita was suggesting.

“So, in this case, the person who was really pulling the strings from the shadows...wasn’t Nagumo-senpai. It was the former vice president, Kiriyma-senpai. It was you, wasn’t it?”

Everyone turned to look at Kiriyma in unison. He looked calm and composed, and expressed his doubts when he heard his name called. “Me? How did you come to that conclusion?”

“Did you not understand from the explanation I just gave?” said Horikita. “That is the conclusion that best fits all the available information.”

“There’s no guarantee whatsoever that the information Ayanokouji unearthed is true, though,” Kiriyma protested. “I have been promised a ticket to Class A by Nagumo. I would never do anything that could incite rebellion.”

In response to Kiriyma explaining himself, an unexpected person spoke up in his defense.

“The student council president’s deduction is interesting, but what Kiriyma says is true,” said Kiryuuin. “That is the main reason I don’t suspect him. A tame dog doesn’t have the courage to bite his master.”

“In that case, I’m sure he won’t mind if we call Yamanaka-senpai and Tachibana-senpai to appear as new witnesses, then, will he?” said Horikita, looking to Nagumo for confirmation.

“You’re the president,” he said. “Do whatever you like.”

“I see,” answered Horikita.

“Wait.”

It was none other than Kiriyma who had told her to wait.

“Do these witnesses know that they are going to be called at this time?” asked Kiriyma.

"No. I will contact them now and speak with them," said Horikita.

Kiriyama glared at Horikita, and then glared at me, since I had gotten involved in this case. If the theory that the real culprit was Kiriyama hadn't been proposed, then I might have been able to get through this without attracting attention. However, I figured that a barrage of questions would be inevitable to clear up these suspicions that had come to the surface. I wondered if Kiriyama could have kept his involvement hidden, even though he hadn't met in advance with those other two students to discuss any of this, now that all the key players had been brought together. It wasn't easy to continue to lie and mislead in a situation like this.

"Is there a problem with calling them here?" Horikita asked him.

If they didn't want to be dragged out into the open, then all she needed to do was drag them out anyway. That was the simplest and quickest method.

"That's..."

"What are you getting all flustered for, Kiriyama? This doesn't have anything to do with you, so it shouldn't be an issue. Just let it happen." Nagumo was talking in a lighthearted, joking manner, but you could see the will in his eyes. It didn't seem like he'd suspected Kiriyama until just moments ago, but he had apparently picked up on the change in the way things were going.

"...All right. Why don't we stop this now?" Kiriyama, realizing that there was nothing more he could do, appealed to us to end it here, as though he had resigned himself to it.

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

"I mean there is no need for you to call witnesses. I admit that I am the one who gave Tachibana the order."

"I never imagined it'd be you," said Kiryuuin. "All right, let's hear it, then. Why did you do something like this?"

Perhaps it was because Kiriyama had accepted his fate and prepared himself for the worst, but he didn't look panicked at all. "I did you wrong, Kiryuuin," he said, "but it had to be you, in order to accomplish my goal."

"It had to be me?" she repeated.

Kiriyama began to explain. "When I told Tachibana that I was delivering an order on behalf of Nagumo, and that he was to carry out this job in exchange for points, he accepted without a second's hesitation. The end of the second semester is close at hand, and the sense of urgency he felt was considerable, after all. There wasn't even a flicker of doubt in his mind about it."

It was perfectly understandable why Tachibana would believe Kiriyama, considering that the message was coming from the vice president, someone close to Nagumo.

"The general outline of my lie went like this: if he could successfully frame Kiryuuin for shoplifting without her realizing, Nagumo would give him a ticket to Class A. The deal would be rendered invalid if he failed, of course, but he would still get points."

"That's a bold lie," remarked Nagumo. "If Yamanaka *had* succeeded, your lie would have been exposed immediately."

That was correct. Tachibana and Yamanaka would have gone to Nagumo right away to demand their reward, their tickets. The fact that Kiriyama had given false orders would have immediately become known to everyone.

"Kiryuuin and I were in the same class for three years," Kiriyama replied. "I know her personality and her abilities very well. I'd determined that it would be impossible for someone of Yamanaka's caliber to plant an item on Kiryuuin without her noticing."

That was the reason it needed to be Kiryuuin. Kiriyama had chosen the person who would ensure the mission ended in failure.

"So, you knew from the very beginning that they'd be found out," said Kiryuuin. "But I don't understand. This is far too elaborate to be for the sole purpose of making me angry, and there's no benefit for you."

"Okay, I see. So, that means we were wrong in thinking that the goal was to frame Kiryuuin-senpai for shoplifting," said Nanase. As she took the minutes, she nodded to herself over and over, repeating, "Okay, okay."

"That's right," said Kiriyama. "I knew that as soon as you pressed Yamanaka

for answers, and you got Nagumo's name, you would first come to make an appointment with me, your classmate, so that you could speak directly to Nagumo. My real objective was specifically to arrange the timing for that appointment so that it would overlap with a certain other time."

Since I had been present at that certain time, in that certain situation, I could immediately see what Kiriyama had been trying to do.

"The student council election," I concluded. "It seems that crushing that election before it even happened was your objective, then, Kiriyama-senpai."

"Bravo. I'd expect no less from you, Ayanokouji," said Nagumo. "No wonder Horikita-senpai placed so much confidence in you." He must have been sorting out the situation in his head as well, because he had also realized Kiriyama's aim and objective. "So, you wanted to dig into the wound from Honami's past, her shoplifting incident, to make her withdraw from the election."

"Yes," said Kiriyama. "I could have personally said something and pointed out what she had done in the past, but I decided that wouldn't be enough. Instead, I calculated that Kiryuuin, who hates that kind of crime with intense prejudice, would mercilessly spew the kind of words that would pierce Ichinose's heart, and Ichinose wouldn't realize anything about what happened."

Though astonished, Kiryuuin responded with a light round of applause. "You had me dancing in the palm of your hand, Kiriyama, and splendidly so! Touché. You got me this time."

Kiryama, having studied under Horikita Manabu and served as Nagumo's right-hand man as vice president, had apparently demonstrated an impressive read of the situation, and his plan was clever. He had used Kiryuuin to orchestrate a "coincidence" in order to hurt Ichinose's self-esteem and make her feel that she was unfit for the position of student council president. Though Kiryuuin was an exceptionally capable person, whose abilities were in no way inferior to even those of Horikita Manabu, she was a highly aloof, solitary individual, with a warped, eccentric personality, and no friends. Therefore, she was extremely weak when it came to information warfare. Kiriyama, knowing full well what Nagumo and Kiryuuin's personalities were like, had come up with a strategy to use that knowledge to his advantage.

"The most unexpected thing was the fact that Ichinose had already decided to resign from the student council at that stage," Kiriyama added. "If I'd known that earlier, then there wouldn't have been any need for me to take that risk."

Even if Kiriyama hadn't engineered the whole shoplifting incident, Horikita would already have won the student council election for sure, if it had happened.

"Why, Kiriyama?" asked Nagumo. "What was the reason you took the risk and tried to stop the student council election?"

"You don't know, Nagumo? It was because I couldn't stand your selfish behavior. What would have happened if Ichinose had no intention of resigning from the student council and the election happened as planned? You would have fought with Ayanokouji to amuse yourself and gambled away a large number of Private Points. And I expect you wouldn't have even hesitated to go as far as to buy people's votes with points in order to win your game against him."

It was certainly true that Nagumo had a massive amount of funds. It would've been no surprise if, in the unlikely event that Nagumo found himself struggling, he ended up going for a strategy of buying votes.

"I don't get it," Nagumo said. "You're the one making assumptions about who would've won. And besides, me throwing cash around is none of your business anyway."

"None of my business? Yes, it's true that I got my ticket to Class A from you. But you must know how much mental strain I've had to deal with because of it. My classmates have continued to be jealous of me and hold a grudge against me, day after day. This time has been difficult to bear."

Kiriyama glared at Nagumo, his eyes containing a serious anger that he had never shown before.

"If you put more Private Points forward for other students in our grade, rather than sinking them into your own entertainment, then we'd have more students who could come up to Class A. And yet, you spend those Private Points, which are soaked with the blood and sweat of our fellow third-years, just for the sake of your own greed and desire to fight? Give me a break!"

Preventing the unnecessary expenditure of Private Points. That was Kiriyma's goal.

"Hunh. Kiriyma, I didn't know. I had no idea that you thought about other people. I thought that all the people I gave tickets to are nothing but self-centered meritocrats who think that, as long as *they* graduate from Class A, that's good enough." Nagumo sounded as though he was impressed, but whether or not everyone else interpreted what Nagumo said as a compliment was another matter.

"First Horikita-senpai, then Ayanokouji," Kiriyma said. "It's just that it's unpleasant for the rest of the third-year students, having to watch you engage in these unnecessary battles for three years now. That's all."

"I understand what you're trying to say. But does this mean that you're prepared for the consequences of betraying me, Kiriyma?" said Nagumo.

Nagumo had the authority to strip Kiriyma of his privileges. A ticket wouldn't be left in the hands of someone who had defied him.

"It's an action I carried out while under contract. Do whatever you like," said Kiriyma.

"I'll leave the matter of Kiriyma's punishment to you, Nagumo," said Kiryuuin. "That should be penalty enough, I'm sure."

With that conclusion, she quickly got up to leave the student council office.

"Please wait, Kiryuuin-senpai," said Horikita. "Our conversation still isn't finished."

"Surely your job here is finished by now, Ms. President?"

"No, that's not it. This was a matter brought before this student council. I do not think that Nagumo-senpai has the right to personally judge Kiriyma-senpai. And besides, there are still mysteries left unsolved."

"Mysteries? What's still left?" asked Kiryuuin.

"Kiriyma-senpai attempted to frame you for shoplifting, Kiryuuin-senpai. And, when that act was brought to light, he coordinated things in such a way that you would come to the student council at the exact moment he desired for

the purpose of destroying the student council election. His goal was to make Ichinose-san recall the trauma of her own shoplifting incident and withdraw."

That hypothesis was believed likely to be true, even by the very person who had admitted to it.

"But there shouldn't have been any need for him to take such a risk," Horikita continued. "If Kiriyama-senpai wanted to stop the student council election, there were several other ways he could have done it. If he wanted to use the shoplifting incident in Ichinose-san's past, he could have approached her someplace where no one would see them and urged her to withdraw from the election. That method would have been safe and certain, yet he didn't use it."

"And it would be...hard to believe that Kiriyama could have come up with that shoplifting idea on his own, wouldn't it?" Kiryuuin, her curiosity piqued, returned to her original position in the room.

"The question remains why he would have bothered to take such a risk," Horikita reiterated. "Perhaps, Kiriyama-senpai, you were fully prepared to be discovered as the real culprit here today?"

Kiryama didn't answer. Instead, he simply stared at Horikita, the student council president.

"I think that you wanted to make this matter public, to raise the question of what was wrong," she said. "You asked all the members of the student council to gather here today, not just me. And Ayanokouji-kun, too. Kiriyama-senpai, you said that all of this was on your orders to begin with, didn't you?"

I had assumed it was Kiryuuin who had proposed the idea of filing a complaint against the student council, but considering she'd looked puzzled when Horikita asked her about it right after she came into the room, it was probably Kiriyama who had thought of it. It was also Kiriyama who'd prompted the conversation to turn toward suspecting him.

"Horikita," said Kiriyama. "It's strange; for a moment, it looked like I was seeing your brother, Horikita-senpai." He spoke as though he was praising her for the correctness of her guess. "I wasn't sure how effective this plan would be, but as you can see, it worked. The number of students feeling discontent with Nagumo and complaining about him is growing day by day. I figured that

even if I told him about it, he wouldn't listen to what I had to say. Was I wrong?"

"Probably not, no." Nagumo readily agreed. I guessed that he had probably just shrugged off whatever Kiriyama said before now.

"I think there were major problems with how he did it, but it seems that this is the truth, Nagumo-senpai," said Horikita.

"What are you going to do, Nagumo?" asked Kiryuuin. "Are you going to make Kiriyama alone take responsibility for what happened? For this incident that was brought about as a result of your own selfishness?"

"That's a good question," said Nagumo. "I was assuming he had nothing to do with this incident, but from everything we've heard just now, I guess we can't say that anymore." I wondered what kind of conclusion Nagumo would come to, but he looked away from Kiriyama and directed his gaze at Horikita. "You're the one who got to the bottom of this, Suzune; finding the truth was your accomplishment. That is exactly why, as this is a student council matter, you should make the call and hand down your judgment."

"...You do not mind if I make the decision?" asked Horikita.

"You're not just sitting there as decoration, are you? I'll follow your judgment."

What kind of judgment would Horikita make, after seeing everything?

"First of all, Kiriyama-senpai," she said, "I would like you to extend a sincere apology to Kiryuuin-senpai for what you did. And then, whatever the circumstances may have been that prompted you to action, you should take seriously the fact that you involved Yamanaka-senpai and Tachibana-senpai, who had nothing to do with this, and made them share the guilt of your crime. Furthermore, since it is inevitable that this will become big news once the matter is reported to the school, I would like to ask that you voluntarily suspend yourself from school for a period of approximately one week, to reflect on what you have done."

The student council didn't have the authority to suspend or expel students. Even if the student council were to hand down that kind of judgment, the

school's approval would be essential. Hence Horikita saying the suspension would be voluntary. It didn't matter whether he faked being sick to miss class; she was just telling him to stay in his dorm room and reflect on the situation.

"Also, Nagumo-senpai, while you were not directly responsible, I believe that you have a certain amount of managerial responsibility as long as Kiriyama-senpai is under contract. While I believe that you are entitled to strip Kiriyama-senpai of his right to transfer classes, I would ask that you please promise not to exercise it at this time."

"That's a bold demand," said Nagumo.

"You could refuse," Horikita conceded. "But you will abide by my decision here, won't you?"

"I'm not inclined to blame Kiriyama for what he did that strongly either, mind you," Nagumo said. "But I have to ask, is that alone going to be enough?"

"No, it is not. If we end it here, there is no guarantee that something similar won't happen again. From this point onward, Private Points collected from the third-year students must be used only for the benefit of third-year students. I would like to add that condition to my ruling as well."

Up until now, Nagumo probably would've handed down whatever judgment he pleased from up on his throne. He must have used a lot of Private Points without our knowledge, spending a huge amount of funds and playing with fire when dealing with Horikita Manabu and the other grades. This was a measure to prohibit him from doing so in the future.

"If you say that this is the decision of the student council, then I'll abide by it," said Nagumo.

"You agreed so readily, Nagumo," said Kiryuuin. "Knowing you, I thought there was no way you'd accept it."

"That's basically because Suzune—I mean, the student council president—made a fair argument," said Nagumo.

I wondered if Nagumo had been a much more proper student council president than I'd always thought.

"Are you really satisfied with this, though, Nagumo?" said Kiriyma. "You have the power to make me fall."

"This is a decision made by the student council president. It's not my place to go against it."

Or perhaps Nagumo thought highly of the part of Kiriyma's true nature that he had demonstrated.

"Are you seriously just going to let this be the end of it?" Kiriyma pressed.

"I understand full well what just happened now, too, y'know. I'm not so lucky, it turns out." Nagumo had a look of boredom on his face, as though he had given up on something. But he didn't want to say anything more.

On the other hand, Kiriyma's facial expression didn't show any sign of resignation, nor did it look as though he was relieved that everything had gotten out into the open. He was thinking about something else. It wasn't hard to see it like he was looking beyond today.

"This matter is now resolved and closed," Horikita concluded. "I humbly ask that you please do not say anything about this incident to anyone else."

With that declaration from the student council president, this series of incidents had now been resolved. However, I wasn't so sure that everything was really over. That look that Kiriyma had on his face at the end, which was so full of meaning... What was it, exactly?

7.2

THE SPECIAL EXAM WAS OVER. On the following day, the closing ceremony for the end of the second semester was finally held. After listening to the teachers' speeches in the gymnasium, the students returned to their respective classes for a brief awards presentation; students received recognition for their exceptional achievements, like getting high grades or doing well in club tournaments. Then we were told things to note regarding our winter vacation. Afterward, Chabashira-sensei gave the students the results of the special exam.

The result that we heard, after everyone held their breath in anticipation, was that our class had won.

In that moment, the class was filled with cheers so loud they could be heard by the neighboring classes. There was only a fluctuation of 50 Class Points for each class, based on their win or loss. Yet we were able to earn significant Class Points.

At almost the exact same time, I received two messages on my phone. The first was from Ichinose, congratulating me on our victory with a “*Congrats!*” And the other was—

“Winter vacation starts tomorrow,” said Chabashira-sensei. “Don’t overdo it on your first day off. It’s important to take time to cool off after you’ve all been studying so feverishly.”

With that announcement from Chabashira-sensei, our class was dismissed, cheers of joy still resounding throughout the classroom. What I found rather striking was that, as she left the classroom, Chabashira-sensei’s eyes were creased into a happy squint, too.

As had been announced previously, this special exam was designed in such a way that students from every class could know, in detail, who had solved what problems, what questions they had answered correctly, and so on. In addition, information like what order students took the test in for each class, and the amount of time each student spent on their questions, would also be disclosed. If you looked at that information, you’d be able to see who had put in effort—but you could also get a sense of what each class’s strategy was. That would undoubtedly be useful data for allies and rivals alike.

I could check the details on my phone, so I figured I’d go over them at my leisure. I cast a quick sidelong glance at the students still making an uproar over the results, and decided to leave the classroom before the rest of them.

Kei had been paying attention to me the entire time. Up until now, I hadn’t had any contact with her since she tried to talk to me yesterday. However, it seemed like she was trying to make contact with me now, as she had been looking over at me the entire time until the minute I got up.

If it was difficult for her to talk to me in a crowded place, then I figured we

should move. As she was right now, Kei was still too insecure to make a move here, and she was also lacking in decisiveness. I supposed this was inevitable, though, since I couldn't expect to see growth in her even if I kept up this state of estrangement forever. With that thought in mind, I decided to walk away from the classroom for a while, but just then...

"Are you heading back alone?"

It wasn't Kei who had followed me out into the hallway. It was Horikita.

"Are you sure it's okay for you, the key figure in achieving this victory, to leave the classroom so quickly?" I asked.

"I'll head back later," she said. "I just thought I'd have a little chat with you."

With that, Horikita caught up to me, and we started walking together. Indeed, she wasn't carrying a bag, so it seemed certain that she'd return to the classroom later.

"You used an interesting strategy for this special exam," I remarked.

"I don't know if my approach was the most efficient," she replied.

The strategy that Horikita had produced had started with Keisei as the first batter in the lineup, the first student to tackle the problems. He was one of the top scorers in our entire grade, with an Academic Ability rank of A. Horikita had Keisei quickly solve the minimum-required two problems right away, and then use his remaining time to focus on reading the test questions. The purpose of this was to allow the second student in the lineup, who was waiting in line, and who had a low level of academic ability, to solve problems easily. The strategy was to alternate between students with high and low Academic Ability.

Under normal circumstances, it wouldn't have been possible to pull this strategy off. That was because we were forbidden from talking during the exam. We couldn't even use things like our cell phones, written notes, or clues. But if you were to ask if there were any openings to exploit at all, you'd understand from looking at the results that the answer was yes. There was an opening. While one student was solving problems in the classroom, the next student would be waiting for their turn out in the hallway. In other words, when that first student left the classroom after solving their problems, there was a

time when the two would bump into each other, albeit only for a moment.

The classroom had two points that could be used to enter or exit, and if students were forced to use the front door when entering and the back door when exiting, there would be a gap between the exiting and entering students. But Horikita had come up with a plan to deal with even that scenario. All that was needed was for both students to be able to see each other for just a moment. Horikita had told them to use their hands when that moment came; the first student could give the next one a few options for problems to solve via hand signs.

For problem number fifty-five, a student would use their right hand and hold up their fingers twice. For problem number sixty-nine, a student would use both hands to hold up first six fingers, and then nine. Although the rules prevented us from mentioning anything regarding the answers to the questions to one another, Horikita had confirmed in advance that using hand signs to convey which problems students should solve wasn't a violation of the rules. Giving instructions that merely indicated to the other student what problem to solve didn't constitute cheating, as it didn't have anything to do with the answers, and we were still observing the rules against talking.

By repeating this process over and over, students with low Academic Ability were able to give their undivided attention to solving problems slowly and carefully, without having to spend time and energy searching for problems to solve.

"Still, it was a close call," said Horikita. "Sakayanagi-san's class did exceptionally too, as expected... We have a lot of students with low Academic Ability in our class, so we were able to win in terms of overall points, but we didn't measure up in our percentage of correct answers."

Horikita's class had answered 72 percent of the questions correctly, while Sakayanagi's class got 86 percent. If the two classes had competed under the same conditions, with every student's score getting equal weight, Horikita's would have lost.

"I'm sure she isn't pleased," Horikita added. "She did what she should have, and she still lost."

Sakayanagi's class had always held the number-one spot on midterms and written exams, and this time served as proof of that, too.

"Still, even if you fell short in terms of your correct answer percentage, a win is a win," I said. "There's no need to be pessimistic."

The fact was that Horikita's class had gained Class Points, and Sakayanagi's class had lost them. Besides, 72 percent was still nothing short of admirable.

"Of course I'm not being pessimistic. I was simply frustrated, is all," said Horikita.

I guessed what I'd said was unnecessary. If anything, it seemed like her feelings of rivalry were much, much stronger.

"By the way, Karuizawa-san has been down lately," Horikita remarked. "She's been properly focused on her studies, but I was wondering, did something happen?"

"Nothing. If I had to say, I guess it might be like we're in the middle of a bit of a cold war," I replied.

"I wouldn't call that nothing. It's unusual to see you having a fight."

"That kind of thing can happen when a guy and girl have been together for a long time. These sorts of things are good experiences, too."

Perhaps she wasn't pleased with my answer, because Horikita looked back at me, obviously doubtful, her brows knit in disapproval.

"It's good that she was able to participate in the study sessions and get results on the exam, despite her unstable mental and emotional state," I added.

"I'd have to say it's more like she was being emotionally forced into her studies, to the point of pouring herself into them, even though she disliked studying, but... Anyway, Karuizawa-san's morale can easily affect the rest of the class. Make up with her as soon as possible."

I'd figured that, as the leader, Horikita wanted to manage a class that was stable, but... Oh well, it was fine. I watched Horikita walk back to the classroom, and then I decided to head on out.

7.3

HORIKITA'S VICTORY over Sakayanagi in the special exam would probably soon become quite the hot topic. Even though this exam wasn't purely a contest of academics, and included an element of competition that favored the lower-level classes over the upper-level ones based on OAA, that didn't change the fact that it was a direct showdown between pairs of classes. The gap between Sakayanagi's class and Horikita's class had been reduced by one hundred points before the year-end final exam. As for the other classes, it was Ryuuuen's class who were forced into an inconvenient situation. He had tried to disrupt his opponents with a strategy focused on putting on pressure outside of class, since he had judged that he wouldn't win based on academic prowess, but Ichinose had calmly accepted whatever Ryuuuen dished out, and picked up a solid win.

Ichinose might have been seen as emotionally unstable due to her resignation from the student council, but it was clear that Ryuuuen couldn't break her.

Even so, you couldn't say that Ryuuuen's decision had been a mistake. One might think that Ryuuuen should have ordered his classmates to study, like Horikita did with hers. Unlike Horikita's, however, who had already worked to lay down broad foundations, Ryuuuen's class didn't have much chance to grow in that respect, and it would have been difficult for them to catch up in such a short period of study time.

Though Ichinose's class only had a tiny shred of hope before, they had taken the victory in this exam, and they still had a slight chance of making it to Class A. Now, the battle between the four classes would carry into the third semester and beyond.

When I put on my shoes by the entranceway and walked out of the school, I saw that the person I was meeting was already there, waiting for me.

"I humbly apologize for calling you all the way here on the day of the closing ceremony."

It was the other person who had contacted me immediately after the results were announced. She had said that she wanted to meet me. Sakayanagi from

Class 2-A.

"I wasn't aware that Ichinose would be coming too," I said.

I never imagined that the two people who happened to send me messages today would end up meeting me by chance like this.

"What's going on here, Sakayanagi-san?" asked Ichinose, with a puzzled look on her face. Apparently, she hadn't heard that I was going to be here either.

"Let's take a walk for the time being," said Sakayanagi. "We'll draw attention if we stand around here."

I supposed it was unavoidable that we'd be overrun with students leaving school if we spent time together in front of the entranceway.

"First of all, Ayanokouji-kun, congratulations on your victory in the special exam," said Sakayanagi.

"Well, this was a victory that we were allowed to have," I replied. "If this were a normal written exam, we would've lost."

"Oh, you're talking about the percentage of questions answered correctly? That is a separate matter. It does not change the fact that I lost."

Sakayanagi wasn't being humble; it seemed more like she had honestly accepted the result, saying that it was what happened even after she did everything that she could. You could also see how composed Class A was from her answer, how much leeway they had.

"And you too, Ichinose-san," she added. "You were brilliant in your defeat of Ryuuuen-kun."

"We just did what we were supposed to, is all, like normal," Ichinose said. "We didn't do anything special."

"It is admirable that you didn't yield in the face of interference from Ryuuuen-kun and his classmates, though. To be honest, my initial assessment was that you both had a fifty-fifty chance of winning. However, when the results became public, Ichinose-san, I saw that your class won by an overwhelming margin. That was likely the precise result of you, as leader, not getting agitated, and giving calm, composed instructions."

It looked as though Sakayanagi had the same read on the situation as I did—that Ichinose had really buckled down for the fight, focusing her energy into it. Sakayanagi had determined that it wasn’t a victory brought about merely by the difference in Academic Ability between their classes, but one that had also come from a calm and composed approach.

“Really? I have to say, it certainly doesn’t feel bad to get a compliment from you, Sakayanagi-san,” Ichinose said.

“You’ve certainly gotten to be very positive and forward-facing, Ichinose-san. I can only assume that something happened recently,” said Sakayanagi.

It was possible that Sakayanagi had some guess as to what was going on, given the fact that she had called me here, too. Since Sakayanagi couldn’t gather information on her own, she had to constantly scheme to gather information using a large number of students, like a spider tugging on its web. The time that Ichinose and I spent at the gym on our day off. The time we spent in the café. Our walks to and from those places. That day she was waiting for me outside my room for so long. It would be no surprise if someone had witnessed what happened some of those times.

“I told you something that was somewhat relevant to this situation on the boat. Do you remember?” Sakayanagi wasn’t speaking to me but rather to Ichinose.

“Something like, ‘excessive devotion may result in painful repercussions,’ I think,” said Ichinose.

“Yes. That is why I have called you both here today. I have come to give you a final warning, Ichinose-san, as you harbor some fleeting romantic crush on Ayanokouji-kun.” It wasn’t surprising that Sakayanagi already knew that Ichinose had feelings for me. “You should distance yourself from Ayanokouji-kun right now, immediately.”

“Is that your ultimatum, Sakayanagi-san?” asked Ichinose.

Even though Ichinose had already conveyed her feelings to me, they were now being reiterated by a third party. Normally, I would have expected Ichinose to appear at least somewhat upset or shaken by that, but she didn’t show any sign of it at all.

"Yes, it is," Sakayanagi told her.

"I don't quite understand, though. Why do I need to keep my distance from Ayanokouji-kun? Whatever feelings I might have for him, there's nothing wrong with me treating him as a friend, right?"

"If you really can just leave things at friendship, then maybe this would be a different story. However, from what I have seen, I cannot imagine that you would be satisfied with that, Ichinose-san."

"You're free to interpret the situation however you like, but unless Ayanokouji-kun himself rejects me, I have absolutely no intention of changing my mind right now."

"It seems as though the erosion has already progressed considerably. You are on the verge of being controlled by him. Do you understand that if things continue like this, you will eventually destroy yourself?"

Ichinose laughed. "Ah ha ha ha! You say some funny stuff."

"I am sincerely worried about you," Sakayanagi insisted. "I cannot just watch as you jump into the depths, with no hope of salvation."

"You don't have to worry about me, Sakayanagi-san," Ichinose assured her. "I am not being controlled by Ayanokouji-kun."

Staring next to Ichinose, I saw a look on her face that I had never seen before. It almost made me think, *I didn't know that Ichinose could have such a hard look in her eyes.*

"Sakayanagi-san," she said. "I can see what you're thinking; it's almost transparent. You want to control me and use me for your own convenience, don't you? I think that's why you're trying to stop me like this."

"I see," Sakayanagi said. "I suppose it's not as though you couldn't interpret the situation that way."

"Also, there's one more thing. I think that the truth is that...Sakayanagi-san, you also have strong feelings for Ayanokouji-kun, as someone special to you, and so my presence has become a sore point... Right?"

Ichinose flashed a broad smile, and in response, Sakayanagi stopped dead in

her tracks for a moment. It was rare to see Sakayanagi so shaken, when until now, she had always stood in a position above Ichinose.

"It's certainly true that I see him as someone special, but not in the same way that you do," she replied.

Ichinose confronted Sakayanagi's denial head-on. "I'm not so sure about that. I think that you probably do, even if you don't realize it yourself."

"Very well. If you're so insistent, then I have nothing more to say. All I will tell you is that I cannot help you anymore, even if you come have regrets in the future," said Sakayanagi.

While Sakayanagi had given up on swaying Ichinose on this matter, hearing Ichinose's intentions probably hadn't increased Sakayanagi's feelings of caution toward her much. She probably just thought it would be cute for Ichinose to end up running wild as a result of her lovesickness, caught up in the blind faith that came with romantic feelings. But Ichinose's situation was beginning to change even more than expected. The goodness that she directed inward, toward her allies, was still as kind and gentle as it had always been, but the goodness she directed outward had undergone a drastic transformation into fierceness.

Ichinose's class, which had been sinking up until this point, had enough strength to give one a hunch that they'd launch a counterattack. I was sure that was what Sakayanagi must have intuitively sensed. Why would I think so, you ask? Because that's exactly what I had been thinking myself.

"My classmates are going to meet at Keyaki Mall later for a victory party. Is it all right if I head on back to the dormitory now?" asked Ichinose, probably because she was hoping to go back and change before meeting up with her class.

"Yes. It would be uncivil for me to keep you any longer," said Sakayanagi. "Please go ahead."

Sakayanagi proceeded to make way for Ichinose, who waved goodbye to me and headed off toward the dormitory. Sakayanagi and I were left standing there.

"I never imagined that I would come to re-evaluate Ichinose-san in this fashion," said Sakayanagi. I guessed that she hadn't been expecting this much of a change either. It was a side effect, or rather a byproduct of, the strong poison. "What a shame. Ichinose-san earns people's trust. She would have been an excellent pawn for me."

"Guess your scheme failed," I remarked.

In moving people around the board, I took a broad perspective and made my calculations, but there were areas that even I didn't understand yet. Namely, how the concept called love had the potential to affect even a person's power of reasoning and nature. In other words, it was conceivable that it could easily lead to unexpected developments. It was difficult to believe, but it certainly was a mysterious and transcendent feeling.

Was Ichinose Honami suited to be a leader or not? Was she a suitable adviser or not? Those questions were a different story. To begin with, Ichinose's specs were not low at all. And I remembered the brilliant way she handled herself in the Zodiac exam. In terms of individual hidden ability, she had enough potential to stand up to Horikita, Ryuuuen, and even Sakayanagi. Depending on the situation, she might unexpectedly end up surpassing them.

"I couldn't see that she had that kind of concealed ability," Sakayanagi said. "But it would be the same thing if I let myself be drowned by the power of love. I'm sure that the consequences will be tragic for her, though."

"And you thought you could stop it?" I asked.

"No. I never had any intention of stopping it, from the very beginning. The only difference is who breaks her."

Obviously, Sakayanagi had never thought of Ichinose as her ally. She would have used her as a convenient, expendable pawn, and then simply disposed of her once she had finished her role.

"Well then, Ayanokouji-kun," she said, "I too shall come visit your room in the near future."

That wording was very deliberate—Sakayanagi was showing me her hand, telling me that she did have information about Ichinose after all.

Chapter 8: A Tinge of Anxiety

THE CLOSING CEREMONY of the second semester had ended. The special exam was over, and the time that the students had been eagerly awaiting had come. It might not have been a long vacation like summer break, but it was still a joyous time for most of the students. Their hard work studying day and night had earned them the reward of victory over Class A in a direct showdown. Without a doubt, the winter vacation that was set to begin tomorrow was sure to be a series of fun-filled days.

Everyone in class thought so, except for one person. That sole exception was none other than Karuizawa Kei. She let out a melancholy sigh, having come to Keyaki Mall with her best friend, Satou Maya. Karuizawa had always been good at putting up a tough front, and she'd appeared calm and composed at school, even concentrating on her studies, after she had that fight with Ayanokouji. For that reason, the people around her had no way of knowing that she continued to agonize over what was going on.

Her best friend Satou was included among that number, but as someone who was a close observer of not only Karuizawa but also Ayanokouji, she had noticed that the two of them, who were normally always near each other, seemed to be awfully far apart lately. However, she didn't think that the cause was a fight. She could only imagine that they were deliberately keeping their distance from each other so that they could concentrate on their studies, and she didn't pursue the matter too deeply. Thus, they were brought to today.

Karuizawa sighed.

"You've been sighing nonstop lately," said Satou. "We finally finished studying, so things should be chill now. What's wrong?"

"Hm? H-huh? Have I? Nothing's wrong," Karuizawa protested.

She had been trying to avoid letting anyone notice what was going on up until this point, but she realized that she had been unwittingly sighing over and over

and over lately, perhaps because she had relaxed now that she was free from having to study and take exams, something that she wasn't good at dealing with.

"...Really?" asked Satou.

"Really, really."

Karuizawa answered confidently and acted the part, but Satou's suspicions weren't clearing up.

"This might be a dumb question, but aren't you going to make plans with Ayanokouji-kun today?" asked Satou.

"Huh?"

"Because, like, break starts tomorrow. You usually go out together and do stuff, right? I mean, Shinohara-san and Ike-kun looked so happy—they were arm in arm, talking about how they were gonna go see a movie and stuff."

Satou pointed out that it was strange for either of them to invite the other to hang out without planning it in advance. While, on one hand, Karuizawa felt that she had failed in keeping up the act, she had been acting the way she was because somewhere deep down in her heart, she wanted to come to Satou for advice. She responded with a small nod, and the two of them walked through the café, which was starting to get crowded. They sat down together on a bench near the rest area on the second floor of the mall.

"So, hey, um, Maya-chan," Karuizawa said. "I actually kind of wanted to talk to you about something..."

"Sure, I'm more than happy to listen." Far from sounding uncomfortable about this, Satou was enthusiastic, as though she had been waiting for it.

Karuizawa first made sure that no one else was around, just in case. Then, she let out the feelings that she had been keeping bottled up inside. "I think that maybe my and Kiyotaka's relationship might be in a little trouble..."

"W-wait, what? Seriously?!" Satou hadn't expected Karuizawa to drop such a bombshell on her, and was startled to the point of practically falling over. It didn't seem like she was overreacting on purpose, though, and she cleared her

thoughts as she regained her original posture.

"Relationship trouble, huh...? Are you saying you might break up?" she asked.

"I don't want to think so, but...but... Lately, I can't help but think yeah, maybe."

The look on Karuizawa's face was far more serious than Satou had expected, and Satou couldn't hide how shaken she was, choking back her words. Even so, she wisely tried to come up with something to say that wouldn't make the atmosphere even heavier.

"So, Kei-chan. You and Ayanokouji-kun had a fight. But you haven't made up, and this thing has dragged on for a long time now. What I'm wondering is, was it just that bad of a fight or something?"

If it had just been a trivial little quarrel, even if it was dragged out, their relationship could've gotten back to normal in just a couple of hours at most. Karuizawa's expression was grave, though. Satou couldn't hide how puzzled she felt, since she had always thought that the two had gotten along well ever since they started dating.

Karuizawa let out a despondent sigh and nodded quietly. "I thought it was a small fight, but maybe that's not true for Kiyotaka."

"Have you two talked at all since the fight?" asked Satou.

Karuizawa told her that the fight hadn't happened just yesterday or today. However, she still wasn't making any mention of things like the cause, perhaps because she didn't feel ready to talk about it.

"I mean, it's winter break already, right?" Karuizawa said. "And on top of that, I worked really hard on studying because Kiyotaka told me to do my best, and I got three out of four questions right on the exam. So, I thought, okay, I can do this, this will work... And then yesterday, after the exam, I made up my mind and tried my hardest to go talk to him, but..."

"But? And then what?" asked Satou.

"Horikita-san came over. Nagumo-senpai was asking for them, and they left. I was going to try again to talk to him today, after the closing ceremony, but then

Horikita-san ended up talking to him again..."

Satou couldn't help but hold her hand to her forehead after hearing how Karuizawa had repeatedly suffered the worst timing.

"So, in the end, you couldn't talk to him at all, and that brings us to now," she concluded.

"Yeah," said Karuizawa.

"But it hasn't looked like Ayanokouji-kun's been mad, or sulking, or anything."

"That's because he's always expressionless. He never acts any different."

That fact had also clouded Karuizawa's judgment on the matter. She thought back on it; if he had shown obvious anger, an apology could have come earlier.

"I hope you don't mind me asking this, because I don't mean anything bad by it, but do you fight a lot?" asked Satou.

The word "fight" popped up regularly among girls who were particularly excited to talk about romantic love, and fighting in itself wasn't uncommon. Moreover, in most cases, it wasn't really something that could even be called a fight at all—more like a minor issue that made things turn awkward, or something like that. Satou wanted to see if there were any other instances that could be classified as fights first, but she hadn't been able to broach the topic right away.

"I mean, by 'fight,' it's like, you know, everyone has fights. I can't imagine Ayanokouji-kun getting angry at all, but...was he angry then?" she asked timidly.

Karuizawa immediately shook her head from side to side. "I'm the one who was mad."

"Oh, okay, I see," said Satou. She wondered if she was about to hear an unexpected side to the story, but quickly dismissed the thought. "So, you're saying that you're the only one who's mad, then, Kei-chan? That's the situation?"

If that was the case, then recovering from the fight would be simple. If Karuizawa forgave Ayanokouji with a smile, Satou thought, then things would go back to normal.

"Well... Not exactly..." said Karuizawa.

"If you don't mind talking about it, could you maybe...tell me, like, what the fight was about, exactly?"

Satou wouldn't be able to understand the issue more deeply without knowing what happened. Karuizawa trusted that Satou was really listening to her, and decided to tell her how it started. It had happened one Saturday night, when she invited Ayanokouji to go out shopping for a Christmas present. When she found out that he was going to spend the day with Ichinose instead, she got seriously ticked off. She couldn't believe for one second that there was some secret reason for him doing so. After Satou heard the whole story, from beginning to end, she quietly closed her eyes. Then, she forcefully slapped both her knees with her palms.

"I see... Okay, so Ayanokouji-kun is definitely the one in the wrong!" she declared with confidence. That was the opinion of a pure girl who didn't show any consideration for the other person's feelings or circumstances.

"I-I know, right?!" cried Karuizawa. Her facial expression had a little of its sunny brightness back, now that she had an ally on her side.

"You're darn right. He's got a girlfriend! No matter what the circumstances are, he and Ichinose going out alone together is totally not okay! You should absolutely have said no to that! Or, at the very least, you should have made him take you with him, Kei-chan! Or have some other guys or girls around!"

It was no wonder that Satou was so angry. On the contrary, it was a case where she should have been angry.

"I mean, he just met up with Ichinose-san, and he wasn't shy about it at all... And on top of that, he wouldn't even tell me what they were doing..." said Karuizawa.

How anxious and worried had Karuizawa been from when she heard about Ayanokouji going out with Ichinose until today? Regardless, she had poured herself into studying, just as she was instructed to do, and persevered until today.

"So, um, Ichinose-san... She's not going out with anybody, is she?" asked

Karuizawa.

That was an uncertainty that Karuizawa couldn't deal with herself. "Anybody." By "anybody," she wasn't referring to Ayanokouji. It was a word uttered from Karuizawa's desire to escape from this, her hope that there was some *other* guy out there that Ichinose was with.

"...I don't think I've heard anything," Satou replied. "She's pretty popular at our school, so I think we'd find out right away if she started going out with somebody... Y'know?"

"...Yeah, you're right." After confirming the fact that Ichinose wasn't with anyone once again, Karuizawa lowered her eyes, downcast.

"Ugh...!" Unable to deal with it anymore, Satou hugged Karuizawa.

"Wh—Maya-chan?!"

"You didn't do anything wrong, Kei-chan!"

"...Thank you. But I know I have my share of fault, too. I should really have listened to him more honestly and understood him. If I did, then...it wouldn't have turned into a fight."

She should just have responded with a smile, said, "*Okay, let's go shopping for a Christmas present next week,*" and grabbed him by the arm. She looked back in regret. If she could go back in time, she thought, that's definitely what she'd do instead.

From Satou's point of view, Karuizawa Kei was cute. In terms of pure looks, she was a girl who stood at the top. When they had first started school, there were times when Satou disliked her deep down, thinking that Karuizawa was a loose girl who cozied up to Hirata, that she was domineering and heavy-handed, and that she had a nasty personality, and was the sort of person who wanted to assert dominance over other people.

However, having come to like that same person, and having opened up to her, Satou understood. She had come to feel instead that this girl just put up a strong front, and that she had a charming personality, despite appearances. Satou could confidently say that even if other girls tried to go for Ayanokouji, there was usually no way that Karuizawa would lose. However, it was a

different story when her opponent was Ichinose Honami, of all people. If Ichinose did take a liking to Ayanokouji, then she couldn't eliminate the possibility that Ayanokouji would switch from Karuizawa to Ichinose.

"Hey... Do you maybe want to do a little investigating?" Satou asked. "You know, talk to people in Ichinose-san's class."

It was possible that they'd see something they were afraid of, or didn't want to see, but if this sort of thing were to happen again even after Karuizawa made up with Ayanokouji, she'd go through the worry and anxiety all over again. If they found out that Ichinose had absolutely no desire to be with him, though, then in that case...

"Yes, plea... A-actually, no, let's not."

Regardless, Karuizawa's anxiety won out, and she declined Satou's offer.

Then, as if to shake off these unpleasant feelings, Karuizawa quickly stood up.

"Okay," she decided. "I'm going to try and not think about this anymore. I'm going to have lots of fun with you starting now, Maya-chan, and I'll go see Kiyotaka tonight. Then we will definitely, absolutely, positively make up!"

"That's the spirit! I've got your back, girl!"

The two of them shared a laugh together, but a moment later, the phone in Karuizawa's hand vibrated. Karuizawa, thinking for a moment that it was Ayanokouji, overeagerly opened the chat app on her phone.

"Huh—?"

"What's up?" asked Satou.

Karuizawa stood completely still, looking at her phone's screen, her facial expression frozen. Satou immediately looked over at her with concern.



"Kei-chan?" she asked.

Even when Satou tried calling to her again, Karuizawa just continued to stare at the screen, not budging an inch, as though time itself had stopped. Satou, wondering what was going on, stole a glance at Karuizawa's screen from the side.

"Wh..."

When Satou saw the picture that was displayed on the screen, she stiffened up, just like Karuizawa.

"Wh-who is this from?" asked Satou.

"...Nene-chan..."

The reason Karuizawa had frozen was clear. The two people shown in the picture attached to the text message that Mori Nene had sent in chat were the very same twosome that Karuizawa and Satou were just talking about. The picture showed Ayanokouji and Ichinose talking as they left the gym. The very same gym that Karuizawa and Satou could see the entrance to, right in front of the bench they were at right now.

"Wh-when was this picture taken?" asked Satou.

"...I'll try asking." Karuizawa, flustered, hurriedly sent a message in chat back to Mori to confirm, and found out that the picture had been taken the evening of the day before yesterday. That was when Karuizawa and the other students had been studying with Horikita for the final home stretch.

"Why w—"

"M-maybe it's just like, they happened to be there together at the same time...? S-something like that?" said Satou, frantically trying to calm her down. But the two had obviously just come out of the gym together in the picture.

"Does Ayanokouji-kun go to the gym?" asked Satou.

"I don't know..." said Karuizawa.

"Hello, Karuizawa-san."

"Wha—?!"

Just then, almost as if to further destabilize Karuizawa's emotional and mental state, Ichinose appeared in front of the gym and called out to her. Ichinose must have briefly headed back to her room and changed, because she was in her casual clothes.

"Oh? Did you come here to go to the gym, by any chance?" Ichinose asked.

"No, it's not like... I mean, we just happened to be here... Right?" said Karuizawa.

"Y-yeah, right." Getting on Karuizawa's wavelength, Satou nodded over and over, and followed up by telling Ichinose that they had just been taking a breather on the bench.

"Oh, I see. I thought for sure you and Ayanokouji-kun had started going to the gym together or something." Ichinose responded with an innocent smile, as if it were only natural that she knew about Ayanokouji going to the gym.

"Huh?" said Karuizawa.

"Hm? What's the matter?" asked Ichinose.

"...You knew that Kiyotaka went to the gym, Ichinose-san," said Karuizawa. She turned off the screen and put her phone away in her pocket.

"Well, sure, I knew, but I guess it's more like I only found out just recently," Ichinose said. "I talked to Ayanokouji-kun about the gym, and we went together so he could try it, and he seemed to like it. So, he decided to start going."

"Oh, I see..." Karuizawa muttered in a voice so quiet that it sounded like it would disappear.

"Ichinose-san, are you going to the gym now?" asked Satou.

"Oh, actually, my class won in the special exam, so everyone wanted to do something to celebrate. We're planning to meet up in the café, but I forgot something at the gym when I went the other day, so I just thought I'd swing by and get it on the way," said Ichinose, with a friendly smile.

"Hey, Ichinose-san. Is it true that you met up with Ayanokouji-kun the other day?" asked Satou. If Karuizawa couldn't ask, she figured she had no choice but to do it herself, so she boldly came right out with it.

"Huh?"

"Ichinose-san... There's nothing between you and Ayanokouji-kun, right?" Satou pressed.

"Oh no, there's not. There's nothing going on between me and Ayanokouji-kun," replied Ichinose with a gentle wave of her hands, as if she were saying, "*Oh no, absolutely not.*"

"...Really?" Satou's suspicions weren't cleared away, and she demonstrated an even more aggressive attitude, pushing harder. Karuizawa tried to stop her by tugging on her sleeve, but her resistance was too strong.

"Yes, really," said Ichinose. "I wouldn't lie about something like that. At that time, I was just asking Ayanokouji-kun for advice about a class matter, that's all... Did that lead to some kind of misunderstanding, perhaps?" Ichinose was bewildered in the face of Satou's glaring eyes and the anxious Karuizawa. "I'd been thinking that you probably wouldn't like that we had met and talked... I'm sorry."

With a sincerely apologetic look on her face, Ichinose bowed her head. Upon seeing this, Karuizawa got the courage to vocalize the thoughts she hadn't been able to say aloud.

"...Was it about the thing with Kanzaki-kun?" she asked.

Kanzaki's name casually fell from Karuizawa's lips. Ichinose didn't have any idea what she was talking about exactly, but she could deduce what the situation was just from hearing that much.

"Yes. It was because our class fell to Class D, and we couldn't afford to mess up anymore," Ichinose explained. "We didn't have the strength to build ourselves back up, and we were struggling. Ayanokouji-kun couldn't just stand by and watch that happen, and said he'd do something, so he decided to help us. I'm guessing you might've heard him mention Mako-chan's name too, or some others?"

"By Mako-chan, you mean Amikura-san, right?" said Karuizawa. "I don't recall hearing her name, but...I think I heard him mention Himeno-san."

"Yes, her too. Himeno-san is helping to rebuild the class as well. We're

discussing it together. Oh, other people know about this already too, so don't worry." Seeing that it didn't seem like Karuizawa had a deep knowledge of the situation, Ichinose told her that to put her at ease.

"But... I don't understand why Kiyotaka is helping your class, Ichinose-san," said Karuizawa.

"Yeah, for sure," Satou agreed. "There's gotta be some weird reason for it..."

Still unable to clear their suspicions, Satou and Karuizawa exchanged looks with one another. Upon hearing this, Ichinose nodded and then closed her eyes for a moment.

"Mutual interests," she said.

"Mutal...interests?" repeated Karuizawa.

"We've been suffering lately because we've been lacking in wins. And we were entering this special exam at the end of the second semester while still in that state of repeated failure. We were going up against Ryuuen-kun, and if we lost, the gap between us and Class A would widen even more, so we were really in a pickle. I think Ayanokouji-kun thought that it would be more convenient to have Ryuuen-kun's class lose to us, rather than the other way around, considering that we're at the very bottom of the rankings and Ryuuen-kun's class is currently vying for second place so strongly."

The answer Ichinose gave was the most satisfactory explanation possible as to why Ayanokouji had supported Ichinose and her classmates, a rival class. Ichinose emphasized that Ayanokouji was a helper who was only providing support temporarily so that they could defeat an even stronger rival.

"So, it's really true that...and I mean, like, really, *really* true, that...there's nothing going on with you and Kiyotaka, right?" said Karuizawa.

"We have done absolutely nothing to feel guilty about. We don't have that kind of relationship." Ichinose looked Karuizawa straight in the eye and stated with the utmost clarity that there was nothing suspicious going on between her and Ayanokouji. Considering Ichinose's behavior, they couldn't imagine that she could be lying, and so Karuizawa and Satou could only nod their heads repeatedly.

"I do think it was a bit of a no-no on Ayanokouji-kun's part too," Ichinose added, "not communicating and coming to a proper understanding with his girlfriend, someone precious to him. But if I'm the one who caused a rift between you two, then I will take responsibility for it and help make things right, if you want me to help as a go-between."

"Th-that's okay, don't worry about it," Karuizawa said. "I understand what's going on, and I think we can patch things up today! Really, thank you for talking this out, Ichinose-san."

"Oh no, it's no big deal. No need to thank me. If you ever have anything bothering you again, you can give me a shout," said Ichinose warmly.



Having conveyed this message in a kind manner, Ichinose watched Satou and Karuizawa go as they walked away from the gym.

"Rest assured, Karuizawa-san, it's the truth," she said in such a quiet voice that Karuizawa and Satou couldn't hear it. "There's really nothing going on between me and Ayanokouji-kun right now."

Then, softly, she added, "Not yet."

Ichinose started to walk away with strong, confident strides, leaving the scent of the perfume she wore hanging in the air behind her.

8.1

IT WAS THE FIRST DAY of winter vacation. The sky was covered with thick clouds, and it had been drizzling rain since morning. About ten minutes after the scheduled time, Ryuuен showed up to meet the person he was seeing, umbrella in hand. Ichinose, who had already been waiting for a while, quietly looked at Ryuuен's face. Before long, he stopped, and they naturally stood close enough that they could each hear each other speak, even over the sound of the falling rain.

"We've been having this kind of weather a lot lately, huh?" Ichinose didn't question Ryuuен over having showed up late.

"You ain't gonna bitch about me bein' late? You okay with that?"

"I don't mind. I set aside thirty minutes in preparation to meet with you, Ryuuен-kun. I planned to leave without hesitation if you didn't show up after thirty minutes had passed, though." Ichinose answered Ryuuен's question with a relaxed, confident attitude, seemingly more concerned about the weather than about him. She tilted her umbrella and looked up at the rainy sky for a moment. "It doesn't seem like it's going to let up at all for the rest of the day."

"How good-natured can ya get, goin' out of your way to answer when I call?" replied Ryuuен, ignoring Ichinose's mutterings.

"Well, I'm not sure if you'd believe it if I said it's because we're friends, but I think it's normal to respond when someone calls for you," she said. "I didn't have any plans for now yet anyway. So, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"I wanted to talk to you because my plans got kinda messed up. I wanted to find out why."

"Oh, you mean for the special exam? Yes, we were a little bewildered over the harassment, I think."

"I thought that doin' the same thing as before would be boring, but it's what the pawns I've got are good at. If it's the easiest and most effective method, why not use it again, right?"

Ryuuen had ordered his classmates to relentlessly put pressure on Ichinose's classmates, and to sabotage them. They would aggressively barge in and cause a disturbance wherever students from Ichinose's class gathered for study sessions, like in the classroom, library, and even at karaoke.

Unbeknownst to Ayanokouji and others, Ryuuen had issued other orders as well—dangerous ones. Ryuuen had offered money to students in Ichinose's class who had a high level of Academic Ability, saying that he'd give them a reward if they got all their questions wrong. He also made threats, telling some of her classmates that if they got all their questions correct, some of their friends would be in trouble. His strategy was based on the idea that if Ichinose's class was weakened, then no matter how tightly knit they were, he'd be able to open holes in their class.

"It's certainly true that everyone was really bothered by what happened," said Ichinose.

"I bet," said Ryuuen.

However, his plans hadn't resulted in any considerable damage. His chances of victory would have been slim even if he'd tried going for a frontal attack, because it was a competition based on academics, and there was a wide gap between their classes to begin with. It was precisely because he understood that fact that Ryuuen had produced the plan to try and take them down outside of the test.

"But did you really think that you could win that way?" Ichinose asked.

"Yeah, I did," replied Ryuuен.

However, as it turned out, none of Ryuuен's strategies worked on Ichinose and her classmates.

"I came here to give you some honest commendation for what you did this time, Ichinose," he said. "I figured a class like yours would've crumbled after somethin' like that, but I guess you've grown at least a little since your first year, eh?"

The reports that had come in from Ishizaki and Ryuuен's other followers had all asserted that their acts of sabotage against Ichinose's class had been successful. Although none of the students in Ichinose's class had given in to the temptation of Ryuuен's offers of money, or even to the threats, Ryuuен had felt a certain level of effectiveness from how upset and shaken he saw the students were. However, the students in Ichinose's class were only acting troubled on the outside. Behind the scenes, they were slowly but surely making time and finding opportunities to study, while at the same time deliberately acting as though they were frightened of Ryuuен's threats.

"Did someone put those ideas in your head?" Ryuuен demanded. "If we were talkin' about the past you, I pretty much would've expected you to just call off the study groups right off and shut yourself away, instead of wastin' your time and effort. Or you would have rejected the threats outright, in the open. I can't believe that you'd deliberately go on pretendin' that my strategy was workin' on you."

If Ryuuен had been going up against Sakayanagi or Ayanokouji, something like this probably wouldn't have surprised him. If anything, he would have considered making an even stronger, more intense move as a natural countermeasure.

A cornered rat will bite a cat. This was a counterattack from the weak after getting pushed against a wall, huh? Ryuuен had wanted to confirm if that was really true, so he called Ichinose to meet him here to confirm directly, face-to-face.

"No one gave me any suggestions, Ryuuен-kun," Ichinose told him. "We just

decided to keep on studying through all the pain and suffering, all the noise. The threatening words really did scare everyone, truly. We just happened not to break down under them.”

“Ain’t no need for modesty here,” Ryuuuen scoffed. “Obviously, somethin’ must have changed in your class.”

“That wasn’t the direct cause of your defeat, though,” she replied. “Ryuuuen-kun, you and your classmates should have prepared for the exam seriously, just like we did, and the other classes did. Study hard and score points. Just like how Horikita-san and her classmates beat Sakayanagi-san and her class.”

“You’re just talkin’ big because you scored a win in an exam where you had the advantage, ain’t ya? Well, this special exam was the most lukewarm I’ve seen, completely dull. No risk of anybody gettin’ expelled. All ya had to do was get a firm grip on your pen and move your arm around. There wasn’t nearly enough excitement for me to get serious about it.”

“You couldn’t have done it in the normal way, like everyone else did?”

“No, ’cause one or two weeks of teachin’ those friggin’ idiots wasn’t gonna create that much of an improvement. It’d be hopeless. I decided it was easier and faster to just kick the shit out of my opponent.” Ryuuuen laughed as he looked at Ichinose, standing out there under the pouring rain.

“But that decision was a mistake, wasn’t it?” said Ichinose.

“We happened to get beat by drones whose only strong point is all being honest and serious. That just means that, next time, I gotta sabotage ya even more spectacularly.”

“Are you saying that, even if we have the same kind of special exam all over again, you don’t intend to change your approach?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I ain’t changin’ it. I’ll sink ya outside the exam.” Ryuuuen answered brashly, unashamedly; yes, that was his way of doing things.

“I see. It seems like we’re not going to be able to see eye to eye, even if I try saying anything more.”

“You temporarily squeaked your way back into Class C,” he growled. “But

don't go thinkin' this is gonna help you win again. You're a pathetic little sheep who's been sinkin' into the swamp for a long, long time. No matter how much you struggle down there in the mud—no, wait, no matter how much you frantically, pointlessly squirm—in the end, you're just gonna sink. Ain't that right?"

"It is true that I've been on a losing streak for a long while now," said Ichinose. "That's painfully true, so what you said sure hits home."

"I'll just say it again—the only thing that saved you this time was the special exam rules."

"I won't deny that."

Ryuuен was snapping at Ichinose relentlessly, forcefully, persistently, jumping down her throat, and that was his agenda. That was because he thought that he could see through Ichinose, see what she was thinking, by laying into her like this. However, he couldn't. The opening that Ichinose would probably have shown in the past wasn't appearing at all.

"The class that you're goin' up against in the final exam is Ayanokouji's," he continued. "That class is a pain in the ass, ya know? Even more than the class I'm plannin' to crush into dust, Sakayanagi's. Your defeat is inevitable. And it ain't just me who thinks so. I'm sure that Sakayanagi chick thinks the same thing—you're gonna be finished by the end of this school year, Ichinose."

Picking up the win this time means nothing. Ryuuен wanted her to think that, and was putting on the pressure, trying to convince Ichinose not to get her hopes up. But she didn't answer immediately. She simply stood still and listened to everything Ryuuен had to say. He ignored her lack of response and kept relentlessly attacking Ichinose, continuing to push and push.

"It'll be a piece of cake for Ayanokouji and the rest of his class," he added. "They get to fight a buncha small fry and earn a buncha Class Points without having to deal with me or Sakayanagi. They couldn't possibly be any luckier."

"That's true," Ichinose agreed. "If our class loses in the final exam this year, we might very well be finished."

If the gap between Ichinose's class and the others got even wider than it was

now as a result of direct confrontation between her class and Horikita's, it would be nearly impossible for her to recover from that over the course of one more year.

"In that case, I'll teach ya how to graduate from Class A," said Ryuuen.

"Is there a way to do so?" asked Ichinose.

"The final exam this year is gonna cut off your path to Class A. When that happens, the only way for you to graduate from Class A is to collect Private Points."

"It would take an exorbitant amount of money to be able to save forty people, though. I don't think it's possible."

"You can't save everyone," Ryuuen scoffed. "But what about one person? In that case, all ya need is twenty million points. You have the ability to collect money from the people in yer class, out of goodwill. People in your class trust you—they'd let you hold on to a million or two million points from each of 'em, for safekeeping. And then all you gotta do is use that money for yourself."

"Using money entrusted to me by everyone in class to do something like transferring to another class would be misappropriation of funds," Ichinose replied. "The school wouldn't allow it."

"You sure about that? Sure, if somebody like me or Sakayanagi did that, then, yeah, we'd get punished. We'd probably get expelled, no question. But for someone like you, the chances of that happening are slim."

"Why's that?" asked Ichinose.

"Cause the people in your class are a bunch of good-natured softies! They're easy marks, they'll take pity on you, they'll try to take your feelings into consideration. Even if they find out you misappropriated funds or whatever, they'd probably tell the school, 'Well, that was money we gave her ourselves.' If nobody files a complaint about it, then it's not really embezzlement or whatever. Can't say it's a hundred percent ironclad, but it's a good enough option to bet on for getting to Class A."

"That's an interesting strategy. But I think I've heard enough." Once Ichinose guessed what the reason was for Ryuuen inviting her out, she no longer had any

reason to stay. “I think it’s about time we go about our days, don’t you?”

“I was only plannin’ on playing with Sakayanagi and Horikita from this point on, but if there’s a fight down the road where expulsion is possible, your class will be a target too,” Ryuuen snapped. “I’ll erase your friends, who you’ve worked so desperately hard to protect, as I see fit.”

Ryuuen was half bluffing. He still didn’t perceive Ichinose as an obstacle. What he said was a threat mixed with a warning, meant to keep her in check and quiet. Ichinose, having listened to his threat head-on, smiled back at him.

“In that case, I’ll just have to stop you before then,” she replied. “And if necessary, I’ll just have to get you expelled, Ryuuen-kun.”

“Heh heh. You think you can make me—scratch that, not just me. You think you can make *anybody* disappear?”

Ichinose was a genuinely good-natured person who absolutely, positively hated it when other people got hurt. That had been the general impression that not only Ryuuen had had of her these past two years, but everyone around them, too.

“Heh. Guess it means you’ve improved a little, if yer able to toss out such a blatant lie.”

“You’re being rather chatty with me today, aren’t you?” Ichinose said. “I wonder what it is that you and Sakayanagi-san feel that’s making you so wary of me, Ryuuen-kun. As you said yourself, I have my back against the wall now. I’m not the sort of person you really need to be worried about.”

Thick clouds covered the sky up above, and the sound of the rain intensified. Before long, Ryuuen’s smile disappeared, and he was lost in thought over Ichinose’s words. *This chick in front of me ain’t worth seein’ as an obstacle.* That’s how he thought he should be treating her. However, when he reflected on it calmly, he realized that he actually *had* been awfully fixated on her.

“Going forward, I won’t go easy on any opponent, no matter who they are,” Ichinose told him. “I intend to do whatever it takes to win.”

“Even if you try and act all tough like that, that sort of declaration don’t sound like you at all,” jeered Ryuuen.

"I just realized that I don't have the time to worry about that kind of thing anymore," Ichinose replied. "That's really all there is to it."

Those rash thoughts quietly receded from Ryuuuen's mind.

"Yer not gonna go easy on anybody, huh?" he said. "Y'know, sure seems like you've been real attached to Ayanokouji lately. If that's true, then the first person you should be gettin' rid of is Karuizawa, huh?"

He was merely joking by saying that. It was an act of harassment to try and rile Ichinose up mentally and emotionally. That was the extent of his remark, but the gentle smile on Ichinose's face didn't change.

"Attached?" she asked.

"Word travels fast in a small school like this," said Ryuuuen.

Through his own information gathering, he was already aware that Ichinose and Ayanokouji had been having more contact. He was convinced, though only speculatively, of Ichinose's one-sided feelings as well.

"Why don't you try and make a move in a more calculating way, without tryin' to be so considerate?" he pressed. "Y'know, if you want, I can help you get rid of Karuizawa."

Impatience, anger, frustration, disgust. Whatever feeling you got, show it to me! That was the intention behind Ryuuuen's attempt to agitate her.

"Sounds like even you know about it too now, Ryuuuen-kun. Guess there's no need for me to hide it." Ichinose still had a thin smile on her lips, and she answered Ryuuuen without hesitation, looking him straight in the eyes. "I wouldn't want to expel Karuizawa-san because of my personal feelings. That would be wrong."

So, even though she's puttin' up a tough front, in the end, she's still a good-natured softie, huh? Ryuuuen tried to reassure himself. But just then...

"But you're misunderstanding something, Ryuuuen-kun. I am a calculating-enough person." Ichinose placed her hand on her chest and smiled. "If there's a problem you can't solve, just think about it. Just think about it, and come up with an answer. If you still can't find an answer after that, then try something."

Do that, and usually, a way will open up.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Ryuuен.

“Hmm,” said Ichinose. “I have to wonder.”

Ichinose thought about that night on the school trip. From that moment onward, within herself, her destiny had begun to change. A slight possibility. No, it was a result brought about by instinct, which did not even consider possibility. That time at night when everyone was inside the inn. The howling blizzard. A vanished self. How would her classmates have responded—what would have happened if it developed into a commotion? What Ayanokouji had discovered for her wasn’t especially surprising at all. At that time, in that moment, everything was inevitable.

As Ryuuен stood there, holding his umbrella, a bad feeling started from his hand and then coiled around his entire body.

“I think that’s enough,” Ichinose told him. “I’m going to the gym now. I don’t want to waste even one second of happy times, after all.”

The feeling Ryuuен was experiencing was the analysis he’d had of Ichinose all this time, all of it, being negated. Ichinose no longer had any interest in Ryuuен whatsoever. She walked by, right past Ryuuен, and headed toward Keyaki Mall.

“I take back what I said earlier, Ichinose.” Ryuuен turned around, speaking to Ichinose’s back. “It might be lucky for us that we’re not facing you in the final exam at the end of the year.”

That was one hunch he had. Those words were a sign of respect from him, born from the fact that he had been made to feel, if just for a moment, that Ichinose was going to be more difficult to face than even Sakayanagi.

Postscript

THE NEW YEAR, 2023, is here! Happy New Year! It's Kinugasa. I sincerely hope this year is a good one for you, too. Last year was certainly hectic, with lots of things happening that kept me busy, and the second season of the anime. With the third season in the works for this year, I hope that 2023 is even going to be a little exciting.

On a personal note, I've come up with a routine for my weekday activities lately, where I choose one café out of about three or so potential candidates in the morning and head over there. I don't get enough exercise working at my desk, so I walk or bike there. I stay out until just before noon, racking my brain, trying to come up with ideas, hemming and hawing, and then return home. I hole up in my workplace until night, and then go to sleep. I repeat this process five times a week, over and over and over.

On my days off, I spend half the day working, and the other half of the day playing with my kids. Weekdays pass by in the blink of an eye, but weekends feel about three times longer, which is tough... But surprisingly, I seem to come up with more interesting ideas at times like that.

One problem I've been having recently is that once I catch a cold, it seems to take a long time before it goes away. I've had a cough and a runny nose since before Christmas, and I can't seem to get rid of them. I'm still not seeing any sign of them going away yet, since both over-the-counter drugs and treatments from the hospital have only been partially effective in dealing with them... The cough is especially bad. When I get into a bad coughing fit while out at the supermarket or shopping or whatever, even though I'm wearing a mask, I still feel so embarrassed and sorry for everyone else. Get warm outside already, and let me be healthy, dang it!

Now, getting to talking about the main story. With this issue, Volume 9, the long second-semester story has come to an end. I would like to offer sincere thanks to those of you who have stuck with me until now. I would be very grateful if you would continue to stick with me, even if it's just from force of

habit.

Ayanokouji, and the rest of the characters too, are now preparing for their third semester and looking ahead to the third year. I humbly ask that you please understand in advance that the third semester story may be a little crueler and more rigorous than the second semester in terms of content.

In keeping with what's been done in the past, the next volume will be a winter-vacation story. Considering that, for the time being, moments of comfort may become fewer, the gentle (probably) winter-vacation volume may be a worthwhile story. Though we're parting again for a short while, I sincerely look forward to meeting once more before the summer.



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

[Sign up for our newsletter!](#)

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter