

NOVEL

9.5

# CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

STORY: SYOUGO  
KINUGASA  
ART: TOMOSE SHUNSAKU

YEAR 2



# **Table of Contents**

[Character Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 1: Irreplaceable Today](#)

[Chapter 2: Song of Loneliness](#)

[Chapter 3: Just A Hunch](#)

[Chapter 4: Casing Each Other Out](#)

[Chapter 5: Signs of Quiet](#)

[Chapter 6: Remaining Time](#)

[Chapter 7: Changing Relationships](#)

[Postscript](#)

[Newsletter](#)



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*"Now is good.  
No one's watching."*

**She must have been  
constantly checking  
our surroundings and  
determined this moment  
would be the perfect  
time. At that moment,  
Ichinose wrapped her  
arm around mine and  
snapped a photo.**

*"I'm not going to keep the  
first one saved on my phone.  
Do you mind?"*



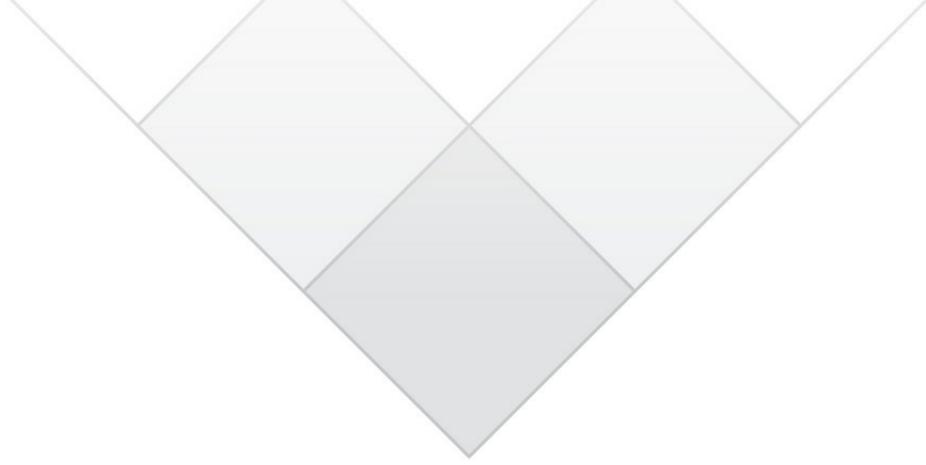






9.5

WELCOME TO THE CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2



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YEAR 2

NOVEL 9.5

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STORY BY

*Syougo Kinugasa*

ART BY

*Tomoseshunsaku*



*Seven Seas Entertainment*



YOUKOSO JITSURYOKUSHIJOUSHUGI NO KYOUSHITSU E 2NENSEIHEN  
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**TRANSLATION:** Timothy MacKenzie

**ADAPTATION:** Lorin Christie

**COVER DESIGN:** Nicky Lim

**INTERIOR DESIGN:** Clay Gardner

**INTERIOR LAYOUT:** M. A. Lewife

**COPY EDITOR:** Meg van Huygen

**EDITOR:** Harry Catlin

**PREPRESS TECHNICIAN:** Jules Valera

**MANAGING EDITOR:** Alyssa Scavetta

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF:** Julie Davis

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**VICE PRESIDENT:** Adam Arnold

**PRESIDENT:** Jason DeAngelis

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# CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

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## CONTENTS

- 1. IRREPLACEABLE TODAY
- 2. SONG OF LONELINESS
- 3. JUST A HUNCH
- 4. CASING EACH OTHER OUT
- 5. SIGNS OF QUIET
- 6. REMAINING TIME
- 7. CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS
- POSTSCRIPT



## **Chapter 1: Irreplaceable Today**

**O**UR SECOND YEAR. Our second winter vacation at Advanced Nurturing High School had just begun. I didn't need to do anything special. But even still, I wanted a normal holiday, like any other student has. Something I could hold on to.

The time I had remaining was quietly but assuredly dwindling, but I wasn't in a hurry. Even if my free time ended today, that'd be enough to satisfy me.

Friends.

Lovers.

Senpai and kouhai.

Our encounters.

I was at this school with so many kinds of people, all spending our days together. It was a fierce game stretching into overtime. All there was to do was spend every possible second as a student, as much as we were allowed to do.

And then, eventually, the day would come.

Parting.

Today wasn't promised to us; it wasn't ordinary or unremarkable. Neither was tomorrow. We needed to understand that every single day was irreplaceable—an irreplaceable today.

## Chapter 2: Song of Loneliness

DECEMBER 24: the first day of winter vacation. When I woke up that morning, I felt a little strange.

"...I had a weird dream," I muttered, as I slowly propped myself up in bed by my elbow.

I had been sweating in my sleep, though only a little. Normally, I didn't really recall what I'd dreamed about when I woke up. Whether they were good dreams or bad dreams, dreams were just that: dreams. They melted away no matter how real they felt at the time, and that was kind of true for everyone. That was the kind of creature humans were. I wouldn't be surprised if there were exceptions to that out there in the world, but when it came to this, I was typical. Even if I remembered something about them right after I woke up, the memory would slip away in an instant.

"...Was, like, the homeroom instructor a bunny girl...?"

Even as I tried to resist remembering it, it was futile to fight it. I'm sure that if a third party had heard what I just said, they probably would've cocked their head in confusion. *What was that about rabbits?* Anyway, I figured that any further attempt to dig deeper into what the dream was about would be a wasted effort.

I let the dream go. Since we didn't have class today, I took my time getting ready in the morning, letting the time crawl slowly by. There were matching toothbrushes and cups in assorted colors lined up on the washbasin. Even with the distance right now between me and Kei, who I'd been dating for quite a long time, life was getting back to normal. It didn't mean anything had changed between us. There was something of a cold war between us lately, as lovers, one that had been brought about due to a disagreement.

There hadn't been any emotional change on my part whatsoever as a result of this event. Of course, I'd instigated it. But I had wondered, if this had happened unexpectedly—if I hadn't caused it myself—would I have been able to really grab hold of this uneasy feeling I'd been reaching for?

"...I wonder."

Ultimately, emotional changes were rooted in how indispensable the other party was to you. Without that, why feel anything? Hypothetically, if there was a situation where one's life were in jeopardy, there wouldn't be any need to hesitate to even hurt or abandon a lover if necessary, without a second's thought. Naturally, the reverse was also true. The other party was entitled to do the same. However, I believed that I had a duty as a significant other, separate from emotion. If people were sharing their time together, if that time was made uncomfortable, it was their joint responsibility.

Furthermore, since this was the most precious time of our lives, we should strive to make it happy, rather than unhappy. Of course, this was an idea based on the morality of human society, or similar. It wasn't a good idea for me to keep subjecting people to my experiments forever, continuing to burden them with mental and emotional anxiety and stress. However, I hadn't set this cold war in motion lightly—I had an idea in mind.

The plan had been for us to go shopping for a Christmas present, which we had promised to do before our relationship had deteriorated. It was a standing appointment, as it hadn't been explicitly crossed out. Originally, the date we'd planned for today was supposed to start this morning. Apparently, it was raining outside, the poor weather continuing from before winter vacation started. It was a little unfortunate, but we couldn't expect clear skies for Christmas tomorrow, either, as the forecast was already calling for rain for the entire day.

It wasn't like I had any control over the weather, of course, so there wasn't anything I could have done about it. There was something else aside from that, though; something I hadn't planned. I cast a glance at the desktop calendar in

my room. A December calendar. There were heart symbols drawn in pink pen, encircling the dates of the 24th and the 25th, but... Something had happened last night, the day our second semester ended. I had tried to contact Kei directly so that we could meet on the 24th, but I couldn't get through. I waited for a while, then tried sending her a message and waited for her response. But it had remained unread.

After spending close to an hour wondering what to do, I finally got a call back. The first word that I heard come from Kei, after she first let out a cough that sounded somehow both weak and violent, was "influenza." Seasonal influenza, or the flu, was very prevalent and could infect people of all ages, causing uncomfortable symptoms. Since the number of infections typically began to increase significantly from late November into December, it wasn't particularly unusual for people to catch it at this time of year. It seemed that Kei had been unlucky enough to catch it herself and suddenly found herself bedridden.

Even though Kei was in poor health, she probably would have wanted to keep our promise of meeting on the 24th even if she had to crawl on all fours. However, influenza spread via droplets that were sprayed and scattered around. If she forced herself to go to Keyaki Mall, other people would be infected because of her selfishness. Apparently, Kei had already started to feel like something was off shortly before she had gotten diagnosed. The first thing she did on the phone with me was apologize for not maintaining her health.

Obviously, there was no way I could have blamed her for catching the flu, so I told her right away that her priority was to rest and focus on getting back to good health. I had also told her that our plans still stood and that we would plan to meet on a different day. If Kei had replied, "Actually, I'd like to cancel our plans after all," before we met up, it could still fall apart, but that wasn't likely to happen at this moment. If there was some change of heart on Kei's part, it would be the influence of the wisdom of a third party. However, since Kei was intensely dependent on me, she wasn't likely to listen to anyone else. If there was some hope of repairing our relationship, it was unlikely that she'd abandon

that option. She'd cling as though her life depended on it.

It was unclear how soon her flu would pass, but at any rate, at that stage of our conversation, we decided to wrap things up quickly, turning our thoughts toward the year's end. While it was easy to surmise that there were many things that she had wanted reassurance about, like our relationship, the current situation, and so on, Kei had a high fever right now and was too sick to carry on a proper conversation. So, I told her to focus on rest first, and brought our brief call to a close.

When I looked into the details afterward, I found out that Kei wasn't struggling with basic needs, because her friends were bringing her supplies while she was laid up in bed. From the sounds of it, arrangements had already been made so that everything would be handled, even if there was some emergency in the middle of the night. That was helpful, since I would have had curfew to deal with. Best I not be involved.

And so...that was what had happened last night, on the 23rd.

That morning, I had also learned that several more students across all grade levels had contracted influenza too. The silver lining for the second-year students, despite this misfortune, was that we had managed to get through this special exam unscathed. I was sure that some of them might have been struggling with poor health during the exam and hid it from everyone. For my own part, since I hadn't had any close contact with Kei over the past few days, I personally wasn't feeling any changes in my physical condition as of yet.

The problem now was how I was going to spend my day today. My plans for both today, Christmas Eve, and tomorrow, Christmas Day, had all been called off. Just then, though, I received a message from Ichinose on my phone.

*"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun. I've heard that Karuizawa-san caught the flu. Is she all right?"*

Another message followed afterward.

*"It seems like other people aren't feeling well, either. Are you doing okay,"*

*Ayanokouji-kun?"*

I expected no less from Ichinose; she had an extensive information network. She'd heard the news rather quickly. Apparently, she already had a good grasp on the situation, even Kei's physical condition.

*"Unfortunately, I think she's going to be stuck in bed for a while,"* I replied.

*"I see... That's worrisome. If you ever need any help with anything, just let me know, anytime."*

*"Thanks."*

Ichinose and I exchanged several more texts, and she asked me what I was thinking of doing today. I had originally intended to keep the day open for Kei, but... Since I had to swing by Keyaki Mall to pick up a certain something regardless, my plan to go out had remained unchanged.

*"I think I'll go to the gym or something."*

I assumed I'd end up going there anyway. Besides, I didn't really feel like meeting with anyone.

*"Oh, okay. Hey, what time do you think you'll go?"*

*"I don't have anything to do, so probably before noon."*

*"All right. Actually, I was thinking of going to the gym around noon myself, but maybe it'd be better if I didn't?"*

*"Why's that?"*

*"Because people might think it was like we're having a rendezvous, maybe? Of course, it would just be a simple coincidence, but still."*

We had both thought about going to the gym, and it just so happened that the timeframe that we planned to go during overlapped. There wasn't any point in worrying about a little detail like that. Ichinose was probably offering out of consideration for my girlfriend Kei, but it was unnecessary trouble on her part. If anything, I found the idea of her scheduling things around me and my

situation to be troublesome.

*"You don't have to worry about it. I'm just going to go to the gym as planned. If I see you there, then be sure to say hi."*

The moment I hit "send" on that last text, I saw that my message was read. She responded with a sticker of some character (who I didn't recognize) that looked like it was rocking back and forth, holding up a sign that said "OK."

Well then, for the time being, I decided to hold off on doing things to get ready for going out, like changing and fixing my hair, until later. It was just after nine o'clock right now. I decided to pass the time with a little leisurely cleaning.

## 2.1

INSIDE KEYAKI MALL before noon, the Christmas Eve spirit was everywhere you looked. The mall was decorated with even more magnificent ornamentation than the day before. It even seemed like the ratio of the clientele coming to the mall to hang out today was a higher percentage of men and women together as couples. I'd popped in at the gym a little while ago, just as I had told Ichinose I would. It had only been a short time since I signed up, but I was paying a monthly fee, so I wanted to go as often as I could.

*Maybe there won't be anyone here?* I thought. As I contemplated this, I finished checking in at the reception desk. When I changed into my workout clothes and stepped into the weight room, though, I saw that it wasn't deserted after all. There were a few guys and girls my age here and there, and some adults, too. One person in particular caught my attention, who was about to start on the bench press. It was none other than Mashima-sensei, the homeroom teacher for Class 2-A. He had a large, muscular build, and his workout clothes suited him especially well.

"Good morning, Mashima-sensei," I called out to him politely just as he was about to lay down flat.

"Hm? Ayanokouji?" he responded with a little surprise in his voice. "You're a

gym-goer too?"

"I just signed up a little while ago."

"I see, I see! Very good, indeed. Welcome news." For some reason, Mashima-sensei nodded with approval when he said that, as though his own child had passed the university entrance exam or something. A little much for a student obtaining a gym membership. "But what's the impetus for you signing up?" he asked.

"I've felt like my level of strength and endurance has gone down compared to where it was before, so I thought I'd try to work back up to where I was."

"That's a bit of an unusual reason for a student."

"I have to admit that I don't know how long I'm going to stick with it."

"That's all right. You know, I was giving it a little thought myself, and I decided to start working out. And now, I've really become quite the regular. Working up a sweat in the same environment as the students isn't bad, either." Perhaps it was because he was more excited and livelier than usual, but Mashima-sensei spoke with a very welcoming, happy tone. "I also have to commend you for coming to the gym on the first day of your winter vacation too. That's dedication!"

"Do you have any plans for Christmas Eve today, sensei?" I asked.

"Hm? No, unfortunately, I'm just planning to sweat it out here in the gym all day," he answered. It sounded all very straightforward until he appended a furtive, quiet, "Probably."

*Probably.* He'd muttered it so quietly he only intended it for himself. So why say it? I wondered.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Oh, no, nothing. Anyway, I'm guessing you're probably completely lost in here, since you've only just started coming to the gym, right?"

"Yes, I suppose you're right."

I'm sure I would have no problem whatsoever with using and handling the equipment, but I decided to refrain from sounding too certain. It would probably be easier for me to have him operate on the assumption that I was a newcomer and that I didn't know anything. At any rate, I figured it was probably about time I got started on something, and—

"All right," Mashima-sensei said.

"All right?" I repeated.

"This is a perfect opportunity. You should take a minute to see what my workout is like."

"Huh? Oh, sure..."

I'd been thinking about starting something myself, but Mashima-sensei ended up stopping me. Mashima-sensei lay down flat on the bench and began to adjust the bar, moving it into position so that it lined up with his eyes. He easily lifted the bar up several times without any effort, and after he had finished making adjustments, he raised the safety bars on both sides, holding them above his chest.

"Whenever you bench press, make absolutely sure you don't forget about the safety bars," he told me. "In the unlikely scenario of a collapse, these safety bars will support you."

"I appreciate the lesson." I couldn't say that I already knew that, so all I could do was continue to watch. However, since it felt like it would've worsened the vibe if I didn't say anything, I decided to ask him an ordinary-sounding question: "How many kilograms can you lift, sensei?"

"Hm, let me think... I'm going with eighty kilos today, but I think I could probably go up to a hundred. They say that only one in a hundred people can lift a hundred kilos, you know."

Though he didn't have a smug look on his face, his tone was overflowing with self-confidence. He flexed, as though deliberately showing me that he was

physically fit. I hadn't seen anyone do that in person before—I'd always wondered if it was just something people did in movies.

"But if you push yourself too hard, your body will break," he added. "It's not something like a workout plan on TV, where you see people lift the bar once and stop for the day. You must repeat several sets, over and over, to strengthen your pectoral muscles."

Maybe he studied what to do by eagerly, desperately following what was on TV. Sounded like it. After giving me that advice, he began to demonstrate. As I watched this man take deep breaths, sweat pouring off him, I started to question the point of all of this. I had gone through the trouble of coming all the way to the gym early in the morning, and yet the next thing I knew, I was watching some kind of P.E. demonstration course. I watched him go at it for a while; after he had completed three sets, Mashima-sensei sat up.

"*Phew.* Well, there you have it!" he declared. "It's like that."

"It was very informative," I replied.

"Glad to hear it. I'm planning to come here six days a week over winter vacation, except for Thursdays. Even after the third semester begins, I'll probably be coming in at night, so I don't expect I'll be deviating from my six-day-a-week plan for the foreseeable future. If you ever have any problems, you can come to me for help, any time."

That was awfully specific. Was there some reason he was skipping Thursdays in particular?

"If you need it, I wouldn't mind teaching you the basics and—"

"Oh no, that's all right," I said quickly, flatly declining his offer. "I would feel terribly guilty bothering you for help, Mashima-sensei. I will make it a priority to keep attending for a while and do some light exercise." I made to leave.

"I see. Well, you can always call on me if you need help. I'll be here at the gym as much as possible during winter vacation."

With my teacher's gracious offer duly considered, I decided to go work up a proper sweat, alone. I'd spent about thirty minutes working out in the gym when I noticed that the atmosphere had suddenly changed. Some of the students who were using the equipment turned in unison to look at something. I followed their gazes, wondering what they were looking at, and saw a familiar face from my class: Kouenji.

He was the center of attention, but he didn't seem to be paying it any mind. He simply began his workout. I had assumed people would be watching him because of his eccentric behavior, but apparently that was not the case. I could faintly hear some boys from other grade levels nearby talking:

"Whoa, that Kouenji dude really is incredible."

"Yeah, not many high schoolers would be able to do that, for sure..."

You could get a sense of his physical ability, which was above average for a high school student, through observing his workout session. He seemed to have attracted a lot of attention as an outstanding athlete. Indeed, even at just a glance, the height of his physical perfection was clear; his refined, toned muscles and his flexibility. There was no wastefulness in his movements, and there was a type of seriousness about him that his usual eccentric behavior thoroughly belied.

Kouenji had always given the impression that he was completely devoted to training his body. It was no surprise that he'd be going to the gym. In fact, no exaggeration, he was made for it. Kouenji even caught Mashima-sensei's attention; he stopped what he was doing and watched. Looking at him objectively, you could say that Kouenji was far, far beyond the realm of normal students.

Kouenji was blessed with a naturally good physique, and he worked out daily, sparing no effort to maintain his body. Even here at school, Kouenji dedicated himself to the pursuit of physical excellence, no matter the time and place. Unlike what I saw from Mashima-sensei, which was only slightly better than a

total beginner could do, Kouenji's workout regimen was truly mesmerizing. It went without saying, too, that Kouenji was the type who got sharper and better when he was being showered with attention, rather than seeming nervous, anxious, or irritated.

"Kouenji-kun is always incredibly popular," Ichinose said. It sounded like this kind of attention was normal for him, then. "Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Sup."

"It sure is rainy again today, isn't it? By the way, about how long have you been here?"

"I got here about thirty minutes ago," I replied.

"I see. To tell you the truth, I had been planning to arrive about the same time you did, but I got caught up talking with a friend for a little, and ended up getting here late."

Ichinose looked up at me from where she was standing next to me. She was very close.

"It's too bad it's Christmas Eve today," she said.

"It's no big deal," I said. "It's just like any other day."

"Hm. Do you think girls think of a romantic day the way you do?"

"Well...I suppose they wouldn't." As a male, I couldn't know what days on the calendar fixated women.

After some light chitchat, Ichinose asked me if I'd like to work out with her on the treadmill, so I accepted. We chose machines that were lined up next to each other, side-by-side, and spent the next thirty minutes running without chatting, each of us taking a pace setting that suited us.

"*Phew*, you really do feel a different sense of motivation when you're working out with somebody else, huh?" said Ichinose.

"You might be right about that. It's a good thing you're here when Amikura

is," I replied.

Smiling warmly, Ichinose wiped the sweat from her forehead with a towel. I enjoyed my time at the gym with her for about another hour. Later, when I told Ichinose I was heading out, Amikura had just arrived. Ichinose said that she would chat with Amikura for a while, so we split up then.

"Are you leaving already?" Noticing that I was about to leave the workout area, Mashima-sensei put his weights down and called out to me. Though he said "already," I had been in the gym for approximately two hours by this point. It'd been long enough.

"Yes, I am. I've gotten rather worn out, after all. Sensei, do you realize that two hours have passed?" I asked.

"Two hours? Hm, that so? Already?"

He must have gotten so unconsciously absorbed in his workout that he really hadn't noticed.

"I think you had best take a little break now, Mashima-sensei," I suggested. "You've gone on for approximately three hours now with hardly any rest. You are building up fatigue in places that you cannot see, and that can lead to injury."

I was fully prepared for him to be angry with me over saying something that you would say to an amateur. Far from being angry, Mashima-sensei looked surprised, and then crossed his arms.

"...Yes, you may be right. I was summoning my willpower so that I could leave my cowardly, disappointing self behind and be a good role model. But it might have had the opposite effect."

Maybe there hadn't been anyone around Mashima-sensei to have given him advice like that until now, and he really, really wanted results as soon as possible. He wanted a strong body. Those feelings seemed to have made him so absorbed in his workout that he forgot about his fatigue.

"All right then. I suppose I'll stop for the day, too." It sounded like he intended to humbly accept the advice I had given him.

"See you later, then." I gave him a slight bow.

I thought I'd go ahead and leave, but Mashima-sensei quickly chased after me.

"Do you mind if I talk to you for just a moment?" he asked.

"Huh? Not at all, no," I replied. I thought it might be something related to the gym, but he directed me over to the rest area.

"Did I do something in the gym that had rubbed you the wrong way, sensei?" I figured I ought to ask, since I didn't particularly know the reason I was being called away.

"Heavens no," Mashima-sensei said. "It's nothing like that at all, so don't worry. You were just fine in the gym, no problem at all," said Mashima-sensei. It sounded like he'd been keeping a close eye on what I was up to. Seeing my eyes full of doubt, he lowered his gaze. "...I have a confession to make. I was so engrossed in my own workout that I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings."

He furrowed his brow apologetically, confirming that I had seen through him earlier. Seeing such a serious reaction from him actually made me feel bad. Teachers were on winter vacation, too. They were free to enjoy their time doing whatever they wanted on campus, and they were under no obligation to monitor the students. It was like I'd stolen some of the pleasure of being an adult from him, and we'd switched roles in a very sad way.

"So, the reason you wanted to talk to me—" I urged him to get on with the conversation, brushing off his apology.

Mashima-sensei quickly took one look around to make sure that no one else was around. "Truthfully, I have a favor to ask of you," he said.

"Okay?"

Mashima-sensei steeled his posture. Just as he was about to tell me what that favor was, a visitor arrived, and at the worst moment. It was a woman with long, wavy, beautiful hair, one of the employees working at the gym. When she noticed us standing there, she gave us a pleasant smile.

"It looks like you really gave it your best today too, Mashima-san," she said.

"Oh no, I didn't really do all that much," he replied, offering her a casual greeting.

Mashima-sensei had been going to the gym longer than I had, and it sounded as though this woman had remembered his name.

"And this is?" she asked.

"Ayanokouji," Mashima-sensei said. "He isn't in the class that I'm in charge of, but he's an exceptional student from Class B."

I felt a powerful slap on the back, *thwack*, as though Mashima-sensei were telling me to speak up and greet her. He might have intended for it to have been a light pat, but the blow from his well-trained body hurt.

"My name is Ayanokouji," I announced.

"I've seen you at the reception desk a few times," she said. "You were with Ichinose-chan."

She was a staff member here, after all. I guess I'd left a little impression on her too, even though I'd only been coming here for a little while.

"Oh, I'm sorry, though," she added, "I'm actually on break. I just came to pick up something I needed. Please excuse me."

After giving us a gentle-mannered bow of her head, the attendant took several towels from the employee rack and then headed back toward the reception area, clutching the towels to her chest. Perhaps Mashima-sensei had wanted to wait for her to leave, because he watched her go until she was no longer visible, without even casting a glance at me.

...

Even after she was gone, Mashima-sensei didn't budge.

"Sensei?" I asked.

"Wh-what, Ayanokouji?"

"Oh, well, it's just... You had something you wanted to talk to me about?" I reminded him.

"Yes, that's right. Well, I did, but let's save that talk for another time."

"Okay? Well, if that's the case, then...I'll be going now."

I turned and made to leave, but—

"Wait." Mashima-sensei tightly grabbed hold of my shoulders from behind.

"...What now?"

For some reason, Mashima-sensei seemed a little strange today. It was like his usual calm and collected demeanor as an instructor had gotten muddied.

"I think this too was fate," he said. "I have a confession to make."

"You seem to have a lot of confessions to make," I remarked. Even so, it seemed like he was finally getting to the heart of the matter, so that was a relief.

"That staff member who was just here a few moments ago. Her name is Akiyama-san."

"I wasn't really paying much attention, but yes, I saw that name on her name tag. And?"

"...I would like you to investigate her. And I would like you to be as polite and discreet as you possibly can."

"Huh?" I blinked.

I tried to leave, but I couldn't move: Mashima-sensei was gripping both of my shoulders with tremendous force.

"I have never once brought matters of a romantic nature to work before," he

said. “However, the situation completely changed once I started coming to the gym. Knowing you, I’m sure that you can understand without me needing to go into detail.”

“Well, yes, I understand what you’re trying to say. So, you’ve taken a liking to that woman named Akiyama-san then, Mashima-sensei?”

“...You could say that, I suppose.” Uh, no, that was the only thing you *could* say. “She is a beautiful woman—despite retaining a somewhat childish face, she is a proper, mature adult.”

“I see...”

She certainly was a beautiful, mature woman, but his choice of phrasing was a little off-putting.

“Wouldn’t the same statement apply to people like Hoshinomiya-sensei and Chabashira-sensei, for instance?” I asked. “It’s not like faculty and staff members are forbidden from falling in love with each other, is it?”

“The rules prohibit it,” said Mashima-sensei.

“Oh, I see. But I’m sure some teachers date in secret, right?”

“I wouldn’t say that kind of thing never happens, no. But even if it weren’t prohibited, I still wouldn’t consider dating either of them,” Mashima-sensei declared, without any equivocation.

“May I ask the reason why?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t intend to speak on that. Ayanokouji, you and I are teacher and student. It’s not a conversation we need to have.”

“Okay then, I’ll be leaving now. After all, the conversation that we were just having right now seems like it’d be inappropriate, too,” I replied, and tried to pull away.

“Hoshinomiya’s personality is too relaxed. Chabashira-sensei’s personality is too serious. That’s all,” said Mashima-sensei.

Well, that was simple enough. Even if we were to assume that Hoshinomiya-sensei and Chabashira-sensei were equal in terms of their aesthetic value, Hoshinomiya was a lovesick, dithering girl, in love with the idea of being in love. She seemed like even if she were in a relationship with someone, she was likely to continue to flirt and hang out with members of the opposite sex. Chabashira-sensei, on the other hand, had clung to her love from her days as a student and hadn't had a single relationship since. If she were to find another target for her affection, I got the feeling it was likely to be a smothering, intense affair.

"But you can't state with any certainty that Akiyama-san, that staff member, isn't like them," I replied. You couldn't know those sorts of things just from how someone appeared on the outside; you would find out through the process of going out with someone, and—

"She is absolutely not like them," said Mashima-sensei. I was sure he didn't have any evidence for that claim, but he denied it forcefully based solely on the strength of his assumptions. "I've known the two of them since we were students," he went on, "and I don't see them as grown women, even. Never have, not even once. Besides, if I tried to pick between the two of them, best friends and rivals, it would have had a significant impact on my life at school."

"Well, I suppose you're right about that," I mused.

"Which is why I'm asking you to do this," said Mashima-sensei.

"Why me, though?"

"Do you really think I could ask one of the other instructors to do this?"

"I suppose you have a point there, but..."

"You are the only one I know who goes to the gym, and who seems tight-lipped and trustworthy."

"Wait, don't tell me, sensei. So, the reason you were so happy when you first saw me today was...?"

"Because I had made a gym buddy, of course."

No, that was most definitely a lie. The look in his eyes had clearly been him homing in on a student that he could use for this specific matter. Knowing what I knew now, I was sure of it.

"You understand the things I wish to know, right?" said Mashima-sensei.

"I can guess," I replied. "If she has a boyfriend. Her preferred type. Hobbies and things that she likes."

"Perfect, full marks. Chabashira is truly extremely fortunate to have a student like you."

I wondered if this person really was the Mashima-sensei that I was used to seeing. Perhaps I should think of it as him keeping his private life and his professional life separate...but he was showing me a side of him that was just far too dissonant. Still, his tone of voice was steady, and I couldn't see anything bad at all from his facial expression.

"I'm not telling you to get moving right away," he added. "Akiyama-san saw you with me today, after all. I don't mind if it's after winter vacation, or whenever. Just take your time, get close to her, and investigate."

Politely and discreetly. That was how Mashima-sensei wanted it, I supposed.

"I'll give it my best try, but please do not expect too much from me," I told him.

"I understand," said Mashima-sensei. "Regarding Akiyama-san's work schedule, she works—"

"Six days a week," I said, cutting him off. "Every day except Thursday, right?"

"...That's right. So, you knew, eh?"

It wasn't really that I knew, it was more that Mashima-sensei had explicitly said that he went to the gym every day except for Thursday. I'd felt like there was something off about that remark; that was why I'd figured it out. I was sure that he had initially gone to the gym for the purpose of working out, but now he was totally focused on Akiyama-san... Well, it wasn't like he was neglecting his

strength training, though, so I supposed I couldn't criticize.

Freed at last from Mashima-sensei's shackles, I finally made my escape.

## 2.2

AS SOON AS I'D LEFT THE GYM, I thought about my plans for the rest of the day. Should I pick up the item from the store that I had decided to stop by in advance, then take a stroll around the mall and head back? Mashima-sensei himself had said to take my time with his request... As I racked my brain, wondering how I would find out the information he wanted, I hoped that he would end up solving his issue himself.

It was still early in the afternoon. If I went back to the dorm now, I'd just end up back in my room with too much time on my hands. Instead, I took out my phone and opened my contacts. It wasn't a bad idea to call up a guy friend to hang out once in a while.

"...Maybe not."

I casually skimmed through my list of contacts, and then I quietly turned my phone's screen off. I hadn't really given it much thought, but I had hardly any experience just spontaneously calling up friends of the same gender to hang out.

*"Hey, if you're free right now, want to hang out for a bit?"*

If I asked someone that, and then—

*"I'm busy."*

—got a blunt rejection like that in response, I'd be extremely shaken.

Someone like Yousuke might sympathize with how I was feeling and take me up on the offer to hang out, but if he were to spend time with me just because he was worried about me, that would give me some mixed feelings. Inviting someone took significant effort, and it was difficult to boot. In the end, I

concluded that it was better for me to remain alone, without bothering anyone.

“What are friends exactly, anyway, I wonder?” I muttered, once again reminded that I still hadn’t excelled in this area, even though it was now the second half of my second year.

I rode the escalator down to the first floor. It was still daytime, so the number of students had increased considerably. If I couldn’t talk to anyone myself, was there another way? For example, bumping into someone by coincidence, a chance encounter. I could run into someone in an unintentional way, and then invite them out, with a “*Hey, do you want to hang out right now?*”

With that thought in mind, I looked around, but I couldn’t see any of my classmates. Come to think of it, someone from the same grade would—well, no. I couldn’t even spot anyone in my same grade level. If I just awkwardly kept looking around, searching for people, then people would probably think I was someone suspicious. I quickly decided to give up on the idea of engineering a meeting with someone, and switched my goal to enjoying my time by myself.

I stopped in front of one of the many floor guide maps placed throughout the mall. I knew the types of shops there were and their locations, but I decided to check to see if anything new might have opened. It wasn’t like stores were replaced all that quickly, though, and I didn’t discover anything new. But there was one store that caught my eye.

“Think I’ll try going there,” I thought aloud.

My idea was to visit a rental shop that I didn’t personally stop by that often. Here, one could rent DVDs or Blu-rays of movies, anime, and so on, whether they were new or old. The store also offered music CDs. However, customer demand wasn’t that high here because, with the school’s permission, video content could be viewed freely at any time you wished via the internet—i.e., through a streaming service with a monthly subscription fee.

People only came to this store occasionally. Usually, it was when there was something specific that they wanted to see. Since it was only students like that

who visited this shop, it inevitably didn't have many customers. That was precisely why I decided to check it out over this winter holiday. I had a lot of time on my hands and thought it would be nice to spend my time like this now and again. I felt like I was just making a lot of excuses earlier, but it wasn't as though I was lonely at all. Just to be sure, I repeated those words to myself in my head.

After I had picked up the item at the store like I had planned, I arrived at the rental shop. It wasn't spacious at all. If anything, it was cramped, and the small space was jam-packed, crammed full of a wide variety of discs on display. Discs were normally housed in a box or a case, but here in this store, they all appeared to come in black, transparent, stretchy protective bags, with a sheet of paper that appeared to be a printout of the back of the disc's original packaging inserted into the bag as well. It was designed so that you could tell what kind of media it was just at a glance.

When I was browsing on a computer or a tablet, I would first sift through the titles to see if any of them looked interesting, or whether anything caught my interest based on the thumbnail. However, in an environment like this, where you would pick things up one by one, you'd find yourself picking up things that you wouldn't normally check out, for whatever reason. And I even found myself reading the plot synopses carefully.

While countless works were readily available for listening or viewing online, I imagined that I was ignoring good works of art without even noticing them. With that in mind, it might not be bad for me to take my time and browse like this now and again. I might even come to the rental shop more often. However, a problem remained. Even if I did find something that looked interesting, there wasn't any need for me to rent it here.

Except in the case of a rare work that wasn't available via streaming, most things could be viewed on demand in the privacy of your dorm without having to worry about the return deadline. These kinds of rental shops were likely going to become more difficult to keep in operation in the future. The same was

true for electronics retailers. I had heard about a trend that had become sort of the established norm, where people would first visit a store to see what the actual products were like, and then buy them online for cheap immediately afterward.

After spending a while checking out the video section of the store, I headed over to the music section. I wasn't normally an avid music listener myself—I'd sometimes hear a current big hit on TV or listen to some classics, but that was it. I didn't have any experience purchasing music myself, nor was I particularly interested in doing so at present. Which was exactly why I was exploring. I hoped to have a chance encounter with someone.

There was apparently one person who had already entered this store, a store that I didn't expect to find anyone in. A petite student had her back to me. She was wearing headphones, and she didn't seem to have noticed me, partly because of the BGM playing in the store. At first, I couldn't tell who this student was, but as I got closer, her identity snapped into focus. It was Shiranami Chihiro, from Ichinose's class. Although I hadn't really spoken to her very much, I had run into her under some unusual circumstances. Most recently, there was that time during the Uninhabited Island Special Exam and that time on the ship; we'd been in the same general area at the time. I wondered what she was listening to. My curiosity was piqued simply because I had little knowledge of Japanese music (though, admittedly, my ignorance wasn't just limited to Japanese music).

However, Shiranami was focused on listening to her music, so she probably wouldn't notice me even if I tried whispering to her. But if I aggressively closed the distance between us so that I entered her field of view, then I'd end up startling her. I could have just waited for her song to be over, but since trying to talk to her afterward and strike up conversation would be difficult for me—certainly not a low bar—I decided to try and get close enough so that I could pick up on what she was listening to. Meanwhile, I pretended to nonchalantly check out the products on display, so as not to appear suspicious to an outside

observer.

“Huh...?!”

*Oops. I guess I ended up startling her. I might have approached her too carelessly due to my curiosity over what she was listening to. Panicking, she hurriedly removed her headphones.*

“A-Ayanokouji-kun?!”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Since she had taken her headphones off her ears, the music was clearly audible now. I could hear a somewhat sorrowful guitar, along with a woman’s voice.

*“Only time can heal my wounded heart. Now, he’s someone else’s—”*

A song about lost love, huh? I heard part of a lyric that sounded like that kind of song, but Shiranami, flustered, hurriedly pressed the button and the song ended.

“Wh-wh-wh-what do you want?!” she stammered, still reeling.

“Well, no, it’s... I don’t really need anything,” I said. “I was just wondering what you were listening to. That’s all.”

Even though I gave her an honest answer, whether she would understand was another story. We were from different classes, and we weren’t particularly close; we had the sort of relationship where we didn’t talk unless it was by chance. And, on top of that, when you considered the gender divide, she might be nervous about me...

“Sorry to have bothered you,” I said. “I’ll be going now.”

Me being near Shiranami any longer for no good reason at all would only bother her. The only thing I could do was leave, and quickly.

“Um... Hold on,” she squeaked.

It seemed like Shiranami wanted to say something. At the very least, I could

tell that she wasn't the type of girl who could speak eloquently with people that she didn't have a close relationship with. Having said that, I was sure that if I urged her to speak, like I was demanding, it would end up causing her to swallow what she was about to say, and the words would remain stuck in her throat. Which was why I kept my eyes fixed, not on Shiranami's eyes directly, but rather on a spot not too far away. I waited for the right time, doing as much as I could to create an environment where she could talk without panicking.



"Um... Actually," she managed to get out, "I was...kinda wondering...if maybe you have a minute right now...?"

Oh, she wanted my time? That was unexpected.

"I don't mind especially, but I'm guessing you don't mean you want to talk here, right?" I asked.

It would've been one thing if the discussion were about music, but it didn't seem like it was. While the rental store wasn't exactly turning people away because it was crowded or anything, people who continued to loiter without spending any money were likely not welcome customers.

"Yes, you're right... Um, well, anywhere is fine, since I don't think this will take too much time," said Shiranami.

"Okay, then—"

"Oh, um, but, well, I think that maybe, uh, a conspicuous place would be a bad idea. I don't want to cause any misunderstandings..."

I was just about to casually suggest that we go to the café, but Shiranami had given me those words of caution before I could finish.

"Okay, then what do you think we should do?" I asked. "Anywhere you want to go is fine with me, Shiranami."

"...I'll leave that to you, Ayanokouji-kun."

So it was up to me, though there were some restrictions. I felt like she was being a little unreasonable, but I was the one who'd initiated contact in the first place, so it was my own fault. I needed to come up with a location that suited her request somehow.

## 2.3

STARTED WALKING with Shiranami, as several locations came to mind. It was

raining outside on our campus during this winter vacation, so the weather was poor, making it difficult to go outdoors. On the other hand, however, indoors was—well, *indoors*. There were a lot of students scattered around in here. The silver lining to this was that Shiranami seemed to have a strong aversion to staying too close.

Usually in these sorts of cases, even if I weren't close to the other person, I'd be walking either a step or two in front of or behind them, part of a group but not too crowded. But the distance between me and Shiranami, who was following behind, was quite far. Most likely, an outside observer wouldn't assume that Shiranami and I were headed somewhere together, if they happened to see us. So, even though it was Christmas Eve, there didn't seem to be any need for me to worry about any romantic rumors.

"...What?" asked Shiranami.

"Nothing," I replied.

If I paid too much attention to Shiranami behind me, she would move even further away from me. The invitation to hang out longer hadn't even come from me, but this was terribly awkward. Still, I had created this connection by trying to strike up a conversation with her, so I supposed there wasn't really anything I could do about it. We wandered around aimlessly until we eventually arrived at a rest area.

It was a place with several large vending machines and two large backless benches. I already knew that not many students used this place, and I guessed that today must have been no exception, since I didn't see anyone else around.

"So do you want something to drink—"

"I don't need a drink, no."

"Okay, how about we sit on one of the bench—"

"I'm not sitting, it's fine."

After being turned down repeatedly, I decided to just give up.

"Okay, let's talk," said Shiranami.

Shiranami stood directly in front of me, though with a fair amount of distance between us, and rubbed her hands together. I figured that this must have been something that was difficult for her to ask, but she needed to get it off her chest.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you... Um, wh-what's your relationship with H-Honami-chan?" asked Shiranami.

"What's my relationship?" I repeated.

"Are you just two people in the same grade? Or are you friends? Or...is your relationship something more than that?" She sputtered it out timidly, but it was clear this was something she wanted to ask me about. Considering her phrasing, it sounded like my response would be important to Shiranami. I knew the reason very well, of course. Because of one of the incidents that had led me to building a relationship with Ichinose in the first place.

Last year, when we were still new to the school, Shiranami went up to Ichinose to tell her that she had feelings for her. Not merely as a friend, but romantic love, the kind that people normally held toward someone of the opposite sex. No, that choice of words wasn't accurate. In this day and age, it would be wrong to raise the issue of gender in romance. A person named Shiranami fell in love with a person named Ichinose. That was all there was to it. And she didn't like the fact that Ichinose had fallen in love with me. It was a simple, easy-to-understand turn of events that didn't require more elaboration.

"I'm not sure how to answer correctly. I'm a little puzzled as to—"

"Don't hold back on my account," Shiranami insisted. "Tell me."

"It's not like I'm refraining from answering out of politeness. It's that it's difficult for me to judge whether I'm qualified to call someone my friend."

"...What is that supposed to mean?" Shiranami furrowed her brow dubiously, not comprehending what I had said.

“I don’t have many friends. I don’t really understand the delineation between friendship and acquaintances in the first place. A relationship where you just talk isn’t really what you’d call a friendship, is it? Where’s the line between acquaintance and friend?”

“That’s... Well, to be honest, I’m not really sure where that line would be, exactly, now that you ask...”

“I’m lost too, just like you are, Shiranami. At any rate, if I had to say something decisive, I’d say that we’re friends.”

“Okay, I feel you’re being really vague... Are you deliberately trying to dodge the question?” asked Shiranami.

That was not my intention in the slightest. I had meant my answer rather seriously.

“Okay then, so, that means you’re just friends, right?” she said. “Like, you two don’t, like, I mean, *like* each other that way right then, right? I can take that to mean you don’t have those kinds of feelings for each other?”

I hadn’t questioned Shiranami directly about this before, but I couldn’t imagine that she was unaware of how Ichinose felt. When she said “each other,” what she most likely wanted to know specifically was how I felt about Ichinose.

“I mean, of course you’re just friends, right?” Shiranami went on—perhaps she couldn’t wait for my answer. “After all, you’re going out with Karuizawa-san, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Does it matter whether I have a girlfriend or not? Regarding my answer for my feelings for Ichinose?” I asked.

“Of course it does. You can only fall for one person.”

It was a rather romantic answer—or rather, one befitting a pure girl. It sounded like she really believed that, too. She didn’t have any doubt whatsoever.

"Isn't it possible that someone could be in love with multiple people at the same time?" That was a perfectly conceivable scenario for both men and women alike.

"N-no way!"

She denied it vehemently. Her tiny hands balled into fists.

"Sorry," I said. "That has nothing to do with what we were talking about. Right now, Ichinose and I don't have the kind of relationship that you need to be worried about, Shiranami."

"...Right now?"

Not surprisingly, Shiranami was extremely sensitive to every single word that came out of my mouth, and she had picked up on my slight hedging.

"No one knows what will happen in the future," I answered.

"Even so, if it were a normal relationship, I don't think you'd include a 'right now' in your answer..."

She might have been correct. If, hypothetically speaking, we had been talking about someone other than Ichinose in this conversation—another girl who I was familiar with, like Amikura—then I wouldn't have added those words. I would have clearly and definitively stated that we were simply friends—nothing more and nothing less.

"Even if...even if Honami-chan does have feelings for you, if you didn't feel the same way, you wouldn't have said 'right now.' And yet, you did... You shouldn't have said those words unless you were willing to break up with Karuizawa-san and go out with Honami-chan." Shiranami struggled to get the words out, like she hated to say it. Her words were full of courage, though her gaze seemed to be directed at the tip of my nose as she uttered them. "I don't mind whoever, um, Honami-chan falls in love with... But I can't just stand by quietly and see her go out with someone insincere..."

"So, if you date someone and then break up with them, that makes you an

insincere person?" I asked.

"That's... Well, no, it doesn't, but..."

Shiranami was Ichinose's classmate, but she couldn't say anything about Ichinose's situation. I had thought Shiranami might have already sensed a change in Ichinose, but there was no sign of that. The truth was that until I knew my own thoughts, I didn't want any unintentional influence, from me or from anyone. Which was why, even if it cast a shadow on Shiranami's heart, I had no choice but to be vague and add "right now" to my previous statement.

"It's not my intention to make you upset, Shiranami," I told her. "But as long as there's a possibility that no matter what I say in this situation, the message won't be received calmly, I have no other choice but to phrase my answer thusly, with that bit of insurance."

I decided that it was best to tell her that firmly and clearly, even if it sounded a little harsh. For a moment, she gave me a look that made me think she was thinking, "*That's not true!*" But then she seemed to have realized that her passions had flared up even more than she had thought.

"...I'm sorry," she said. "I feel like I may have gone too far with what I said..."

Shiranami had been so frantic, so worked up, that she herself had temporarily lost track of how far she had gone with her comments in this conversation. That was all it was.

"You're worried about Ichinose," I said.

She was worried, as a close friend. And even more than that, it was only natural for someone to worry about a person that they had feelings for.

"U-um, I... I-I'm really sorry!" The more Shiranami settled back down, the more strongly and more seriously she began to feel about her mistake. "I've been hearing lots of gossip going around about you and Honami-chan lately, Ayanokouji-kun..."

"Rumors are just that, rumors," I replied.

"That's true... I just selfishly believed such ridiculous rumors, without even questioning them, like how you two started going to the gym so you could be alone together and neglecting your studies for the test, or how you had invited Honami-chan to come into your room even though you have a girlfriend, Ayanokouji-kun..."

*Uh... Hmm?*

"Wh-what's the matter?" she asked. "You were so calm all this time, but your face just suddenly went strangely rigid."

"Oh, well, I was just wondering how baseless rumors like that... Rather, how facts that aren't actually that big a deal got embellished like that and spread around."

"That's an unusual choice of phrasing. Rumors and facts are opposites, aren't they?"

"Yes, of course, it's true that in many cases they have nothing to do with each other," I replied.

"...Huh?" she blinked.

"Hm?"

"You didn't...go to the gym alone together, did you?" asked Shiranami.

"We didn't. I just started going to the gym. And I just so happened to run into Ichinose there, by chance. You know?"

That was exactly what happened. Ichinose did reach out to me beforehand, but it wasn't like we had promised to meet up.

"Yeah, that makes sense," said Shiranami. "You're right. Mako-chan goes to the gym, too. Oh, but that whole thing about you inviting her to come into your room, Ayanokouji-kun, that's definitely got to be a malicious rumor, without a doubt."

"Correct. I didn't call Ichinose to ask her to come in my room," I replied.

There had been approximately three instances of this sort of thing with Ichinose. The first time was during the In-Class Voting special exam that we had in our first year. The second time was on that rainy day near the end of that school year. The third time just happened recently, but in that specific instance, it was only because Ichinose had been waiting outside of my room of her own accord. Most likely, someone had seen Ichinose while she was waiting outside my door, then, the third time she came to my room.

“...I believe you,” said Shiranami.

Though she said it hesitantly, Shiranami had responded with the most positive look on her face that I’d seen today when she said those words. But the trouble was, depending on how Shiranami saw things that might happen in the future, she might think that I had betrayed her. I figured I should append my statement with an addendum then, just in case. However, if I were to carelessly throw out something that sounded like an excuse right now, it would cast a shadow over Shiranami’s heart once again, right when she was finally on the verge of recovering.

“Can I say one thing?” I asked.

“Y-yeah. What is it?” said Shiranami.

“No matter who Ichinose likes, or whoever likes her, that doesn’t diminish the relationship you two have, Shiranami. However, that’s only true as long as you don’t do something that Ichinose doesn’t want you to do. Do you understand what I mean by that?”

“...Yes,” she replied.

*I can't be with the person I love. So, if I don't like this situation, I'll sabotage it.* If Ichinose, the person who Shiranami loved, saw that Shiranami had those kinds of thoughts, then it was only natural that it wouldn’t make her happy.

“Ugh, I feel like I’m such an awful girl,” said Shiranami. I guessed that now that she had calmed down, Shiranami was looking at what she’d done soberly. “I was just complaining to you the whole time, like I was taking my frustrations

out on you, Ayanokouji-kun, and..."

I'd guessed what she was after when she asked to head off somewhere, even though I'd been the one to surprise her. I had zero judgment for Shiranami over it from the very beginning.

"Even though you helped me when I got lost during the Uninhabited Island Special Exam over the summer too..." she added.

Shiranami had held a candle for Ichinose ever since they started school together. And now, she was suppressing those feelings, supporting Ichinose as a treasured friend and ally. It wasn't unreasonable at all that she would feel disgusted, unintentionally hostile toward someone like me.

"It's all right," I said. "If anything, I'm sorry for bothering you earlier, and for spouting off something that sounds like a lectu—"

"I am really very sorry!" Before I could finish giving my own apology, Shiranami interrupted me and shouted another of her own. "Um, I mean, it's not like I dislike you or anything, Ayanokouji-kun... Really, it's not like that at all..."

I already understood all of this, but Shiranami didn't understand that I understood, so she started apologizing and explaining herself. I figured that I should just listen for a while, because I probably wouldn't even be able to convince her if I tried to stop her. For a while after that point, the words that came out of her mouth were about 80 percent apologies and 20 percent explanations. She messily bounced from topic to topic, continuing to ask for my forgiveness.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **Just A Hunch**

I PUT ON my personal clothes, which I hadn't worn for a while since I'd bought them, and then poured some warm water into a cup. As I was pouring, I noticed the light seeping in through the window. I opened the curtains.

"Wow, it's really piled up..."

The rain that had been coming down all day had turned to snow while I wasn't watching, and it kept falling all throughout the night. It was snowing intermittently right now, and it was supposed to stop for a while at noon, but apparently it was going to start really coming down tonight. And according to the report on the TV, snowy days were going to continue for a while.

"No wonder it's gotten colder," I muttered.

The season when hot coffee tasted better had officially arrived. I stood in front of the kitchen, holding a freshly brewed cup of coffee in my right hand. In my left was my phone. Displayed on the screen were products and their prices. I didn't know this until recently, but apparently, Keyaki Mall had been running web advertisements for the people living on campus here at ANHS. The battle for deals during the Christmas shopping season continued even through the end of today, the 25th, and they were hosting a big sale to coincide with that.

I learned this fact suddenly last night, when it had come up in a group chat made up of people from class. I had guessed they were getting all excited talking about how they had spent their Christmas Eve or how they were in the process of spending it. The first topic that got brought up in the group chat centered around two people in particular: Ike and Shinohara. Even though the two of them were *in* the group chat themselves, the fact that neither of them had read messages in the chat since it started after nine o'clock at night had caused an awful lot of talk amongst our classmates.

Was it just a coincidence? Or were they together? Of course, almost everyone thought it was the latter. Some rather intense students from the group chat had tried calling Ike and Shinohara, half out of envy and half in an attempt to tease them, but they both had their phones off, so no one was able to get through. However, no one saw the fact that they had their phones off to be a coincidence, and the chat continued.

Afterward, the flurry of messages continued even as the chat moved on to different topics, but I was amazed how they could talk for hours on end without running out of things to say. One of the subjects that had pinged my radar was the big sale.

"Huh... Even home appliances are cheap, too?" I remarked.

As I slowly brought the coffee to my mouth, taking care not to burn myself, I slid my finger across the screen. There was a variety of items, like ones that were popular with boys, such as game consoles and video games, and things that you could call everyday necessities, such as hair dryers and electric toothbrushes. There was even cookware, like mixers and slicers. I was cooking more often these days, so more than a few of these things were catching my interest. I was somewhat interested in the yogurt maker, and moreover, I noticed that it was in the special offers category in the web ad. "While supplies last."

I figured this was, simply put, a high-pressure sales thing. I would have preferred to have kept my Private Point spending down...but I could make up that expense in the future by using the yogurt maker. Just how much yogurt would I need to eat during the time I had remaining here at school to make this expense cheaper than it would cost to just buy yogurt from the sto—no, that was an unproductive train of thought. I simply wanted this yogurt maker. And I wanted to try using it. Maybe that was all there was to it.

It was obvious that if I considered only the cost effectiveness of the product alone as important, then I would have no other choice but to decide against buying it. The more I racked my brain over it, the less likely I'd be to buy the

yogurt maker. So, I stopped thinking. They were selling it at a discounted price, so I was going to buy it. That was it. The remaining question was what to make of this “while supplies last” part.

Keyaki Mall was not likely to have a system in place designed to hold a large amount of inventory, as it primarily targeted students. It was more than possible that they only had a few units available for sale. Above all, this big sale seemed to be popular among the students. I hadn’t paid any mind to it last year, but the popularity of the sale had spread without me realizing at the time, and some things ended up selling out (according to the class group chat).

“Maybe I should go and check it out...?”

To be honest, this sort of sale was completely foreign to me, so I really had no idea how it all worked. Was anything and everything an experience to be had? Or should I wait and see? As I waffled back and forth, still holding my phone, I got a message.

*“Good morning. Is it okay if I give you a call? I don’t want to be a bother.”*

It was from Ichinose. We’d just hung out at the gym yesterday. Was this a discreet, well-mannered way of confirming whether Kei was with me? Even though Kei wasn’t feeling well, just out of consideration of the unlikely possibility that she was here? No, I didn’t think so. Ichinose already knew that Kei had the flu. She wouldn’t think that Kei could have gotten over it already. I supposed it was just a polite formality on Ichinose’s part. I decided to just call her back directly, thereby implicitly telling her that it wasn’t a problem at all.

*“Good morning. Is it okay to talk now?”* she asked.

“Yeah. What’s up?”

*“Um, I was wondering, what are your plans for today, Ayanokouji-kun?”*

“Plans? Nothing in particular.”

*“I take it Karuizawa-san’s condition still hasn’t improved.”*

“I mean, it’s influenza, so it’ll take a while for her to recover, I imagine.”

*"I see... I was thinking that I'd like to pay her a get-well visit or something, but I'm guessing the school issued a warning against that, right?"*

"Yeah. They said something about avoiding any unintentional contact."

The school had sent emails to students and anyone else affiliated with the school, urging them to avoid casually dropping by to visit people who were sick and to avoid going out carelessly while the flu was going around.

"At any rate, I've been checking on her," I added.

*"I see. That's good to hear, I'm glad."* She wasn't just saying so—she sounded genuinely relieved by that. *"I know that this is a tough time for you right now, but...do you have plans to go to Keyaki Mall today?"*

"Not sure... Well, I was thinking of going out later, but—well, if there's something you want to talk about, how about we decide on a time and head to Keyaki Mall then?"

*"We can't. I know this might sound fussy, but really, it's not a rendezvous or a date or anything. I just wanted to know if you were going to Keyaki Mall today, Ayanokouji-kun."*

"So, should I just answer with 'I think I'll probably go,' then? Is that okay?"

*"Yes, that's perfectly fine. Thank you,"* Ichinose said. *"If you ever have any trouble, let me know, okay? I want to help you, too, and Karuizawa-san."*

We ended the call shortly after that, but in the end, I didn't figure out what Ichinose wanted after all. Anyway, be that as it may, after looking at the time, I made up my mind.

"All right."

It was 9:45. It was the perfect time for me to leave the dormitory, as Keyaki Mall would open soon. I was curious about what Ichinose had said too, so I decided to take the plunge and head out. I was going to take the shortest, most direct path to the mall and then head for the electronics retailer. Then, I would pick up the yogurt maker without even looking at anything else. If I ended up

carelessly buying this or that, it just meant I had gotten roped in and manipulated by the mass marketing strategy.

I set my empty coffee cup down on the sink and headed for the front door. Mission: Start.

### 3.1

I ARRIVED AT KEYAKI MALL at 9:55 a.m. on that same day. It looked as though seven students were already here, waiting for the mall to open at the entrance closest to the dorms. The gender ratio was five girls and two boys. The girls were clumped into one group of three and one group of two. Both groups were engrossed in friendly conversation. You would have no way of knowing they were steeling themselves for battle.

The boys, on the other hand, comprised one first-year and a third-year. Even though they looked behind them, they didn't look like they were expecting anyone else to come, and they went back to fiddling with their phones. It looked like they weren't together. While it was perfectly conceivable that they could be headed for the electronics retailer, I couldn't imagine that they were after the yogurt maker.

The first-year boy was somewhat overweight, wore glasses, and was holding his phone horizontally with both hands. He was busily sliding and tapping his fingers against the screen, likely playing a mobile game. Someone of his demographic would be interested in game consoles and game software.

However, there was one thing that felt strangely off. Why weren't any of my classmates here? I took out my phone and opened the group chat once again, which had gotten so animated yesterday. More than a few of them had said that they were planning to go to the electronics retailer today to buy something, their messages phrased like declarations of intent. Among them was Hondou, who had excitedly posted messages to the group chat saying that there was something he had wanted for a long time featured in the

advertisement. I didn't want it myself, but even so, competition over it was apparently not meager by any means.

Many people voiced concern about whether they'd be able to buy their items even if they rushed to the store as soon as it opened, and several people had warned others to be careful not to oversleep. The clock on my phone marched on, and it was now 9:56. The store's opening time was inching closer and closer. However, there was no sign of Hondou, nor of anyone else from my grade. Based on the flow of the conversation in the chat, it was strange nobody was there.

"...What is going on?" I wondered.

Something was off—students who were supposed to have been here weren't. And looking at the seven people who *were* here right now, none of them appeared to be anxiously fidgeting or anything. Normally, wouldn't people be sticking close to the entrance, prepared to fight over the slimmest advantage? Were these things that you could still buy, even if you were leisurely playing a mobile game? I felt a vague uneasiness, but I mustered my courage and decided to find out. Fortunately, the student amusing himself with games was my kouhai.

"Do you have a second?" I asked.

"...Yes?" replied the student.

The first-year looked up at me, with a somewhat irked expression on his face. He really had been playing a game, after all. Perhaps he had pressed the pause button: the screen was paused. I immediately got the impression that he really didn't want to be talked to by a senpai, but I didn't have any other choice. I was trying to confirm something.

"So what brings you to Keyaki Mall?" I asked.

"Huh? What? Are you imitating a TV show or something...? I don't understand what you mean."

“...Uh?” I had tried to speak to him as naturally as I could so as not to scare him, but I’d somehow put him on high alert. However, I didn’t have any time to waste, so I cut to the chase. “I was wondering if you came to check out the sale going on at the electronics store today. They have cheap game consoles and stuff.”

I tried to emphasize the game part as much as possible. He must have gotten my meaning then, because he responded with an “Ah!” However...

“Yeah, even though the game console is technically called the latest hardware, it’s the old LCD type, plus it’s an unpopular version too, since the controllers break easily. They call it a big sale, but it’s more like a clearance sale. Even the games they’re selling are ones that didn’t get great reviews. They’re old. They’re selling them for like 20 or 30 percent off the MSRP. Besides, I’m the type of person who buys the digital games for consoles, anyway.”

...I see.

I could understand the individual words coming out of this kouhai’s mouth, but I couldn’t comprehend what he was talking about. One thing was for sure, though: he had absolutely no interest whatsoever in the sale.

“I’m just heading to the bookstore. Today’s the release date for a manga I want. Oh, I bet you’re wondering why someone who downloads games is going to buy the physical version of a book rather than the e-book version, right?” said the student.

“Uh no, I—”

I tried to grip the torrent of words, but approximately 20 percent of it had already slipped out of my head. My brain was refusing to commit the information to memory, partly because he mumbled and partially because it was all nonsense. “It’s certainly true that for the e-book versions, you can buy them as soon as the release date rolls around, plus being able to read it whenever you want via your phone or tablet or whatever is appealing. But I like the feel of the book in my hands. I suppose you could say that I’m in the camp

that wants to keep physical copies of manga and novels around forever, I guess. I'm only talking about manga and novels, though; I'm not opposed to going with e-book versions for other things in the slightest. For instance, catalogs about the year's best products to buy, photo books, stuff like that. I tolerate those kinds of things. Up until junior high, I went with physical editions for those, too. Since I came to this school though, I have more access to phones and tablets, so I made the switch. Oh, is it okay if we end this conversation here, though? I'm in the middle of an event right now in my game, and you're distracting me."

After my kouhai had finished his intense information dump (which I hadn't really listened to), he went back to fiddling with his phone. He no longer so much as even glanced in my direction.

The time was 9:58. It really was getting to be the time when familiar faces and other students interested in the sale should have been showing up. Maybe the sale wasn't getting as much attention as I had thought? Perhaps that was because, like my kouhai had said, it was more inventory clearance. However, I heard that last year was a huge deal, and judging at least from the reactions of my classmates, including Hondou, it seemed like people had really looked forward to it.

*Wait, don't tell me, did I get the date wrong? They had said "tomorrow" in the chat, but wasn't it possible that they had made a mistake? Or maybe it was "tomorrow" meant day after tomorrow, since the group chat started in the evening right before midnight.*

I was starting to think maybe that was it. I hurriedly took out my phone and brought up the online ad again.

"...It's today," I mumbled.

I hadn't made a mistake. The opening of the store was getting closer and closer, and yet not a single student had come here.

*What is going on...?*

When the store opened, I was going to head straight to the electronics store

and buy a yogurt maker. Nothing could go wrong, right?

"Oh, hey, that reminds me. Yuuko just sent me a picture a minute ago. She says that the line at the north entrance has gotten crazy. Here, check it out."

"Whoa. And I even went last year. But I couldn't buy what I wanted, since they didn't have enough in stock at all. Hey, why are people lining up at the north entrance, though?"

"Oh, you remember last year, there was someone who got hurt when everyone scrambled toward the store? From Class B?"

"Oh yeah, that's right. Everyone was in such a hurry that they ignored her. It was awful."

"Yeah, exactly. Apparently, that's why people are supposed to go to the north entrance starting this year. One of the employees guided people there."

The terrible truth—what I needed to hear but didn't want to—finally reached me. Time cruelly marched onward, and it was now ten o'clock in the morning at Keyaki Mall.

## 3.2

**B**USINESS WAS BOOMING AT the electronics store, with lots of students and other people affiliated with the school continuing to crowd it. I kept watching the store from a slight distance, observing the situation as it unfolded. Customers who had queued up in line thirty minutes before the store opened got in first and snatched up all the featured products. I wondered how many of the good items would be available to the general consumers; the ones coming in like normal.

Even so, I wasn't worried.

*What kind of student wants a yogurt maker? I mean, I was sure that there weren't any students who wanted one. So, there wasn't any need to worr—*

Those thoughts had been running through my mind as I entered the store later, but my hopes had been thoroughly dashed.

There was a notice that the yogurt makers had already sold out. Reality once more smacked me in the face. On seeing this news, I fell into despair and almost reached for one of the newest models of yogurt makers, but the price was more than double the cost of the model that was on sale. I somehow managed to refrain from buying it, and left the store. Even now, students who bought the things they had wanted from the various retail stores were walking out of the shops, beaming.

"I'm so disappointed..."

It was no exaggeration; that was truly how I felt. I put how I really felt right then into words. I had made the painful mistake of not researching the buying patterns associated with this kind of sale, to my great sorrow. Was this the end of the road for losers? For the side of the battle that didn't gather intel?

There was a supermarket in the mall that was on my way back. After finding myself sucked inside, as though something had led me there, I headed straight for the dairy section without even taking a basket.

Milk and yogurt were available for purchase from numerous manufacturers. If not for my error in tactics, I could have gained the power to transform this milk into yogurt myself. I had yearned to test it. That desire now surged within me, stronger than before. The distance between me and the milk cartons and the yogurt, which I normally reached for without a thought, now felt insurmountable. It was not, alas. It was not a mere problem of distance.

It was as though invisible glass was blocking me. This must have been how that one boy had felt when he really wanted the lamp shaped like a leg on the other side of the display case at Christmas...Wait, no, was that what he wanted?

Men and women alike were pushing past me for the milk and yogurt, one after another, snatching them up. I was actually running low on yogurt right now myself back in my dorm room. However, getting some right here would

be...like admitting defeat, wouldn't it? I told myself to leave, but my legs wouldn't move.

The reason being... Well, the milk was on sale for a special price.

Furthermore, yogurt was also about twenty yen cheaper than normal. If it hadn't been for the yogurt maker incident, I most definitely would have just bought my items and gone back to my dorm.

“...”

I couldn't move away from the dairy section. I had dairy sleep paralysis.

“Eggs are cheap now too, huh...” I mused.

Due to inflation and the situation out there in the world, prices in general had continued to go up and up. Even though this school was somewhat isolated from society at large, with its own unique rules, we weren't separate from the rest of the world. Upon graduation, students' days of confronting the prices on the shelves in front of them and consulting with their wallets would begin. Granted, I didn't have any plans to deal with reality like that when I graduated, but still... Well, I guess I was an ordinary person for the time being anyway, so it was probably fine for me to think like that.

It had been a mistake for me to come here thinking that I was just going to take a peek at things. At any rate, I couldn't just stand around here forever, that was for sure. I forced my heavy legs to move, dragging myself away, firming up my decision to leave.

But just as I was in the process of making my withdrawal, a very emotional time in my life, someone called out to me.

“Did something happen? This is the first time I've ever seen you look so crestfallen, Ayanokouji.”

“...Kiryuuin-senpai.”

Strangely enough, even though my legs should have been feeling heavy, they suddenly became exceptionally light, and I was now able to leave very easily.

That was probably because I had originally just stopped here to look at the yogurt lined up on shelves forlornly and had no real need for real yogurt in my life.

I left the store empty-handed and Kiryuuin followed me. While we engaged in conversation, I explained the situation to her—eloquently, of course. Perhaps I had wanted someone to listen. I guess I just wanted someone to understand my yogurt-maker disappointment.

I told her about how I had found out about the sale last night, and about how I had rushed over to the mall when the stores opened, but I had misunderstood where I was supposed to have lined up. As a result of that misunderstanding, other people bought them all up, and I couldn't get one.

Once she had finished listening to the whole sequence of events, she chuckled, as though she found it amusing. “You never cease to fascinate me, Ayanokouji. You really are quite a special man.”

“I am? But I’d describe myself as the sort of ordinary high schooler that you’d find anywhere.”

“See? You’re funny! Well, no, actually, I suppose it’s partly true,” said Kiryuuin. “I laughed because you were acting so normal, so much like a high schooler. I think it’s odd that you’re so fixated on a yogurt maker, but I suppose if you replaced it with something normal, it wouldn’t be so strange.”

“I see...”

“But still, you really wanted a yogurt maker that badly? I think it would be much cheaper, tastier, and safer to just buy the yogurt directly from there,” said Kiryuuin, casting a glance back toward the supermarket that we were walking away from.

“There’s meaning in making your own food. I lost that opportunity.”

“Even though you don’t have any expression on your face, I can feel your ardor.”

"Do you not cook, senpai?" I asked.

She nodded unreservedly, without a moment's hesitation. "When I was little, I challenged myself to do so in order to please my parents, but I haven't cooked at all since then, no."

"Were you met with disastrous results when you tried cooking?"

"No? Well, the result was indescribable, somehow," she mused. "It wasn't particularly good, nor was it bad. My parents seemed pleased with what I had made for them. Normally, I probably would have worked to improve my cooking so I could see their happy faces again."

From the sounds of it, she hadn't decided on an orthodox path in life. She had completely abandoned the path of the culinary arts.

"I normally get something from the convenience store or the school cafeteria," Kiryuuin added. "Even when I do stop by the supermarket, I've gotten into the habit of buying ready-made things from the grab-and-go area."

I'd kind of had the feeling that she might have cooked, but from the sounds of it, the opposite was true. She didn't cook at all. Actually, the strange thing was that when she told me that she didn't cook, it felt perfectly natural.

"What about you? How did you come to like cooking?" asked Kiryuuin.

"My high school debut," I replied. "It's my first time living on my own, plus there's the fact that I started in Class D, and we lost our Class Points early on."

"So, you decided to cook for yourself and save on food costs?"

"Even though the school provides ways for us to eat for free, it would be agony to eat nothing but that all year round. Besides, by cooking again and again, I improve my skills and become more efficient. I've just recently started to think that I'd like to maximize my cost-effectiveness."

The yogurt maker had the potential to be a new step up for me. I was beginning to lament its loss again.

"And? If you really wanted the yogurt maker, couldn't you have simply bought

one anyway?" she asked.

"No, because the difference in cost between the one featured in the sale and the other one they had in stock was outrageous," I sighed. "It looked like it came with a lot of different features, but I just wanted to be able to ferment milk, so I decided that I didn't need it."

That was exactly what they wanted. The stores wanted you to feel desperate to get your hands on something, so you'd be willing to put down a hefty sum of money.

"Did you try checking online?" she asked.

"No, not yet."

"In that case, you should take a look before you get discouraged. There are things you can get for surprisingly low prices. There are a few sites I recommend."

With that, she took out her phone and typed some keywords into the navigation bar. We stopped at the end of the walkway so as not to get in the way of other walkers, and I looked at the items available for sale. And I saw that the price was almost exactly the same as the special sale price offered today.

"That is surprising," I remarked.

"That's how it is with 'sales,'" Kiryuuin explained. "It's not just the electronics retailer at this school that's having trouble dealing with inventory because they can't get people to buy products of the same model number. That's just a matter of common sense. Anyone our age ought to know."

"This has been a learning experience."

"Why don't you buy it online, then?"

"I do see that I could buy the item for the same price, yes, but I also discovered something new. I've decided that I'll look for something simpler to buy after I get back to my room."

When I looked it up with Kiryuuin, it turned out that the yogurt maker that

had been on sale, the one I originally wanted, had more features than I needed, too. I could get a different model, one that was more stripped down, for a cheaper price.

“More than anything else, though, I feel like I’ll have lost if I buy the same model online. By the way, Kiryuuin-senpai, are you all finished shopping?”

“I only followed you because I saw you hunched over earlier and thought something interesting was going on,” she replied. “I didn’t have any business in the supermarket in particular.”

“It’s rather unusual for you to go out of your way to come talk to me just because you think that I look curious.” I wondered if she had nothing to do over winter vacation and just had a lot of time on her hands.

“I know what you’re thinking. But let me assure you, no, I didn’t just poke my nose into something seemingly trivial just because I’m a person with a lot of free time on her hands.”

“That’s nice if true, but I find that doubtful.”

After I told her what I honestly thought, she gave me a wry smile and then explained once more: “The fact of the matter is that it’s because it’s you, Ayanokouji.”

“I’m not worth the compliment, though.”

“You surely understand that there’s no point in acting modest by now. When I saw you engaged in combat on the Uninhabited Island, the sight was burned into my brain, whether I wanted it to happen or not.”

She was talking about what happened in the summer, when I had finally settled things with Tsukishiro on the beach. Kiryuuin had been in the fight too, helping me by trading blows against Shiba, whom I had thought to be Tsukishiro’s subordinate. I supposed it wasn’t unreasonable for her to see me as special, and not just physically, since that was an unusual situation.

“That’s precisely why I’m so disappointed,” she added.

"Disappointed?" I asked.

Kiryuuin let out a deep breath, like a girl might do before she was about to confess romantic feelings that she had been keeping hidden in her heart for a long time. "Over the summer," she said, "I often thought to myself, 'If only this school had a system to repeat a year.' That went through my mind a lot."

"Repeating a year?"

That was a thought that students who weren't set to graduate from Class A might consider at least once, out of desperation and pain. But they would have to immediately give up on the thought. Besides, this school didn't allow students to repeat a year ever.

"Seems like a preposterous thought, doesn't it?" said Kiryuuin.

"Definitely. Many students don't resist the established rules."

Anyone could *break* the rules. But pushing back on them, overturning them? Convincing the school to allow something outside the rules, getting them to change the rules? Much harder.

"Even so, I wanted them to consider the option of allowing me to stay here next year," she said. "If they granted me that, then I would be able to see your progress over that year from up close."

"I never imagined there was a student who'd think that way," I said. "You really are a strange one."

This was Kiryuuin we were talking about, though, so I guessed it was more than just a passing fancy that had popped into her head just now.

"There's nothing you cannot buy with Private Points," she went on. "But when I tried to check the answer with the teachers with that understanding in mind, as a fundamental premise, the answer I got back was 'no.'"

"I'm just asking out of curiosity, but would the answer still have been 'no' even if you had the largest number of points ready? Twenty million?" I asked.

I figured that if the school didn't allow for students to repeat a year, then if

there was a way to overturn that stance, it would be by paying a huge price. It would've been nice if Kiryuuin had answered my question, but from the look on her face, she didn't even need to give me one.

"The biggest purchase at this school is the right to stay in any class you like," she said. "If you're some kind of weirdo, you could imagine, say, moving into Class A right before graduation, repeating a year, and attaining the dream you've held onto for three years."

"You're right. I suppose there's no purchase bigger than that," I agreed.

The power of attaining a place in Class A vs. the cost of being held back a year was enormous. Who on Earth would want to stake twenty million points by choice to invest in a high-risk move like being held back academically?

"Still, why is it that even if you do have a huge sum prepared, being held back a year isn't allowed?" said Kiryuuin. "Don't you think that's strange? Rights to prevent or nullify expulsion, to transfer classes, things like that are all included in the school rulebook, but the idea of being held back a year has been excluded from the very beginning."

She wasn't wrong. Private Points were immensely valuable; there was nothing you couldn't buy with enough of them. But then there was the fact that there *were* some things that you couldn't buy. The idea of a student intentionally staying back a year was something that couldn't be deemed more valuable to a student than transferring to Class A in their own grade level. Nevertheless, if something wasn't allowed, there was always a reason for it.

"A student who wishes to be held back would have been at this school for over a year," Kiryuuin said. "They would have a greater knowledge base of things like special exams, and so on. From an informational standpoint, that might be unfair to the other classes."

Information, huh? It was certainly true that you could think of it that way, but students could share information. That was fairly routine, a kind senpai offering as much information as they could to their kouhai. Besides, the information

advantage wouldn't be that much of an advantage. The special exams that the school gave each year were fundamentally different from the ones given the year before. Even if a student who was held back had the advantage in things like written tests, it was unlikely to have a significant impact on the overall situation.

"Perhaps it's because there's a fear that it would lead to a reduction in the institution's value, as a school?" I asked.

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"Students who graduate from Class A at this school receive enormous benefits," I reasoned. "Companies consider students who graduate from Class A to be outstanding, so they will hire those students on the spot. However, if there were students who were held back a year mixed in among the crowd, doubts about the value of the school would start to come up, wouldn't they? If you were to look at just the results from the outside, from the perspective of someone in higher education or a place of employment, you would see the reason a student had graduated from Class A to have been only the result of them repeating a year. This could apply to you too, Kiryuuin-senpai. 'She's an odd one who didn't graduate from Class A in her own year because she was inefficient, and she got held back a year.' You have the ability, but that truth would become blurred to the people who do the hiring. It would become exceedingly difficult to assess your worth."

In that case, even from the school's perspective, those wouldn't be students they'd want to send out into the world.

"So, you're saying that the school has rejected adopting the system of having students repeat a year so that they could eliminate that troublesome possibility," said Kiryuuin.

"I figured that if there were a reason for it, that would be it," I replied.

"Well thought out on your part. If I were to interview myself for a job, I probably wouldn't hire myself," said Kiryuuin. It was a self-deprecating joke

that she could tell precisely because she had confidence in her own abilities.

“Please transfer to Nagumo’s class rather than considering the notion of staying back a year on a whim,” I urged.

“I’m not interested in that.”

“Even if you had twenty million points saved up and on hand, which you got solely as a result of your own abilities?”

“Even then. I don’t care which class I graduate from.”

“You’ve decided that there isn’t much difference between graduating from Class A and Class D for you personally, Kiryuuin-senpai, but if you *could* graduate from Class A, then that would be the best option,” I said. As long as no one would be unhappy over it, it would be better to transfer to Class A.

“The school allows you to convert your Private Points into actual currency upon graduation,” she reminded me. “That’s more important to me than graduating from Class A.”

No matter the amount, those would be precious funds for a student who had just graduated from high school. However, it still really wasn’t normal to go that route, when you weighed that option against the possibilities that awaited in the future if you graduated from Class A, which would be almost priceless.

“Private Points may be able to fulfill most of a student’s wishes, but it’s not like they can fulfill any and all of them,” I said. “I think they have that kind of meaning, too.”

“Yes, that’s true. Like it’s impossible to use Private Points to fire a teacher that you don’t get along with, for instance,” responded Kiryuuin, saying something troubling with a grin on her face.



“It almost sounds like you’ve tried doing that before.”

“Ha ha, let’s just say my response to that is ‘no comment.’”

“You really don’t have any interest in Class A at all, do you?” I asked.

“Surely it’s not that surprising, is it? It might indeed get me classified as ‘strange and unusual,’ but I can’t imagine I’m the first. And besides, Ayanokouji, I thought you weren’t too different from me yourself in that regard, no?”

It was certainly true that I didn’t have a strong obsession with graduating from Class A. That was because I wouldn’t receive the greatest benefit the school had to offer: the generous support.

“It’s true that I might not be so different from you, Kiryuuin-senpai,” I admitted. “But even if there are other students out there who aren’t interested in Class A, like me, they are still vastly different from you, Kiryuuin-senpai.”

“And what is the difference between us?” she asked.

“Contribution to the class. Usually, even if it’s not something they need for themselves, those students will work for the sake of their friends and classmates. Someone like you, Kiryuuin-senpai, someone highly capable, could have lent a hand to Class B and even crossed swords with President Nagumo. I’m sure that even with differences in personality and thinking, there must have been at least a few times when your classmates had tried to rely on you, senpai.”

Kiryuuin responded in the affirmative, with a simple “Yes, you’re right,” speaking as though we were discussing someone else.

“But for three whole years,” I added, “you’ve only been acting for your own sake. This whole time, even now, you haven’t ever deviated from that.”

“Isn’t it possible that I’ve been contributing in my own way behind the scenes?” she said. “It might simply be that I was no match for Nagumo.”

“If you look at things from Kiriyma-senpai’s perspective, as someone from your same class—wait, no. If you look at it from the perspective of the entire

third-year grade level, you can tell. You only do things for yourself, Kiryuuin-senpai, but you won't drag others down. Which is precisely why both enemies and allies alike don't think about you at all."

To both allies and enemies, she would be someone with no presence at all, completely invisible. Whether you were capable or incompetent, it wasn't easy to make yourself invisible.

"There were some people who used to speak to me out of spite or bitterness, but before I knew it, even they stopped trying to talk to me," Kiryuuin agreed.

It was hard to argue with her results. She was regarded by the school as having a prominent level of Academic Ability and Physical Ability in their evaluation, which meant that she had achieved a certain level of success in written examinations, in classes, and in competitions related to athletics. She wasn't cutting corners anywhere anyone could catch her out, unlike a lot of people. Me included.

"May I ask you a few questions of my own?" she said.

"There's something you want to ask me?"

"What a foolish thing to say. I have countless things I'd like to ask you. But I'm sure that asking a dozen or so questions would only annoy you, and there's no guarantee that I'd get the absolute truth in response." She knew perfectly well how things worked. With that said, she went on to ask me her question. "Can I assume that you've solved all of the numerous problems that you've been dealing with?"

That was a broad question, but I didn't need to think too deeply about what she was referring to.

"Yes, thanks to you. I've been spending my days in peace now." I emphasized my point by stepping forward and walking around a little, as though I was showing her that I was living in peace right now, at this very moment.

"No matter how many times I think back on what happened, I'll never forget

your flowing movements on the beach back then. You far exceeded my assumptions, my imagination, and even what is conceivable as human potential. I'm sure that if I were to tell my esteemed grandfather about you, he wouldn't believe me."

"Your 'esteemed' grandfather?" I repeated.

"I apologize. Does that sound strange to you? That's what I've always called my grandfather." Kiryuuin's eyes creased nostalgically, as though she were remembering her grandfather as we spoke. Even though I understood the meaning of what she said, the phrasing had been strangely formal.

"That is an unusual way of saying it," I remarked.

"I am a young lady from a rather nice house, after all," she said. "Everyone always referred to me as 'young miss' at home."

"Is that so? Well, to be honest, that's not a way of living I'm accustomed to."

I had always felt there was something there that indicated she had a good upbringing. On the other hand, though, I had sensed a wildness about her too, so it wasn't like I'd had proof one way or the other.

"I spent much more time with my esteemed grandfather ever since I was little, rather than with my parents, who were busy with work. If I were to use a more familiar expression, I guess you could say that I'm quite the 'grandpa's little girl.' She smiled nostalgically, her eyes creasing again. That wasn't the kind of look you'd see on the face of someone with a lot of bad memories. "When I found out that I was going to be attending this school, I got so terribly depressed over the fact that I wasn't going to be able to see him for three years."

"It sounds like your grandfather really cherishes you too, Kiryuuin-senpai," I said.

"He used to say things like 'You can drop out of school anytime! You're always welcome back!' As if it was his catchphrase."

That was a pretty terrible thing to say to a grandchild who was about to spread her wings and go out into the world. He did seem a little unusual.

“But he’d be shocked if you actually dropped out of school, wouldn’t he?” I said.

“No, knowing my esteemed grandfather, he would be genuinely overjoyed, without a doubt. And besides, if I hadn’t made the decision to choose my own path, I’d be able to go on to most any college or workplace anyway, with just one word from him.”

Meaning, in other words, that even if she didn’t graduate from Class A, she’ll still get the same level of—or, no, she would be able to get even more support than that from her grandfather. From the sounds of it, he had both power and favor.

Speaking of which, there was a young man in my own class who was in a similar position, though his views were different from Kiryuuin’s.

“Do you know anything about Kouenji by any chance, Kiryuuin-senpai?” I asked.

“Kouenji?” she repeated. “Why did you suddenly mention that name?”

“Why? Well, look.” I indicated with a glance, and she followed my gaze to see Kouenji himself walking over this way—I’d happened to notice him while we were having this conversation, and I couldn’t help wondering whether she knew him.

“I don’t think I have any ties to an oddball like him,” said Kiryuuin.

He attracted the attention of the students surrounding him, who were eyeing him as though he was a sideshow attraction. He was carrying a large box all by himself. Upon that box was emblazoned the logo of a major manufacturer. Judging from the unique shape of the cardboard box, I could guess it was probably a large flat-screen TV.

“So, you don’t know him, then?” I asked Kiryuuin. “Apparently, Kouenji’s the

son of a very prominent businessperson, a captain of industry. And is that he's already been named as the next president of the company."

"Is that so? Well, I suppose that might be the root of his unconventional nature," she said. "But unfortunately, no, I don't know much about him either. However, if he is as famous as you say, I wouldn't be surprised if my esteemed grandfather has some connection to him... At any rate, it's none of my business."

From the sounds of it, Kiryuuin apparently had no involvement in the worlds of politics and business. In that sense, I was grateful to know that she wasn't caught up on the somewhat unusual family name, "Ayanokouji." Well, even if she did remember it, it would be absurd for her to try to connect that directly to me. No matter how unusual the name, you couldn't simply assume I was of the same family lineage as others who shared it.

"Perhaps that's the basis for your lack of interest in Class A, in your case?" I asked.

"Heavens, no," she replied. "I decided to take the plunge and come to this school because I was sick and tired of being born into such a wealthy family. I have no intention of depending on them after graduation. The class war has already been settled for the third-year students, so I'm concentrating solely on higher education and job hunting, just like everyone else in Class B and below."

She had a clear path in mind, then—and no intention of accepting favor from her family.

"Just for reference, may I ask what kind of path you're planning to take, Kiryuuin-senpai?"

"For the time being, I'm planning to go to college. If I enroll as a scholarship student, then I can save on necessary expenses. I'll work a part-time job to earn the money I need for daily living. It's not really unusual."

"The scholarship aside, that sounds like any ordinary student," I remarked.

"I want to live my life unfettered, to pursue my studies, and become an adult," she said firmly. "Afterward, I'll work somewhere, probably for some small or medium-sized company. Or something smaller than that, honestly, I wouldn't mind. In any case, I'm going to lead a life that has nothing to do with the status of the Kiryuuin family name."

She wanted to live her life freely—unobtrusively, in the sense that she wouldn't stand out in society, but she wouldn't be bound, either. Kiryuuin's words seemed to convey that kind of strong will in them.

"That doesn't sound bad," I mused.

"I know, right? I don't need anything special. That's how I see it now, at the very least."

In a way, that was strikingly like what I had thought when I came to this school. It didn't matter if I went up or down in the class rankings. I would spend my time for the sake of my own freedom and live my life. And now, here was someone else who had carried that thought, without changing, all three years.

"However, while a peaceful, uneventful life may seem easy to obtain, it really isn't," Kiryuuin added. "Even if it's good enough for now, the Kiryuuin family name will follow me after graduation, whether I want it to or not."

I didn't know anything about the Kiryuuin family, but if she was from a reasonably famous lineage, then it was only natural that she would be railroaded onto a set path. Even if she could escape to this school out of a sense of rebellion, like I had, the end would come once three years was up.

"So, your grandfather won't leave you be, then?" I asked.

"Oh no, if anything, it's my parents who wouldn't leave me alone. Unlike my esteemed grandfather, they don't have even an ounce of a sense of humor. It's not difficult to imagine how they'd react if they knew I was planning to lead a normal life."

I wondered if perhaps her family situation was rather like my own, in that

regard. As I listened to her tell me her story, I felt like there were striking similarities to my own case.

"I have no regrets over my actions over the past three years. I've lived my life here as I've pleased." Even as she declared her convictions, I could see a faint trace of hesitation in her side profile, and a moment later she said, "Even so, I have had a smoldering desire within me—to see myself choose something beyond just my freedom. Maybe that desire is behind what I've been doing, in my search into whether there's some way that I could repeat a year."

If only Kiryuuin-senpai could have lived her life here with all her might—what would have happened? There was no doubt in my mind that she would've become a threat to Nagumo's Class A. Living up to one's family lineage might also be a demanding thing to do, too.

"Your battle with Nagumo still isn't over yet though, right?" she asked me.  
"What are you planning to do?"

"If the opportunity arises, I'd like to resolve the matter, but I'm admittedly not sure what's going to happen," I answered.

It was all up to the school. Whether there would end up being an opportunity for me and Nagumo to have room for our battle would be a matter of luck.

Besides, there were always some paths that wouldn't be feasible, regardless of whether one wanted them to happen or not.

"Well, I can't possibly imagine you'd be careless or conceited," Kiryuuin said, "but just in case, be careful during your third semester."

"Is that advice from a senpai?" I asked.

"Nothing as heavy as advice. It's just that I had heard Nagumo talking on the phone with someone the other day, and he seemed wholly intent on gathering gossip about second-year students."

I wondered if that meant Nagumo had his feelers out much more than usual so that he could make that fight with me a reality.

"The next special exam you're going to be taking may prove to be trickier than you think," added Kiryuuin.

"I'm sure that the school administrators won't divulge any information about that even indirectly, but it seems easy to surmise what the difficulty level of the special exams will be like based on past statistics," I said. "Truthfully, how did you do on the special exam you took at the beginning of the third semester of your second year?"

If there was a high probability that similar trends would continue, then Nagumo must be making inferences based on the special exam from last year.

"Not sure," she replied. "In our grade, Nagumo has total command of everything; he has authority. I'm just a student in Class B, living her life day by day. Nothing more. I don't remember every little detail."

"I see."

It was certainly true that Kiryuuin had seldom participated in the special exams. Her claim that she didn't remember at all bothered me a little, though.

"However, at the time of that special exam, there was one person who left Class B," she said.

"When you say they 'left,' do you mean they were expelled from school?"

"That's what I remember. Most likely, it was a necessary sacrifice. Someone who was cut off and thrown away due to Nagumo's tuning."

Nagumo's idea of the ideal outcome and the toll. If this was a special exam in which expulsion was inevitable, then there would be considerable sacrifice. If what Kiryuuin was saying was true, there could be a harrowing challenge in store for us in the third semester.

"Ordinarily, eliminations would be coming from Class C or Class D, right?" I said.

"Hard to say. I don't remember the circumstances from the other classes." Kiryuuin was less interested in the other classes than what was covered on the

TV news this morning. For someone who said that she didn't remember anything, though, she seemed to remember the highlights. "That being said, it won't necessarily be the same as last year. There's no need to get too worked up over it."

"That doesn't sound very convincing coming from you, Kiryuuin-senpai, when you just said you don't know anything." I didn't want to press the matter too deeply.

"Sorry for holding you up," she said. "It's not every day that I get the chance to talk to you about silly trifles like this. It was a nice opportunity."

"You took the words right out of my mouth. I was happy to be able to talk to you too, Kiryuuin-senpai," I replied.

Kiryuuin was about to turn and walk away, but then she suddenly stopped and looked back at me. "This is just a simple hunch on my part, but I have a feeling that in the near future...somewhere, not at this school, we will meet again."

"How often are your hunches proven to be correct, senpai?" I asked.

"About half of the time," she replied.

So, really no more than a hunch.

"In this case," she went on, "I'm fairly confident that I'm right. If I had to give a reason, it's because you're not an ordinary high school student. If you don't get buried out there in society, you may eventually catch my eye again."

"Wouldn't it be better if that didn't happen, though? You're supposed to want a normal life, Kiryuuin-senpai."

"Hm? Ha ha ha, yes, you may be right about that."

With a casual wave of her hand, Kiryuuin started walking away, heading out of Keyaki Mall.

*We'll meet again somewhere, huh?* I thought to myself. That future would probably never come. But, if such a future did exist, then—no, better to just

forget about that thought. There wasn't any point in holding such delusions about the future. Right now, at this moment, I was living freely. That was enough.

### 3.3

AFTER PARTING WAYS with Kiryuuin, I thought back to the conversation I'd had with Ichinose this morning. I'd been wondering whether she would come to the mall, but the important part, the part that sounded like there was something she wanted to do, remained unclear. Normally, I'd just say that I should use my phone and tell her that I was still in the mall, but judging from how our conversation went, it sounded like she didn't want me to do that. Besides, if I read into the peculiar way she'd phrased her question, she had probably decided that she could still meet me without having to get too deeply into the matter as long as I was going to Keyaki Mall.

For the time being, I decided not to go looking for Ichinose, and to continue on my way. If I didn't run into her by the time I got outside, then I could always turn around. With that thought in mind, I headed back toward the entrance of the mall. A large Christmas tree was set up there. Yesterday too many friends and couples stood in front of the tree, taking photos and admiring the tree, but it was going to be taken down tomorrow. I was sure that Kei, who was confined to her bed, greatly regretted being absent, but there was nothing we could do about it. There were signs that this flu was secretly turning into an epidemic, with nearly twenty people in the school having already tested positive for it.

As I walked by the tree, I noticed that there were many students gathered around it. Actually, there might have been even more students here than there were yesterday, if only at this moment. Among the crowd of people, I spotted Ichinose. Three first-year girls surrounded her, chatting away happily with a warm smile. Since I didn't have the courage to go over and call to her, I decided to keep my distance and watch for a while. Just then, Hoshinomiya-sensei and

Chabashira-sensei were passing through by chance, and they spotted me.

I'd often seen the teachers in their personal attire during long vacation periods, but I couldn't help but feel like there was something particularly off when it came to Chabashira-sensei, who habitually wore suits.

"Oh? You're alone?" asked Hoshinomiya-sensei, the first to approach me. Chabashira-sensei appeared right after her.

"Yeah, more or less," I replied.

"I would've thought for sure that you and your girlfriend would be spending the holiday doing couple-y stuff, though," she said. "Did she dump you?"

"Don't tease students, Chie," Chabashira-sensei scolded her. "Besides, Karuizawa has the flu," said Chabashira-sensei.

But to my surprise, Hoshinomiya-sensei replied, "I already know."

"You already knew, and you still said that?" said Chabashira-sensei.

"Because it's just so darn frustrating, you know? You know, like, 'Students are too young to spend Christmas with a lover!' That kind of feeling?"

"You probably would've done the same thing every year up through this past year. It's just this year you're alone," said Chabashira-sensei.

"That's *why* it's unacceptable. Maybe I know what it's like to be you, Sae-chan," said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

"Don't lump us together. I don't mind spending Christmas alone." Chabashira-sensei turned to me. "Anyway, sorry Ayanokouji, that's unfortunate. That you can't see Karuizawa, I mean."

"There's nothing I can do about it," I shrugged. "Besides, I don't have any aversion to spending Christmas alone either."

Chabashira-sensei chuckled a little at that, but Hoshinomiya-sensei looked offended, like I'd hurt her feelings. Seeing this contrasting pair, I thought back to what Mashima-sensei had said. It definitely did seem like if I picked a side

between the two of them, it would lead to a lot of trouble.

"Where are you off to, Chabashira-sensei, Hoshinomiya-sensei?" I asked.

"Karaoke!" Hoshinomiya-sensei replied. "Even we teachers have the right to enjoy ourselves, after all. Right?"

"You're the only one who wants to sing, Chie," Chabashira-sensei reminded her. "I'm just tagging along."

"Ohhh, really now? You're not in high spirits yourself, Sae-chan?" said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

"I'm not in 'high spirits'..."

Even teachers would get fed up with the constant tension of the class competition. I watched the two teachers head off to karaoke while exchanging grumbles and telling each other off, wondering if they were friends or bitter enemies...

In the meantime, I noticed that Ichinose was looking over at me. Apparently, the girl talk was finished, and I had ended up making her wait for me.

"What a coincidence, huh, Ayanokouji-kun?" she said.

"Yeah, it sure is. You looked like you were having a lot of fun with those first-years."

"Those girls are from Class 1-B. You remember how Yagami-kun, who used to be on the student council, suddenly got expelled from school? Well, I guess that there's still some lingering effects in their class, and they're in disarray. But even so, it sounds like the girls are feeling positive about things."

Given the nature of why he was expelled—because he had been trying to get me kicked out of school—I would have thought that his class wouldn't be getting penalized, but I supposed that the class would suffer the inevitable damage that came with people being removed. No doubt their difficulty would continue for a while.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"Since about half past ten, I think," said Ichinose.

Considering that it was almost twelve o'clock now, that meant she had been waiting here for over an hour now. But I supposed it would be odd to describe it as "waiting." What Ichinose was doing today was based solely on her own principles.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun? Would you take a picture with me?" With that, Ichinose took out her phone, somewhat shyly. "I've been taking selfies with a bunch of people today, to make memories."

Perhaps she wanted to prove what she said was the truth, but Ichinose opened the photos folder on her phone and showed me the pictures that were dated for today. It turned out that, yes, she was indeed happily taking pictures out in front of the Christmas tree with various students. Among them were even pictures taken with some of the boys in her class. She had a picture of her together with those first-years from earlier, too. Ichinose claimed that she was waiting here to make memories, but her real aim was revealed immediately:

"But actually...I mostly wanted to take a picture together with you, Ayanokouji-kun," she admitted. "That's my biggest wish."

Ichinose didn't explain things any further, but it wasn't difficult to see why. If she had a picture of just me and her on her phone, then Kei and those close to her probably wouldn't look at that too kindly when they found out about it. But, if she took selfies with a whole lot of people, girls and boys alike, then there wouldn't be any problem even in the unlikely event that someone did try to get on her case. In fact, though there weren't many, there were some pictures of Ichinose with other guys from other classes, too, with just the two of them together in the shot. Perhaps they were happy that Ichinose had reached out to them, because they were making peace signs at the camera, albeit bashfully. Furthermore, regardless of grade level, there was no pattern when it came to the type of boy, either. It looked like she was willing to take pictures with any student who approached her, without showing any favoritism.

"So, I was wondering...would you take a photo with me?" she asked.

"Of course I will," I replied. "I don't have any reason to turn you down."

"I'm glad!"

She had gone through an incredible amount of effort just to take a picture with me.

"I hadn't really intended to take pictures with this many people, but I guess people must have heard that I was standing here taking pictures or something, because a lot of people just started coming. It's been a bit of an ordeal," said Ichinose, bashfully.

From the sounds of it, word was starting to spread, and people were saying that Ichinose wanted to take pictures with a lot of people.

"How many people have you taken pictures with?" I asked.

"Let's see, with those girls earlier, that makes forty-three, I think."

That was a lot of pictures in a short amount of time.

"I plan to keep going for a while afterward. People would think it meant something if I just suddenly stopped now, right?" said Ichinose. She didn't intend to leave any evidence of what she was after, even once she had completed her objective. "Well, I guess, not that it wouldn't look suspicious in a different way, though."

She had a warm, goofy smile on her face as she thought back on what she was doing, which someone could only interpret as strange when viewed objectively. If I had tried doing the same thing, I definitely would have been treated like a complete weirdo, without a doubt. However, that same behavior was interpreted differently coming from Ichinose.

She pulled on my arm, guiding me so she could adjust the angle for the shot. Then she leaned in close, switched to the inner camera, and held her phone out in her hand.

"Now is good," she said. "No one's watching."

I had guessed that she must have been constantly checking our surroundings and had determined this moment would be the perfect time. Then, Ichinose wrapped her arm around mine, and snapped a photo. Then, afterward, she took another shot, but this time without her arm on mine and with a little distance between us.

“I’m not going to keep the first one saved on my phone, so... Is that okay?”

“Asking for permission after the fact, eh?” I teased.

“...Yeah, I guess so. If it’s not okay though, I’ll delete it right away.”

“Nah, you can keep it,” I told her. “Besides, even if anyone does see it, I wouldn’t blame you. No matter how it’s used, it would be my fault for allowing my picture to be taken.”

“Are you sure that’s okay? I don’t want to cause a rift in your relationship with Karuizawa-san...”

“It’d be bizarre if I conveniently let you take my picture and then complained about it after, though. Right?”

If I wasn’t prepared for what might come, then I shouldn’t have let her take my photo in the first place. It’d be different if I’d been forced. We were up close to each other for about ten seconds, and then, in a flash, we were back at our normal distance. No one had seen that moment of intimacy.

“Oh, that reminds me,” she said, “you met up with Chihiro-chan yesterday, right, Ayanokouji-kun?”

By Chihiro, she meant Shiranami Chihiro. I thought back to the sight of her listening to music with her headphones on.

“You’re well informed,” I remarked.

“Well, she and I get together often on weekdays or weekends or whenever, after all. I was thinking, well, I kind of got the feeling that Chihiro-chan was acting a little differently yesterday. Did something happen? She didn’t say anything specific or anything, but she did react when I mentioned your name,

Ayanokouji-kun, so I was wondering if maybe you two met up and talked.”

I supposed that for someone like Ichinose, who was always attentive to her classmates’ feelings, it hadn’t been hard to spot.

“By the way, what do you mean when you say, ‘acting differently?’” I asked. “I hope it’s not in a bad way,” I asked.

“Oh no, she’s totally okay. I don’t know what you guys talked about the other day, but I felt like Chihiro-chan was smiling much more than usual yesterday.”

It was a somewhat risky gamble, but it seems like Shiranami had taken my encouragement to be resolute to heart, with positive effect.

“I’m glad to hear that,” I said.

“But...” I was pleased with Shiranami’s growth, but Ichinose wasn’t going to let that be the end of it. “I know that she’s still really fixated on me right now, but don’t get too deeply involved, okay? She tends to get easily influenced by things,” Ichinose cautioned. I guess she didn’t want me to get any closer to Shiranami than I already had. “If you do ever want to hang out with Chihiro-chan, I’d like you to ask me to come along too.”

“All right,” I assured her. “I’ll definitely do that.”

Was that Ichinose’s duty as the protector of her class? Or was that something she was doing for herself? I’d need to be careful if I ever met up with Shiranami again.

“Ichinose-senpai! Ayanokouji-senpai! Hello!”

“Oh, it’s Nanase-san!” exclaimed Ichinose.

Nanase had spotted Ichinose and me and hurried over to us at a slight jog.

“I heard that you were taking selfies with people, so I rushed here,” said Nanase. Apparently, word had been spreading.

“Don’t you think this might get out of hand?” I teased Ichinose. “You might end up getting stuck here taking photos until midnight.”

"Well, I guess if it happens, it happens. Maybe I'll become the legendary girl who took selfies with the entire school out in front of the tree," Ichinose joked back, a big, happy smile on her face.

"Why are you here with Ichinose-senpai, Ayanokouji-senpai?" asked Nanase.

"Oh, I just happened to come here to get a picture with Ichinose when I heard she was taking photos, too. I won't get in your way."

I decided to take a step back. It would've been bad if I carelessly stuck around.

"I don't mind if you join in a picture with me, though," said Nanase.

"Nah, I'll pass," I said. "It'd be tough for me to be held up here like Ichinose, and besides, not many people would want to take a picture with me."

Nanase, sensing the situation, didn't force the issue, and she went to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Ichinose. Both girls started to adjust their position to get ready to take the picture, but then Nanase must have realized something, and stopped moving.

"I'm sorry, but could you please wait a moment?" she asked.

"Hm? Sure, I don't mind. Is something wrong?" asked Ichinose.

Nanase apologized and ran off somewhere. Apparently, she was looking for a student from her same class—it turned out to be Housen. He was walking around all alone with a frightening look on his face, not even so much as glancing in our direction. Nanase strolled up right beside Housen like a little puppy, called to him, and then pointed her finger in our direction while she talked to him about something.

"Maybe she's inviting Housen-kun to come take a picture?" Ichinose suggested.

"It...looks that way," I said.

Inviting a classmate wasn't especially strange, but this was Housen. Housen did not seem the type to take selfies with anyone. However, after his short conversation with Nanase, he must have had something on his mind, because

he walked over toward Ichinose and me with that frightening look still on his face.

"Looks like they're coming over," said Ichinose.

"It...looks that way."

Housen wasn't just looking over at Ichinose, but also at me, standing beside her. I was here enjoying a nice, relaxing winter vacation—I really wanted to avoid getting into any trouble or sparking new disturbances.

"Um, may I have Housen-kun in the photo with me?" asked Nanase.

"That's completely fine with me. Is that what you want?" asked Ichinose, her words implicitly containing the question, "*Housen wants this, too?*"

Housen didn't say a word in response. He simply kept alternating looks between Ichinose and me...and still with that terrifying look on his face.

"Yes, I think he's totally fine with it," Nanase said. "Come on, Housen-kun, get in the picture."

With that, Nanase pushed Housen from behind, practically shoving him. I thought for sure that he'd resist, but surprisingly enough, Housen got in close, not dragging his feet at all. Just when I was wondering what exactly the two of them had been talking about just now, he glared at me.

"You've been starin' at me for a while now," he grunted. "What, is there somethin' stuck on my face?"

"No, it's just—" It wasn't like him to act like this. There must have been something behind it.

"Huh? If you got somethin' you wanna say, then say it," he spat.

"Nothing." I decided to back down.

Housen responded with a derisive snort and looked away from me. "Hah."

He had an intensity that was unbelievable for a first-year student. I couldn't help wondering whether I'd get stabbed if I wasn't careful. At any rate, despite

some rough words directed at me, Housen went ahead and took pictures with Ichinose and Nanase. It looked like Housen still had something to say even after they were done with the picture, but then he just stuck his hands in his pockets and walked away.

“What just happened?” I thought aloud. I didn’t understand what that was about.

Nanase then approached me and whispered quietly, so that no one else could hear her: “To tell you the truth, Housen-kun likes Ichinose-senpai quite a bit.”

“...Seriously?”

I never would have known. Well, actually, I also thought the way he so readily stood next to Ichinose like that to take a picture just now was strange. But even so, that news was just shocking.

“I think that he came here to check things out, because he heard that Ichinose-senpai was taking pictures with people,” Nanase said.

Meaning that he hadn’t just been passing through by chance—he had come intentionally?

“No, I mean, I’m sure it was really just a coincidence, though,” I said. “Wasn’t it?”

“I don’t think so,” said Nanase. “I came to Keyaki Mall today because Housen-kun called me. I think he wanted to use me because he probably couldn’t talk to Ichinose-san himself.”

So, if it really was a calculated move on Housen’s part, did that mean he just wanted to take a picture with Ichinose, then? That’s what it seemed like, although I really didn’t get that impression from the way he was acting, at all. There was no way for me to check into it any further though, as Housen had already stalked off.

“Oh, Ichinose! Take a picture with us, too!”

Two third-year girls walked up to Ichinose, waving to her as they came up.

More people would keep coming up to Ichinose as long as she stuck around here, I figured. I greeted the two third-years with a slight bow and then decided to leave.

"See you later, Ayanokouji-kun." Ichinose gently waved goodbye to me, and then turned her attention to our senpai, like that was what she was here for. I was just one out of a crowd of forty-three... Well, wait, including myself, Nanase, and Housen, it was forty-six. So, I was nothing more than one out of a crowd of forty-six. She'd gone through all that, just so I'd be one of them.

## Chapter 4: Casing Each Other Out

DECEMBER 26. Students from Horikita's class, including Sudou and some others who didn't have any club activities today, gathered at a café in Keyaki Mall. There were a total of eight people present: Ike, Sudou, Shinohara, Matsushita, Mori, Wang, Maezono, and Onodera. It was Maezono who had suggested they meet up. Everyone cocked their heads to the side in confusion when she proposed they get together, saying that she wanted to "have an important discussion about the future of the class." First and foremost, it was far too serious a topic for Maezono to be bringing up, given how she was. Secondly, the usual key players of the class were intentionally excluded from the meeting.

Why had people like Horikita and Hirata, central figures of the class, not been invited? They were people who, by nature, were indispensable in discussing the class's future. Most of the eight people chosen for this meeting didn't have a strong reluctance toward the idea of getting together, and had accepted Maezono's invitation thinking that it was partly just to hang out. It was Matsushita alone who had some suspicions about this meeting from beginning to end. However, she didn't mention these suspicions to Maezono directly, and, at least ostensibly, had accepted the invitation from Maezono just like the other six did, as something coming from a friend. She decided to act as though she was simply showing up for a meeting, and nothing else.

Perhaps because eight people were invited to this meeting, a relatively large number, Maezono had decided that the meeting place would be a café in Keyaki Mall. When the appointed time came, at 11:30 that morning, six of the eight had gathered—everyone except for Ike and Shinohara. Upon seeing who else had gathered for the meeting, Matsushita's suspicions grew. She wondered not only about the people chosen for this meeting, but also whether they could

really discuss the future of the class somewhere so public. From the outset, she didn't believe that there would be a substantive discussion because of Maezono's personality and abilities.

Even so, if Maezono was going to label this discussion as important, then Matsushita wanted her to at least be more careful about the location. But Maezono showed no signs of understanding what was going through Matsushita's mind. Instead, she simply roared with laughter as she excitedly talked about what she saw on TV yesterday. Matsushita was relatively close with Maezono and seemed to be in even better spirits lately than before.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting!" said Shinohara.

Matsushita put those thoughts aside as Ike and Shinohara showed up, having arrived somewhat late. The two of them looked quite familiar, holding hands, and they sat down side-by-side on two chairs that had been left open out of consideration for the fact they were a couple.

Sudou, though taken aback by the degree of passion of their love, made a jab at Ike. "Come on you two, don't be doin' PDA in the middle of the day, jeez. More importantly, yer late!"

"Heh heh heh, come on, dude, it's not like that. Right, Satsuki?" said Ike.

"That's right, we're being totally normal," said Shinohara. "Besides, Sudou-kun, you've got quite the history of being late, don't you?"

Sudou let out a sigh as he watched the two of them sit down, still not letting go of each other's hands. "I ain't been late lately though," he replied. It didn't seem like his words reached Shinohara or Ike's ears, though.

"Hey," said Maezono quietly, "those two..."

Matsushita nodded. "Seems like it, yeah."

It seemed that something had happened, either on the 24th or the 25th, and ever since then the two of them had clearly been acting differently. People speculated that they must have taken a step beyond what their relationship had

been so far, crossing some line. Although such rumors had been going around for some time, even during the school trip, it'd never been confirmed. But even so, the way Ike and Shinohara were acting now made their classmates realize that they were right.

Sudou had been friends with Ike for a long time, and last year, they had many, many animated conversations about how they would've liked to do *this* or *that* if they had girlfriends. Sudou was frustrated that his friend had beaten him to it, getting a girlfriend before he did, and now he found himself exasperated seeing the two of them flirting all the time. His feelings burst out with a heavy sigh. "Kanji, you..."

Onodera, sitting next to Sudou, who couldn't understand his conflicted state of mind, spoke to him in a whisper, somewhat worried. "What's the matter, Sudou-kun?"

"Nothin'. Anyway, more importantly, I'm glad that the class is back to normal."

"Yeah. Things were pretty rocky up until just a little while ago," said Onodera.

After the Unanimous Special Exam, there were several people who'd been anxious about whether certain friendships would fall apart thanks to Kushida mercilessly exposing people's secrets. Wang had gotten support thanks to Matsushita and some other girls supporting her after her crush on Hirata had been made public knowledge. And Shinohara, who had been made fun of about her physical appearance, had completely recovered thanks to the support of her boyfriend, Ike. These people all coming together and meeting like this today was evidence of the fact that their relationships were gradually mending, little by little.

"Maezono, come onnnnn, get this show on the road already," said Sudou, trying to hurry things along, unable to look at the hot and heavy couple playfully flirting with each other.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. Ahem. First, thank you all for coming here

today,” said Maezono.

Maezono began the meeting first by thanking all seven of the people she had approached for coming. Maezono, when she first came to this school, had been quarrelsome, willing to snap at anyone and everyone, and had a foul mouth and a bad attitude. Maturity had softened her, however, and she had mellowed out—at the very least, she didn’t appear to be disliked by any of the people currently present. In fact, she was close to being best friends with Wang and Satou. Maezono was ostensibly included in that category of good friends too. But inwardly, Matsushita didn’t think much of Maezono at all.

“I don’t mind gettin’ together or anything,” Sudou said. “But if we’re gonna be talkin’ about the future of the class, why is it just us here? This is important, ain’t it?”

He seemed to have the same question in mind that Matsushita had. After hearing her concerns being expressed out loud, Matsushita hoped the conversation would continue along those lines.

“Yeah, now that you mention it, you’re right,” agreed Ike. “Why?”

He and Shinohara exchanged glances, as though they had just noticed this issue for the first time. Matsushita had a theory tucked in the corner of her mind that Maezono simply hadn’t thought about it, but...

“Yeah. To tell you the truth, there’s a proper reason for it... I deliberately chose not to invite Hirata-kun and the others,” Maezono said. “There’s something I wanted to make clear before the third semester starts.” She seemed to be giving what she was saying proper consideration. With that established, she began to explain the purpose of this discussion. “When I say that there’s something I want to clear up, I mean regarding Ayanokouji-kun.”

So this was about a classmate? The seven students Maezono had invited didn’t react strongly. They seemed puzzled why they needed to discuss him at all.

“I know it might be a problem for me to say this,” she said, “but, well, I don’t

think I like Ayanokouji-kun. Well, no, I guess that's not quite right. To be perfectly honest, I'm not good at dealing with him." Perhaps she had decided that her words had been a little harsh, because she softened the initial statement.

"Not good at dealing with him?" Why's that?" Wang asked, but she continued speaking before getting an answer. "Ayanokouji-kun isn't someone who causes problems, and he's not pushy." Wang couldn't imagine anything about him that would give Maezono a bad impression of him.

"Well, no, he's not," admitted Maezono. "But I guess it's like, I don't like suspicious, gloomy people, or like... If someone can't get along with the group, it makes me feel like we're not on the same wavelength, and I just get a weird feeling. So, I guess that's why I've been keeping my distance from him, I think?"

Matsushita had remained silent until then, but now she asked pointedly, "So, you're saying that your aversion to him is one-sided?"

"Yeah... I guess that might be true, yes," said Maezono.

"Well, I mean, sure, I guess if I had to say, Ayanokouji's kind of a gloomy guy," Ike agreed. "Y'know, like, the asocial type? He's always quiet."

The image Maezono had of him wasn't exactly wrong, per se. It wasn't about liking or disliking him, merely the fact that Ayanokouji's personality gave an impression of someone taciturn and a little gloomy.

"It's different now, though. At least, I think so." Sudou was the first to dissent. He provided evidence for his claims, too: "Besides, if he was that suspicious and gloomy in the first place, there ain't no way he could wind up datin' that Karuizawa. Y'know?"

"Yeah, the fact that he's dating Karuizawa was a real surprise," said Ike. "But still, I mean, come on." While he found part of what Sudou said convincing, the image that he had of Ayanokouji in his mind was largely unchanged. Ike had judged what Sudou had said earlier to be more about sticking up for Ayanokouji than actually providing a sound argument, and he pressed Sudou on that point.

"Actually, you've been talkin' to Ayanokouji a lot lately, Ken. When did you guys get to be so chummy?"

While Sudou was a bit taken aback by this, he picked up his cup containing his drink. "Hey, it wasn't just me and him. You were there too. We all hung out a bunch when we first started school."

"Well, sure, but it was, like, just hangin' out with classmates. We weren't especially close or anything. Did you think we were close friends then?" countered Ike.

"W-well, I..."

Sudou had been throwing out counterarguments up until that point, but he choked on his words as he thought back to when they started school. As Sudou and Ike started glaring at each other, though, Maezono hurriedly put a stop to it.

"Hey, hold on!" she said. "No fighting! We haven't even gotten to the main topic yet. I've got a bunch of questions I want to ask you today, Sudou-kun, since you're started to become closer friends with Ayanokouji-kun."

The standoff subsided as Ike and Sudou broke eye contact. Sudou caught his breath before turning to Maezono.

"...Me?" he said.

"Yeah, you. I think that you'd know the most about what's going on with Ayanokouji-kun lately out of any of us." Maezono felt there was no point in dragging this out any further. She lowered the volume of her voice a little, and started to get to the heart of the matter. She started by saying to her friends, who still didn't understand what this was about, "I don't think that Ayanokouji-kun is just some gloomy classmate. I think he's hiding something."

With that said, everyone, including Ike and Shinohara, began to understand what Maezono wanted to say.

"So, does that mean that today's meeting is about discussing who exactly

Ayanokouji-kun is? Is that right?" asked Wang.

Maezono nodded several times in affirmation. "I excluded his girlfriend, Karuizawa-san, from this meeting, of course. But also Satou-san, because she's Karuizawa-san's close friend, and also people who are often in contact with Ayanokouji-kun, like Hirata-kun and Horikita-san, as well as Hasebe-san and the others that he used to be in that group of friends with."

"But why?" asked Wang. "I would've thought it'd be better to have as many people who know him well as possible, but..."

"I'm not so sure about that," Maezono said. "Actually, I think they'd probably mislead us if we included them. I think that all those people I just named probably know who Ayanokouji-kun really is. Otherwise," she muttered under her breath, "things don't add up at all." That was precisely why she had excluded students who had strong connections to Ayanokouji, based on what she could tell of the situation.

"Okay, but if that's true, then why'd ya call me?" asked Sudou.

"Well, if nobody here knows anything about Ayanokouji-kun, then the discussion's not gonna go very smoothly, is it? I figured that you'd tell us things honestly, Sudou-kun." Maezono responded with pride in her voice, as she had thought it out in her own way and selected people that could be trusted. Someone with information would be vital if they were going to further explore the issue.

"Okay, I think I get what you're saying," said Shinohara, but she tilted her head to the side in confusion. "But is this really something that warrants meeting in secret about?"

"At present, yeah, it is," Maezono replied. "I mean, sure, it would be nice if there was nothing to talk about, or like, I think that would be best, but... I mean, it's obvious that he's strange, right? Ayanokouji-kun, I mean."

The people present exchanged looks. There was a period of silence for a short while, but then someone unexpectedly spoke up next, backing up Maezono's

opinion.

"...I certainly do find him a little mysterious, if I'm being perfectly honest," Wang admitted reluctantly.

"I know, right? Right?" Maezono made no attempt to hide the delight in her facial expression at the appearance of a sympathizer to her cause.

"Mysterious? What do you mean by that, exactly?" Shinohara asked, leaning forward slightly. She wasn't sure exactly what Wang was referring to.

"I think there's a gap between his OAA, what the school has assessed and disclosed, and his real abilities, at the very least," Wang said. "I suspect that his OAA scores are actually lower than his real abilities, whether we're talking about Academic Ability or Physical Ability."

"Come to think of it, what were Ayanokouji's OAA scores again?" asked Ike.

Ike didn't know offhand, so Shinohara, who was sitting next to him, brought out her phone and showed him.

"...Yeah, something's weird," he huffed. "I can't accept that he's just flat out better than me in every category." Ike recalled he'd groaned upon seeing the scores in OAA.

"Well, it's just that you're no good, Kanji," replied Shinohara.

"He has improved quite a bit, though, even from the time that OAA was first introduced," said Wang. "Perhaps he's just working hard to improve, like Sudou-kun, but I don't feel like we can see any trace of that. Wouldn't you say so?"

Sudou, who'd initially had the lowest possible score in Academic Ability, an E, had raised his score by studying day after day. His improvement in his attitude and everyday behavior was clear to everyone in their class. On the other hand, though, in Ayanokouji's case, no one had been able to see any sign of him putting in that kind of effort. It wasn't surprising that Wang would find it all so mysterious, wondering about the sudden, strong impression she got seeing him

score high on a test and his incredible speed during a race.

"And the conclusion that we can draw from that is that he's not giving things his best effort, right?" added Maezono. This was what she had been wanting to say since the start, the reason she had gathered her friends together.

"I think that's reasonable," said Wang.

"You mean he's holding back?" asked Shinohara.

"Of course, right?" Maezono replied. "It means that he hasn't been taking things seriously this whole time."

"But why would he do that?" asked Ike.

"Maybe it's like, he hates working hard, or something like that?" Shinohara suggested.

"Wait a minute, hold on," Matsushita cut into the tide of negativity. "I understand what you're trying to say, but that's not necessarily always the case, right? People don't have to show their work outwardly, whether we're talking about studying or athletics. If Ayanokouji-kun doesn't like to stand out by nature, it's possible that he's just putting in effort behind the scenes."

She felt it was possible that in contrast to Sudou, who had been working on himself out in the open, Ayanokouji had gained competency by working on himself behind the scenes. If he had been hiding his abilities from the very beginning, then his reputation would suffer. Everyone would judge him for making no effort for the sake of the class. If the group was going to speculate without evidence, Matsushita didn't want them to assume something negative.

"I sure didn't have the best reputation when I started school here, for real," Ike mused. "Maybe he's just trying desperately hard now to prove himself to everybody? Heck, I'm working pretty hard on that myself right now, and I've been making progress." He didn't add a lot and simply seemed to agree with Matsushita.

"Do you really get what's going on here, Ike-kun?" said Maezono, slightly

angry.

"Wh-what the eff? Why are you acting like I don't get it?"

"Because, in the special exam we had the other day, Ayanokouji-kun got five questions perfect," she told him. "Didn't you notice that?"

"Well, sure, yeah, I noticed, I guess... But some other people got all their questions right too, didn't they?" Ike said. Students who had an Academic Ability score of B or better, like Horikita and Hirata, had done perfectly.

"The problems that Ayanokouji-kun solved were even more difficult than the ones that Horikita-san and the others did," Maezono argued. "I also saw the results for students in other classes too. The questions he answered were so difficult that even some students with an A score in Academic Ability got them wrong." She couldn't imagine a small amount of effort would have been enough to explain that.

"But, hey, maybe it's, y'know... Oh, if I remember right, he's really good at math, right? If they were math questions, then it makes sense. Right?"

"Only one of the problems we solved was a math question, though," said Maezono. She'd done her research before calling this meeting. "The rest were two English problems, one chemistry problem, and one contemporary literature problem. They weren't all from just one subject."

"I think you might be on to something. I was kind of wondering about that, too," said Wang, nodding. She was an excellent student herself. "Taking that into account, I'm starting to think that the discrepancy between his OAA scores and his real abilities is actually even more immense than I thought."

"I know, right?" said Maezono. "I mean, right? It is *definitely* bizarre, don't you think?"

Matsushita thought about interrupting Maezono's judgmental ranting, given that she'd made up her mind and this wasn't productive, but she held herself back. It was obvious that it would be difficult for her to propose something like

the idea that the questions Ayanokouji had gotten right had just so happened to be covered in the material that he'd studied. If Matsushita spoke up like that too often and too carelessly, it would make her appear as though she were simply rushing to Ayanokouji's defense. Matsushita didn't necessarily disagree with what they were saying, but she wanted Ayanokouji to play a useful role in the class in the future. She didn't want to allow a buildup of aggression from other students to interfere with that. That was precisely why she had decided that she shouldn't make a statement that would be clearly seen as a show of support for him at this time.

"Maybe he just took wild guesses and got them right, though?" offered Ike. Ike wasn't coming in as a defender of Ayanokouji or anything, but his rather spontaneous comment ended up saving Matsushita. Ike's ability to naturally speak up and say the things that Matsushita couldn't on her behalf made her think that perhaps he was just the person she needed in this situation.

"No, it wasn't *guessing*, and it wasn't coincidence, either," Maezono said firmly, with particular disdain for the word 'guessing.' "Ayanokouji-kun must have always been smart."

"Is there another reason for that?" asked Wang. She seemed curious about the truth.

After taking a look around, Maezono lowered her voice once more. "This is just something I heard, okay? So...you remember how in the special exam on the uninhabited island this year, they had these tests and stuff over the island that you could get points or stuff from? I heard that there was one that Ayanokouji-kun participated in, and he answered all the questions correctly without any trouble at all, even though they were supposed to be super hard."

The fact was that Ayanokouji had possessed a high level of academic prowess even before the special exam was held in December. Though Maezono had prefaced her statement with a disclaimer that it was something she heard from someone else, she wanted the others to take the rumor seriously.

"I don't know what the truth is, but... I think you're right," said Wang. "The image I have of Ayanokouji-kun in my mind now hasn't changed very much from the image I had of him when we started school here, but... It's just, I kind of get the feeling that our circumstances have changed a lot. Hirata-kun also seems to trust Ayanokouji-kun a great deal, too. They call each other by their first names. I think that Ayanokouji-kun is probably the only person Hirata-kun is like that with."

Wang had feelings for Hirata; she paid more attention to him than anyone else did. If she said something like that, then there was no doubt about it. They all listened attentively, not hesitating to trust what Wang said in the slightest.

"Horikita-san's the one leading the class, but... Don't you think that maybe Ayanokouji-kun's been pulling the strings from behind the scenes, and more than just once or twice?" said Maezono.

In response to Maezono's impassioned speech, others, starting with Onodera and then Ike and Shinohara, nodded their heads deeply in agreement. Matsushita, listening to the discussion as it unfolded around her, had come to understand something once again: everyone in their class had already begun to realize the potential that Ayanokouji possessed. That was because, of course, Ayanokouji was taking more overt action than he had during their first year, but the problem was that there was a possibility people would interpret this negatively. In that case, Matsushita decided, she should shift to a different position for the time being.

"I think that your read of the situation might be correct, Maezono-san," she said. "Ayanokouji-kun has a long history of getting mediocre results, so it should follow that even if he's improving, he shouldn't suddenly leap to the results he's getting now. And maybe if he had been serious about things from the very beginning, he could've had an A in Academic Ability, at the very least."

A look of triumph settled onto Maezono's face when she saw that Matsushita, who had been a skeptic before, came around to her side. A woman's intuition. The look on Sudou's face didn't escape Maezono's notice, and she pressed him

on it. “Sudou-kun, do you know anything special about Ayanokouji-kun?” she asked. “Preferably something the rest of us don’t know, if possible?”

Sudou looked hesitant, like he was of two minds. Maezono was bursting with anticipation, waiting for more from him.

“What? Is there something? If there is something, tell us,” she said.

At the start of their second year, Sudou had felt something when he saw what happened with Housen. He had caught a glimpse of Ayanokouji’s strength. Now, he wondered whether he should bring it up. Although that series of events was a secret, so nobody should know about it. Sudou mulled it over internally, thinking, *“I’m pretty sure they didn’t say anything about keeping quiet about Ayanokouji’s ability itself, though, right?”* If it was something that they didn’t want anyone to get word of, then Sudou would have strongly reminded himself to keep quiet.

“...Yeah, okay,” he said at last. “You and the others are only focusing on the academic side of things here, Maezono, but I think his amazing growth isn’t just in Academic Ability.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” asked Maezono.

“You guys saw it yourself, right? How fast Ayanokouji was back in that relay race. He was faster than me.”

Although they hadn’t technically competed directly against each other at full strength, Sudou had to admit that he would lose to Ayanokouji, no contest required. At this stage, few people were surprised by Sudou’s claims; it was already well known that Ayanokouji had competed against the previous student council president, Horikita Manabu, and that what they saw had been unusual.

“Well, yeah, of course,” said Maezono. “Everyone knows that already. Right?”

Sudou revealed more of the truth. “But it ain’t just that he’s quick. It’s like, okay, it’s kinda frustrating for me to admit this, but he’s more athletic than I am in general.”

"M-more than you, Sudou-kun?!" exclaimed Maezono, incredulous.

Sudou continued, choosing his words carefully, perhaps because he was thinking of how best to convey how amazing Ayanokouji was as straightforwardly as possible. "If there's anything that I could beat him at in a serious competition, basketball would pretty much be it. And even then, I wouldn't wanna actually play against him, if possible. It ain't like I feel like I'd lose, but it's like, I have a feeling he'd really drive me into a corner if we were gonna play. It's like, that's what my gut tells me."

Ayanokouji had made Sudou, the person with the top-rated Physical Ability score in their entire grade level, raise the white flag. That fact alone was incredibly stark.

"Okay, that's incredible if true, but why do you think that?" Maezono was excited, but she pressed Sudou for more.

Since there was no way that Sudou could ever mention anything about that fight with Housen, he decided that he'd just need to make something up on the spot. "I got into it with Ayanokouji before. I picked a fight with him, totally uncalled for on my part. I tried to punch him, but I couldn't land a hit on him at all. It's like, I could feel how incredible he was from that fight."

Sudo hid the lie behind a sip of water. Even while coming up with that story, though, he thought back to the time Ayanokouji had fought Housen. Ayanokouji was completely undaunted in the face of Housen, an opponent Sudou would have been helpless to defeat. And on top of that, Ayanokouji didn't seem afraid of being stabbed; he fought back so calmly. The truth was that Sudou had seen plenty, enough to make him realize that he wouldn't be able to win against Ayanokouji if they ever fought. Sudou's words had the weight of real emotion, which made it seem truthful. Maezono was convinced.

"Maybe Karuizawa-san started going out with Ayanokouji-kun because she realized that he had more to offer than Hirata-kun...? If so, then damn, Karuizawa-san's great at sniffing out talent." Maezono made no attempt to

mask her tone, sounding at once as if she was complimenting Karuizawa and disgusted with her.

"Yeah, I've been wonderin' that too for a while," Sudou said. "Why did Karuizawa start datin' Ayanokouji?" That was something he didn't understand, precisely because he had experienced how incredible Ayanokouji was. "If Karuizawa found out about Ayanokouji, saw what he was like, then she would have chosen him. I could believe that, I guess."

But just then, another emotion was born within Sudou. He felt that, if that were true, then there wouldn't have been any reason for Ayanokouji to choose Karuizawa as his girlfriend. Her physical appearance aside, Sudou felt that Karuizawa's personality was unpleasant. He knew that was a subjective opinion, though, so he decided to keep it to himself.

"I dunno, dude, I feel like from your point of view, that's an insane level of praise, Ken," Ike said. He definitely grasped what Sudou's explanation meant, but he seemed uncertain. "I still don't really get it."

"Well, I mean, it's only natural you'd feel that way," Sudou replied. "You won't get it unless you experience it for yourself, I guess."

"Yeah, that's true. Okay then, so how do you think we can get a handle on how incredible he is?" asked Maezono, hoping that Sudou would give a little more to substantiate his claim.

"I dunno, I—wait. I got it. What about, like, suddenly throwin' a punch at him? Come up from behind, like *wham*."

"No way, dude! From behind? Forget it!" said Ike.

"Dude, there ain't no way you're gonna land a hit on Ayanokouji unless you sneak up on him," said Sudou.

"Come on, man, I could totally hit him with a sneak attack," Ike protested. "But I wouldn't do that because it's not fair, in the first place."

"Okay then, why don't you try him head-on, then?" Sudou crossed his arms.

"You'd have a zero percent chance in that case, dude. Zero."

"Hey man, we don't know that for sure, do we? Y'know, I'm pretty confident in my fighting skills." Ike stood up, alternating between throwing punches with his right and left fists. He was making *swish swish* sounds with his mouth, but his movements were sloppy.

"You've never actually been in a real fight before, though," said Shinohara, exasperated, prompting Ike to sit back down. He was being embarrassing.

"H-hey, shut up. It's just that I don't bully weak people," snapped Ike.

"Yes, yes, okay," replied Shinohara.

"W-well, all right, let's forget fighting," said Ike. "Anyway, if this is all true, then I'd like Ayanokouji to really get serious about stuff, like, *bam*. If he did that, then the class'd be safe. Or like, don't you think that maybe we'd really manage to get up to Class A? You think?"

If they could ask Ayanokouji to contribute greatly with his academic and physical prowess, then that would be a significant asset for the class.

"That's right. We're in the same class, and I think it'd be all right to ask him to help," said Wang. If there were exceptional students in class, then they should definitely pull their weight.

"I agree. Let's ask him straight after winter vacation," replied Shinohara, immediately agreeing with Wang's suggestion. It seemed perfectly reasonable.

Expectations of Ayanokouji were beginning to swell. That was something that Matsushita had always hoped for, but at the same time, she was keenly aware that they needed to avoid making a big mistake.

"Wait, I have just one word of warning," she said. "I understand your desire to rely on Ayanokouji-kun, and how you feel reassured by this news, but I really think you should refrain from mentioning any of this in public and from trying to coerce him to do anything."

"Why though? If we don't say anything, then he's not going to be

constructive,” Shinohara grumbled. Surely Ayanokouji wouldn’t be any help if he reverted to being the same kind of student he was before, the kind who always hung in the background.

“Yes, you might certainly be right about that. But I think we also need to consider why he’s been so meek up until this point,” replied Matsushita, gently reprimanding the students who were getting excited over the idea. They should be considering Ayanokouji’s feelings.

Sudou had been hanging back and listening for a while, but this idea must have resonated with him, because he deliberately cleared his throat to get the group’s attention at that point. “Yeah, she’s right. If he hates standin’ out that much, then spurrin’ him on unnecessarily might backfire on us.”

“Yes,” said Matsushita. “And if he becomes uncooperative as a result, that would be our loss, wouldn’t it? We can tell that he has the desire to help us, like answering all those questions correctly on the last special exam.”

Shinohara and the others seemed to understand what the two of them were saying about the danger of trying to forcibly drag Ayanokouji out onto center stage.

Onodera spoke up next. “I agree. If he were someone like Kouenji-kun, the type of person where you don’t know what they’ll do if you leave them be, that would be a different story. But he’s not that type of person. I think it’s okay to just continue treating him as we have until now for the time being.” She echoed the others, as if to provide a final reminder to the rest of the group.

At this gathering, at least eight people had come to a shared understanding. Namely, that Ayanokouji was someone capable, far more so than his OAA scores indicated. And even though they expected he would demonstrate his skills moving forward, they weren’t going to rush him. However, Maezono, the person who had arranged this meeting, had something completely different in mind.

“Is that really enough, though?” she asked.

"Huh?" Onodera turned to look at her.

"I can totally understand that Ayanokouji-kun is an amazing student," Maezono said. "But it's exactly because of that that I'm scared, or like... I guess I find him creepy. Because I mean...he nominated Sakura-san for expulsion, even though they were close, in that same friend group, remember? Then there was the way Ayanokouji-kun pushed Kushida-san into a corner, he just totally steamrolled her... If Ayanokouji-kun felt like it, he could probably get *anybody* from class expelled."

The group had gotten absorbed in their conversation. It had already been over an hour since they got together, and during that time, more groups of students had come and gone, in and out of the café. One student, who had already been at the café a few minutes before Wang—who was the first member of the group to show up to the café—had arrived, now got up from their seat. They held an empty drink cup, which had been emptied some time ago.

"That was a decision that had to be made, though," argued Sudou. "'Cause of Kushida's choice, remember? Our class didn't have any chance at winnin' unless we expelled somebody. It's perfectly reasonable that he chose to expel someone based on OAA criteria, and didn't bring any personal feelings into it."

Everyone's eyes widened in surprise at Sudou's immediate rebuttal.

"What?" he asked, flustered. "Did I say somethin' weird?"

Maezono gave him a puzzled look. "Maybe not *weird*, but it's..."

Matsushita took over. "She means that what you're saying is really well thought out. I guess it's like, you're really growing as a person."

"Huh? The hell is that supposed to mean?" barked Sudou.

"Well, if you were the old Sudou-kun, you wouldn't say things like 'personal feelings' and 'perfectly reasonable,' would you?" said Matsushita.

"Yes, I think so, too," added Wang.

"Hey, that's totally normal! How stupid do you think I am?" replied Sudou.

"Isn't that just a sign of how much you've matured?" said Onodera. She had a happy look on her face for some reason, as though she were the one being complimented.

"Quit pokin' fun at me." Embarrassed, Sudou tried to force the discussion back on track. "Uh, let's see, where was I? Oh yeah, that's right. Ayanokouji ain't really that bad a guy."

"Yes, I know it was something that had to happen," Maezono said. "I get that. That was an exam where someone had to be expelled, no way around it. But it's like... How do I put this? You remember that back-and-forth he had with Kushida-san leading up to it, right? The way he was mercilessly driving her into a corner. Totally indifferently... Yeah, like a machine, you know?"

"It was a situation where he had to be ruthless," protested Sudou, persistently defending Ayanokouji from the standpoint of someone who wanted to stick up for him. "It wasn't like he wanted to do it."

"So, if a similar situation were to come up, would you have Ayanokouji-kun make an emotionless decision again?" asked Maezono.

"It ain't like we should rely solely on Ayanokouji or nothin', but ain't it necessary to make decisions objectively?" said Sudou.

"Objectively, huh? You think that sounds good, everyone?" Maezono said pointedly, indirectly drawing attention over to Ike and Shinohara. Their names could be found at the bottom of the ranks in OAA. There was a hint of the future: Ayanokouji would probably choose one of those students as the next candidate for expulsion.

"W-well, w-w-wait a second here, hold on," said Ike. "Yeah, sure, I guess it's, Ayanokouji's way of doing stuff is kinda, y'know, out there, sure. But having lots of friends is a respectable skill too, and I'd hope he'd take that into consideration, I mean. Plus, if I were to get expelled, Satsuki would cry. I mean, that wouldn't be efficient at all or whatever."

"I absolutely do not want that to happen." Shinohara, seated next to Ike, clung tightly to his arm and wasn't letting go.

"And there's also that whole thing about Hasebe-san really suffering for a long time because of what happened..." added Wang. Bringing up that fact, which had occurred in the very recent past, made her face cloud over.

"If things stay as they are right now, then that'd be good," Maezono said. "But...don't you think we should absolutely avoid a potential future where Ayanokouji-kun becomes the class leader?"

Maezono had finally got to what she was worried about. The thing that she had felt anxious about, that she herself hadn't been able to see exactly in her mind before, had now been put into words.

"There's no way that Ayanokouji will become the leader, though. He ain't got the qualities for it," argued Sudou.

"I'm not sure we can say that for certain, though," said Wang. "If he is skilled, then I think he could be."

"I think I'd welcome it, actually. If Ayanokouji-kun really is capable, then I'd be fine with having him as the leader." Matsushita, who prided herself on her brilliance, was in favor of Ayanokouji taking command of the class in the future. While the lower-ranking students would need to fear the risk of being cut from class, the upper-ranking students, like her, would feel a sense of security in the knowledge that they would never be expelled while he was in charge as long as they were at the top of the class and didn't do anything that would disrupt the leadership.

Horikita, who was currently the acting leader, was different. Since Horikita's judgment was somewhat influenced by emotion, Matsushita didn't know whether she might get cut for some reason. She felt that she couldn't let her guard down.

"I am strongly opposed to that," Maezono said. "I absolutely do not agree to having Ayanokouji-kun become the leader."

“Okay then, in that case, what exactly do you think should be done, Maezono-san?” Matsushita wanted to draw out the last of Maezono’s inexhaustible concerns.

“That’s—” Maezono hurriedly tried to reply, but perhaps she didn’t have a clear answer in mind, because she swallowed her words. “Well, I guess it’s like, I don’t know the answer for sure, so that’s why we’re having this discussion. You know?” Maezono choked it out. It sounded like she was running away from the question.

“Anyway, I don’t think we can get any answers even if we discuss Ayanokouji-kun’s way of thinking any further here,” Matsushita said. “No matter what anyone says, the class leader is Horikita-san. If we dig into this discussion any deeper, we need to have her here with us. Don’t you agree?” It was a harsh statement, but Matsushita said it in as soft a tone as possible.

It wasn’t as though she wanted to fight with Maezono. And it wasn’t like she had wanted to make herself the center of the conversation, either. What she needed to do now was impede them from taking an action that would elevate Ayanokouji’s position in class, by attracting their attention. She could understand how the lower-ranked students like Ike felt, how they feared cold-hearted judgment, but that didn’t matter to Matsushita one bit. In the back of her mind, Matsushita appended her statement with a *“Look, I’m sorry, but...”*

“You have a point, sure, but... Maybe if we discuss it more, we’ll find an answer?” replied Maezono.

Maezono wasn’t ready to stop yet, but the conversation didn’t go anywhere new. Eventually, the topic of conversation shifted to the events of Christmas Eve.

## 4.1

JUST BEFORE 2:00 P.M. on that same day, a male student crammed his empty

cup into a trash can placed outside of Keyaki Mall, and a female student appeared, glaring at him. Both were from the same class, and the boy jovially raised his hand, offering a wave.

"Yo, Masumi-chan," he said. "You're earlier than expected."

"Look, can you stop calling me that?" she snapped. "And don't call me up on a day off."

"Come on, don't say that. I got my hands on some interesting information today."

"I know how much you love gathering info, but don't drag me into it."

"Oh, harsh! This is some pretty useful information though, y'know?"

"In that case, report it to Sakayanagi and earn some points," she retorted.

"Hey, I've got a lot of thoughts on my mind, I'll have you know. You're the only person in class who understands, Masumi-chan."

"Liar."

"It's not a lie. At the very least, you can voice your opinions to the Princess without fear, Masumi-chan," It wasn't the first time Hashimoto had told her that he appreciated her in that regard.

"So?" Kamuro scoffed. "That has nothing to do with 'speaking your mind.' And I hate how capricious you are."

Hashimoto didn't seem bothered by it, though, and tried to continue the conversation. "Come on, just hear me out for the time being. Check out what I've been hearing."

He proceeded to tell Kamuro that he had eavesdropped on a certain group of people having a conversation at Keyaki Mall that day. Hashimoto began to explain what he had heard, supplementing it with his own words based on facts that he had recorded with his phone. He told Kamuro about a class discussion involving eight people including Sudou. Despite her original lack of interest, by the time Hashimoto was finished, Kamuro's expression had shifted.

"So? Pretty interesting stuff, right?" said Hashimoto.

"We already knew about it, though, to a certain extent," said Kamuro.

"The core of Class B. It's not Horikita after all. That glimpse he showed us back on the uninhabited island, that strange feeling I've had about him, until now, that something was off—it all ties in to this. And apparently, behind the scenes during the Unanimous Special Exam, something much more extreme than we even imagined happened. It's not easy to just drop a girl from your group of friends that you've been close with, is it? He can be extremely ruthless. And she wasn't plain in the looks department either. She was cute."

"What do her looks have to do with anything?" asked Kamuro.

"Of course it matters," said Hashimoto. "If Sakura was ugly, then people would think, 'Oh, okay, whatever,' even if they did have to cut her. Looks are a surprisingly big deal."

"You're saying that Ayanokouji is someone who can make cold-blooded decisions based solely on the outcome, regardless of whether he's close with the person or not." While Kamuro didn't agree with his opinion, she demonstrated that she understood the first part.

"That's exactly what I'm saying," he said. "On top of that, as you could tell if you'd heard that group's discussion earlier, Ayanokouji isn't especially high up in the class's social structure by any means, at least not at the time of the Unanimous Special Exam. It would be extremely difficult, a Herculean task, for a person like that to seize control of the class and lead them."

Hashimoto kept the recording on his phone saved securely, putting a lock on it so that he wouldn't delete it by mistake.

"By the way, there's something that's been bugging me for a little while now," said Kamuro.

"What's that?" asked Hashimoto.

"How were you able to eavesdrop on such an important discussion?"

"Simple coincidence. Just got lucky is all."

Hashimoto answered without hesitation, but Kamuro didn't believe him in the slightest.

"Coincidence, huh," she repeated.

The audio data that Hashimoto had recorded started from some point in the middle of the discussion that the students from Horikita's class had been having when they met up in the café. It would've appeared highly likely that they had only been engaging in meaningless chitchat. There would have been no way for him to have foreseen any important discussion taking place there. Even if Hashimoto were just out gathering intelligence at random, listening for anything he could get, how could there possibly be such a convenient coincidence as that?

"Oh? Do you perhaps doubt that it was a coincidence, by any chance?" he asked.

"Meh, not really. If you don't want to talk about it, I won't ask. It's fine to just leave it as a coincidence, right?" Kamuro judged that it was wiser not to pry too deeply and decided not to pry. Hashimoto made no indication that he was going to answer her question, either. "So, now what? Sure, it was interesting info, but what's next? What's the point of knowing?"

"Before we arrive at any conclusions... If it's confirmed that Ayanokouji is not a normal person, then I'm starting to wonder about what he's been doing since coming to this school before today," Hashimoto said. "Where he did it, and when. Ryuuken was on a rampage right when we started school and then he suddenly went quiet. Recently, we've even seen him interacting with Ayanokouji here and there, strangely enough. Right?"

Hashimoto told Kamuro about the assumptions and predictions that he had arrived at, while skillfully interspersing facts that they both already knew.

"So, you're saying that...Ayanokouji is lurking in the background, behind Horikita...and Ryuuken fought him and lost?" asked Kamuro.

"Ryuuuen isn't the type to obsess over one simple win or loss," said Hashimoto. "If that was what happened, that he lost to Ayanokouji, then I think it was more than just losing. I think however Ayanokouji defeated him, he demonstrated a considerable difference in strength between them, enough to make Ryuuuen just give up."

"If that's true, then why's he getting involved with Ayanokouji after the fact? Is he looking for a rematch?"

"I'm sure he probably has that idea in mind too, yeah. But I think it's also likely that Ayanokouji's personality's got somethin' to do with them getting all up in each other's business, probably. Y'know? If Ryuuuen assumes that he can get an advantage by getting involved with Ayanokouji, then he probably figures it's better for Ayanokouji to see him as an ally than to see him as an enemy all the time. Don'tcha agree?"

"So, he's using him for his own purposes," Kamuro mused. "That's what you mean. Well, I guess that's what we'd expect from Ryuuuen, right?"

Even if Ryuuuen lost, it wasn't like he'd simply go down. Once he took a bite out of someone, he didn't let go. That way of doing things was exactly in line with what Kamuro imagined Ryuuuen was like.

"There is definitely that, yeah," said Hashimoto. "But in this case, I think there's more to it."

"More?"

"Ryuuuen is probably using Ayanokouji for his own benefit, yes. But I've got no doubt Ayanokouji knows it too. It's like Ayanokouji's practically tellin' him, 'Okay, if you want, I'll let you use me, so try your best.' Like that."

"What the hell is that all about?" Kamuro asked. "What does Ayanokouji gain from something like that? I get that supporting Horikita from the shadows makes sense, in that he helps the class improve..."

"I'm not sure," Hashimoto shrugged. "Do you think he wants to crush Ichinose

and Sakayanagi by helping Ryuuен, then, or something? If Ayanokouji isn't the type to get his own hands dirty, then relying on someone belligerent and aggressive like Ryuuен makes a heck of a lot of sense, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, you might be right about that."

"I've always had my suspicions before, but now, all that fog is finally startin' to clear up. The most troublesome enemy in Horikita's class is Ayanokouji. And..." Hashimoto hesitated for a moment before continuing. "Ayanokouji is even more capable than the Princess."

"Are you certain?" asked Kamuro.

"Yeah. I'm not going to tack on a 'probably' or 'most likely' by this point anymore. That discussion today left me convinced." Regardless of who the target of their analysis was, there was no way that Hashimoto would ever overestimate anyone to that degree.

"If what you're saying is true, that's trouble-trouble," said Kamuro.

"Trouble, trouble, trouble. It gets worse." Hashimoto calmly declared what no one else in Class A would say. "More importantly, we can expect that the final exam waiting for us at the end of the third semester is gonna result in a major point change. If we do lose against Ryuuен then, we won't be able to hold onto the winning position anymore."

Kamuro glared at Hashimoto, slightly annoyed by what he was saying. From this point forward, a confrontation with Ayanokouji's class couldn't reliably be won. Even if there was no imminent conflict, it was perfectly conceivable that it could come eventually. Their first priority needed to be the final exam that was going to be held at the end of the third semester.

"You think that we're going to lose to Ryuuен, don't you?" she said. "That's why you're worried about the future of Class A. So, what, you're hoping that we'll lose? That's what you'd prefer?"

"I don't wanna lose, come on. Wow, Masumi-chan, you really get mad over

these kinds of comments.” Hashimoto was a little surprised—Kamuro was hardly one of Sakayanagi’s believers, after all. That wasn’t what made Kamuro angry, though.

“It’s just that I don’t like your pessimism is all,” she said. “You always think like that.”

“I’m not gonna deny that I take a pretty negative view,” he conceded. “But there’s nothing wrong with bracing for the worst.” One never knew what kind of upsets or loopholes were in store at this school. Hashimoto was always on the lookout for those, but he couldn’t anticipate everything.

But negativity was futile, in Kamuro’s opinion. She didn’t want to hear it. “Bracing is okay. But the least you could do is keep an open mind. You can do at least that much, can’t you?”

“Come on, don’t say that,” Hashimoto sighed. “You’re the only one I can talk to like this, Masumi-chan.”

“Sigh...”

Even though Sakayanagi used Kamuro, Kamuro hadn’t offered up her heart to her. She complained if she didn’t like something Sakayanagi said, and she would even reject it without hesitation if she thought the situation called for it. That was what Sakayanagi liked about Kamuro, and the same went for Hashimoto, as well.

“But hey, keeping an open mind is good too, right?” said Hashimoto with a smirk. He was just joking, of course; that was just where the conversation had brought them. “As long as we stay in the same class, that is.”

That last remark, though, cast what could have sounded like pessimistic thinking in a new light.

“If you’re talking about Class Transfer Tickets, that would be a risky bet,” said Kamuro. “I can’t imagine they’d give them out to losing classes, and even if they do give them out before the end of the year, there’s only a short window of

time we'd have to use them."

While Class Transfer Tickets were powerful, the truth was that those tickets didn't offer that much benefit. The higher the class you were already in—and thus the more likely you were to earn them—the less benefit there was in moving to a lower class.

"Even if we do lose in this worst-case scenario that you're anticipating, the classes will just be neck-and-neck at best," she went on. "Besides, if you were lucky enough to get a Class Transfer Ticket, would you be able to use it? Even if we assume Ayanokouji's abilities are the best in our grade, it would take a lot of faith to make the jump just for that."

Even if Ayanokouji's class did temporarily move up to Class A, the more competitive the classes were, the more likely it was that their positions could switch again in a single special exam. If Sakayanagi retaliated against Ayanokouji and her class rose to the top again, transferring classes would be a huge fiasco. While it was possible that they could still be saved if they were lucky enough to be able to get another Class Transfer Ticket while in Ayanokouji's class, that was just a series of wishful what-ifs.

"Those tickets would be useless to us, unless we were clearly in a downturn, like Ichinose's class," Kamuro concluded.

That was hardly something that Hashimoto and Kamuro were the first to contemplate. It was a common topic of conversation among students, whenever they were chatting with each other, day or night.

"But those tickets aren't the only method you can use to transfer classes," Hashimoto pointed out. "Right?"

"If you're talking about the thing about twenty million points, then that's impossible," Kamuro said. "That's even more unrealistic than a Class Transfer Ticket."

But Hashimoto was constantly keeping his eye on the possibility of transferring by cooperating with a class as a unit rather than as an individual.

"Look," Kamuro continued, "I know this is probably none of my business, but what do you think's going to happen if you try to profit while others fight?"

She was being vague about what she meant, but Sakayanagi was aware of Hashimoto's suspicious moves. Kamuro herself had even reported them to Sakayanagi more than once now. Kamuro figured it was unlikely that she was the only one on it. Sakayanagi probably had several students across all grade levels probing into Hashimoto's business and keeping an eye on him. If Hashimoto showed any signs that he was going to betray the class and try to steal glory for himself, he'd be targeted.

"No matter who wins, all we need to do is be in Class A at the end," Hashimoto said. "It sounds difficult, but it's pretty simple."

"I understand what you're trying to say. But it's better for you if you don't get any weird ideas." For now, Kamuro was Hashimoto's classmate, at least in name. As his classmate, she wanted to give him a bit of advice—a warning.

"Thanks," said Hashimoto, albeit somewhat absently, in a small voice.

It wasn't that he wanted to betray Sakayanagi. It was just that in order for him to graduate from Class A, he couldn't be totally committed to her, unyielding in following her. The powerful monolith that had existed when they first started school had crumbled, and now, there were three forces vying for the top spot. No, in the back of his mind, he'd always considered the possibility of the top three duking it out. However, his initial assumption that Ichinose's class would end up edging out the others had been a miscalculation.

He hadn't noticed the true weight of Ayanokouji's influence until after they'd passed the midpoint of their second year. Hashimoto had conducted reconnaissance several times, and he hadn't ever caught a glimpse of Ayanokouji emerging as a leader. That was probably intentional, he figured. However, Ayanokouji had been acting conspicuously again and again over the past few months—almost as though his previous mediocrity had been an act.

At first, Ayanokouji had been someone who laid low, and appeared

uninterested in the class competition. What was the reason for the about-face? Had this been his strategy from the beginning? Or had Ayanokouji just decided it was time to start pulling his weight, after dragging his feet all this time? Questions kept fading in and out of Hashimoto's mind, one after another.

Whether it was Sakayanagi, or Ryuuen, or Ichinose, Hashimoto had a clear picture of what they were all about—the kind of person they each were, and what kind of philosophies they had. But when it came to Ayanokouji, Hashimoto couldn't see an answer to any of those questions. It was troubling.

"For the time being, I still want information," Hashimoto said. "I plan to keep on digging into Ayanokouji and what's going on around him."

"I don't really care," Kamuro replied. "You can go ahead and do that on your own, can't you?"

Hashimoto had never been ordered by Sakayanagi to conduct any reconnaissance or gather information related to Ayanokouji, after all. As far as Kamuro was concerned, if he was so worried about it, then he should just do what he wanted on his own. Truthfully, she could admit that the audio recording Hashimoto had gotten hold of today was going to be useful for the battle ahead... However, at the same time, Kamuro suddenly realized something. As early as the beginning of last year, Sakayanagi had given her orders to investigate Ayanokouji. Had Sakayanagi already noticed his abilities way back then?

"Actually, Masumi-chan, that's something I wanted to talk to you about," Hashimoto said.

Kamuro wondered, though, if Sakayanagi had really been able to understand everything that Ayanokouji was truly capable of at that time. One possibility emerged in her mind. Could it be that Sakayanagi *had* already known about Ayanokouji's true abilities, but in a way that they didn't expect...? She wondered.

"Hey, Earth to Masumi-chan?" said Hashimoto.

Hashimoto waved his hand in front of Kamuro's face as she stood there, lost in thought. Coming to, she aggressively batted his hand away.

"...What?" she asked.

"No, it's just, you were spacing out there," he said. "What I've got to say next is important."

"I have a bad feeling about this for some reason," said Kamuro, but she put a stop to her train of thought for a minute to listen attentively.

"Would you help me contact Ayanokouji?" Hashimoto asked. "You know, together?"

"...Why me?"

"Because people are *definitely* wary of me. If I'm not careful, Ryuuken could catch me out."

"Even if I'm with you, you're still there," Kamuro pointed out. "That's what together means, remember? More importantly, even if I'm there too, Ayanokouji will still be wary."

"If there are twice as many people to deal with, then Ayanokouji's sense of vigilance will increase accordingly, but if we have four eyes and four ears between us, we'll be able to pick up twice as much information. Right?"

"I'm willing to go along with this, but I have conditions," said Kamuro.

"Oh, and what are they? Do tell."

"Never call me Masumi-chan ever again. That is an absolute requirement."

"...O-kay. So, uh...Kamuro-chan is safe, then, I guess?" Hashimoto thought that was more than enough, but Kamuro had more to say.

"And one more thing. I'll be the only one to make contact with Ayanokouji."

"Just you, Kamuro-chan?" Hashimoto looked puzzled.

"If Sakayanagi caught wind of me working with you, it would cause unnecessary misunderstandings," she said.

"I won't deny that." Kamuro's concern that Ayanokouji's guard would be raised if they worked together wasn't unfounded, but for Hashimoto, that was not an appealing proposition.

"I'll find out what you want to know," Kamuro insisted. "Compromise."

Hashimoto figured that if he tried to push the issue, she wouldn't show him any mercy; she'd just pretend the whole conversation never happened. And she was refusing to let him call her Masumi for some reason, too. After spending close to two years together with Kamuro, though, Hashimoto had come to understand her well.

"Well... Guess I don't got any other choice. Okay. Let's shake on it."

Hashimoto extended his right hand. But Kamuro didn't take hold of it. All she did was shoot him an icy stare. "Dang, frigid as ever," he chuckled. "I actually like you quite a bit, Kamuro-chan. You know that?"

"How can you spew stuff like that when you have a girlfriend?" she snapped back.

"Oh, so if I break up with her, will you go out with me?"

"Absolutely not."

"Aww man," replied Hashimoto, holding his hand to his forehead in a show of dismay. The thinly-veiled smile on his face made it obvious it was a charade, and Kamuro just shook her head, done with putting up with this.

"I'm leaving now," she told him.

"Sorry about that. Oh, but make sure you tell me what day you're going to do this, and what time."

On that point alone, Hashimoto was insistent.

## 4.2

**O**N THAT SAME DAY, a day on which various students were following their own

respective agendas, I, who had no way of knowing what those students were doing, ended up spending time with people that I didn't usually see. It was December 26. Christmas had already passed. This day was also known as the day when stores sold the least amount of cake in a year. Well, no, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it was famous for being the day when cakes were marked down.

There were theories as to why this was, but one of the reasons was that Christmas had passed. Japanese people quickly changed their mindset, shifting from focusing on Christmas to focusing on New Year's, the next holiday. Although it seemed like people had developed the custom of eating cake all year round nowadays rather than limiting themselves to specific events, the fact remained that this particular day was categorized as the day of the year when cakes didn't sell. Which was precisely why, in recent years, a not-insignificant amount of people intentionally bought cake on December 26 to take advantage of the markdowns.

None of that was really on my mind when I woke up early that morning, though—I figured I'd spend the entire day in my room. The day that Kei would be recovering from her illness would soon be here. Her fever had already subsided, and she was now able to move around a little bit. If she wanted to repair the relationship, then we would go back to the way things were before.

My room was clean enough, but there was probably still dust in the corners and other hidden places, so today, I was going to thoroughly wipe everything down and clean the place up. With the cleaning supplies I had prepared in advance laid out on the table, the battle was about to begin. Thus began my struggle. Starting that morning. I moved the furniture, wiped everything down with a dust cloth, and thoroughly sterilized everything with alcohol disinfectants and such. Of course, once I was finished cleaning my room, the next step was the toilet, and then the bath, and then the closet.

By the time the kitchen, my final stop, was cleaned to perfection, I noticed that the sun was setting outside. Although it wasn't snowing at this time of day,

there still wasn't any sign of the snow melting.

"I wonder if there's any leftover Christmas cake," I mused.

The 26th was almost over. Many of the cakes that hadn't been sold today were probably going to be thrown away. Expiration dates and all that.

*Should I go and look, to see if they're selling them cheaply, just in case?* I thought to myself. I didn't need a whole cake, but if they were selling slices of cake at a discount, I was interested in trying. My mind made up, I decided to head to Keyaki Mall and enjoy the sunset.

### 4.3

**W**HEN I ARRIVED that evening, Keyaki Mall looked different once again. Since Christmas had already passed, the trees and decorations had already been removed, and preparations for New Year's were underway, as expected. There were no stores in the mall that specialized solely in cakes, so I went to the section of the supermarket where cakes were sold. However...

"None."

The usual cakes that they always had were up on display, but there weren't any discounted cakes to be found. The special section set up for Christmas was gone as well, and there wasn't even a whole cake in sight. Were the cakes sold out? Had they just been tossed? Maybe they just hadn't wanted to pointlessly stock up too much, since the customer base they served was limited to who was here on campus. It wasn't like I had especially wanted it or anything, but now that I was here and found there was nothing, I felt a little disappointed. It was a wasted trip, but I didn't want to make an unnecessary expenditure here. I walked around the supermarket, taking two or three laps through the aisles to see if there was anything I needed, but in the end, I left the store empty-handed.

"Ayanokouji-kun."

Just as I was about to leave Keyaki Mall though, I heard a voice calling to me, from off to the side. It was Sakayanagi, sitting on a bench, waving at me.

“Are you already returning to your dorm room?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“I notice that you only stayed in the store for approximately fifteen minutes.”

“You were watching, huh?”

“I just happened to see you when you left the dormitory earlier.”

I understood. In that case, it was probably understandable that she’d promptly call out to me like that, considering there was no indication that I had purchased anything. Kei was bedridden due to influenza, and I had spent Christmas doing nothing. I explained to her that I had come to the supermarket because I had thought I might’ve been able to eat some cake at a discount.

“Ah, I see,” said Sakayanagi.

“I guess I just missed the time window,” I said. “It feels like at this rate, the opportunity’s just going to slip through my fingers.” I supposed that it likely wasn’t going to happen this year, considering I hadn’t eaten cake even on the 25th, let alone the 24th. “It’s too bad that I missed out this year, but I’ll have some next year.”

Sakayanagi chuckled elegantly from her spot on the bench. “Ha ha.”

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“No one has any guarantee that they will be able to eat cake at this school next year,” she said. “Am I wrong?”

“...No, you’re certainly not wrong.”

“Especially so in your case, Ayanokouji-kun. Once you return to your family home, you’ll have a life devoid of cake.”

“I won’t even be served cake on my birthday,” I agreed.

*Should I turn on my heel right now and head back to the supermarket? I*

wondered.

Sakayanagi, who couldn't see that superficial thought running through my mind, stood up with her cane. "By the way, I do not recommend the cakes from the supermarket."

"Really?"

"I'm sorry to say this, but they're the mass-produced sort you can find anywhere," she said dismissively. "Cakes should be produced by artisans."

"Sure, but there are only so many places where you can buy cake," I said.

"The convenience store has surprisingly good cakes available."

I see. The Mont Blanc that Sakayanagi brought me before had come from the convenience store, if I remembered correctly.

"I suppose if you want a satisfying flavor, though, you have no other choice but to special order," she added.

She started to walk away, but then she stopped just as she was passing by me. "I wonder if you would perhaps like to join me for a short while. What do you say?"

"Where?" I asked. "We'll stand out too much if I'm out walking all alone with the leader of Class A."

"Please rest assured. We will not remain alone for much longer."

As she said that, Sakayanagi gently raised her hand in a direction away from us. When she did so, a male student spotted her and briskly drew closer to us.

"My apologies, Sakayanagi-san," he said. "Were you waiting long?"

"You certainly are a little late. However, I was able to pass the time in an enjoyable fashion thanks to your tardiness, so I suppose it was a good thing."

I figured she meant chatting with me.

"Sanada-kun, have you ever spoken with Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Sakayanagi.

"No, truthfully, today marks the first time we've ever talked," Sanada replied, bowing politely to me.

I'd seen him around many times, as someone in my same grade. I hadn't ever had the opportunity to talk with him. His name was Sanada Kousei. His OAA scores were as follows:

Academic Ability: A

Physical Ability: C+

Adaptability: B+

Societal Contribution: B+

Overall: B

He was an extremely bright individual with an A in Academic Ability, a score that only a few second-year students had achieved. He was average in Physical Ability and above average in other areas, and he had no obvious weaknesses. Although Sanada was an exceptional student, I had never seen him with Sakayanagi before now. Though I had been encountering students from Class A more often lately, I was reminded now of how little interaction I'd actually had with Sakayanagi's classmates. At the very least, it didn't seem like these two were here by chance.

"Actually, I've been wanting to talk with you sometime, Ayanokouji-kun," said Sanada. His tone of voice was polite, and his demeanor gentle. I didn't feel bothered by another man wanting to talk to me.

"Really?" I asked. I didn't think I had done anything that would've drawn Sanada's attention.

"Oh my, I see. What about Ayanokouji-kun happened to catch your eye?" Sakayanagi asked him.

"Well, he's emerged as one of the prominent students among Class B lately, and also..."

Sanada approached me, still smiling. He gently took hold of my right arm and pulled me away from Sakayanagi, who I had been standing next to, putting distance between us.

"Please pardon my rudeness," he said, "but what is the nature of your relationship with Sakayanagi-san?"

"The nature of our relationship? We don't really have one," I replied.

"She is the leader of Class 2-A. She is not someone you can approach for no reason."

I wondered if Sanada had this strong perception of me as an enemy. From the depths of his polite, courteous words, a sense of unidentified anger—or perhaps a chilly caution—oozed out.

"The fact she would be so familiar with a member of the opposite sex, one-on-one, is incomprehensible to me," he said.

That was an interesting way to put it. I wanted to say that it wasn't like that, but that would've been difficult. I got the impression that Sakayanagi didn't do very much on her own—that a high percentage of her activities were, in fact, done with multiple people present. Cases where Sakayanagi was alone with someone, and someone of the opposite sex on top of that, were carefully limited. Even if it were a common sight for students in the same class, it wasn't something that students from other classes would do often.

But I supposed it wasn't a good idea to think too deeply about it right here. I was just going ahead and picking apart Sanada's phrasing and word choices on my own; how much of what he was saying was actually on his own behalf was hard to say. Actually, if he was someone who would say these things for his own sense of propriety, then it'd be simpler for me to just play the role of a quiet, unsociable blockhead who wasn't aware of anything.

"I had the opportunity to talk to her last year during final exams," I told him. "That's the extent of our relationship. Nothing more, nothing less." I decided to evade the question with a safe response. Whatever the intention behind his question, that was the better choice.

"I see," Sanada said. "I understand. Please forgive me. I asked you that question in a somewhat intimidating manner."

"Don't worry about it," I answered.

"Have you two young men finished jawing?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Yes," Sanada replied. "Ayanokouji-kun, would you mind accompanying us for a little while, if it's not too much trouble? If Sakayanagi-san permits it, of course."

"Hm?" I said.

"Oh my, what an unexpected coincidence this is, Sanada-kun. I actually just invited him myself," said Sakayanagi.

Although I wasn't sure what was going on here, Sakayanagi and Sanada seemed to have the same idea. They exchanged glances and laughed. I followed their lead and quickly walked back from the exit, entering the mall once again.

"Here we are."

Shortly afterward, we arrived at the general store. It was a popular store selling a variety of small items that were especially popular with the girls. Both Class A students strode inside and started looking for whatever it was they were going to buy.

"Ayanokouji-kun, please give us just a moment. If you don't mind, please go ahead and look around the store at your leisure," said Sakayanagi.

Even though I was told to go ahead and look, having not been given a detailed explanation about what was going on, I could do nothing but stand by and watch. The background music playing throughout the store made it difficult for me to pick up on their hushed conversation, but I had no choice but to keep my

distance from them, since I couldn't join in. I looked around the store to kill some time, but five or ten minutes later their conversation was still going strong, and there wasn't any sign of their shopping trip coming to an end.

I was made to wait a pretty long time, and eventually I ran out of things to browse. Eventually I approached Sakayanagi and Sanada to see what was going on. As I did, Sanada hurriedly reached into his pocket.

"Please excuse me. I'm afraid I must take this call," he announced.

After excusing himself politely, he walked out of the store and stood outside.

"I was out on a date with Sanada-kun today," Sakayanagi told me. "I spent Christmas with him."

"I see. That's news to me."

I'd thought there was sort of a date-like vibe going on, but that was certainly a surprising revelation. Until now, I'd had no idea Sakayanagi had a partner like him. Was there some event that had spurred a major relationship change right before Christmas? Or had they been together for a while and just never disclosed it?

"Is that okay, though?" I asked. "Doing things so openly like this, I mean. If it becomes known that someone is important to you, it wouldn't be surprising if someone tried to use that against you."

Protecting a third party was a significantly different matter from simply keeping yourself safe. Especially in Sakayanagi's case, since having a limited range of mobility meant that the chances of her falling one step behind were not small.

"Of course," I added, "I guess that's just how confident you are in yourself, and... What's the matter?"

Sakayanagi was staring at me in silence. But it wasn't any normal silence. She seemed angry.

"Couldn't you tell that was just a little joke?" she asked.

“What was?”

“Come now. Of course I didn’t agree to a date with Sanada-kun.”

“Hm?”



What she was saying now was the exact opposite of what she'd said earlier, leaving me totally confused.

Sanada rejoined us, having finished his phone call. "Please pardon me, Sakayanagi-san. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

"And? What did she say?" asked Sakayanagi.

"She said yes. It's a date," replied Sanada. He wore a happy, warm smile, gently stroking his cheek somewhat bashfully.

"The person he spoke to on the phone earlier was Miya-san, from Class 1-B," Sakayanagi explained. "She just started going out with Sanada-kun the other day, much to his delight. He was agonizing over what to give her as a gift and I was providing him advice."

That was completely different from the story she had initially told. Apparently, the lie had been a joke. I didn't understand in the slightest what was supposed to have been funny about that, but it didn't seem like the right environment to press the matter, so I just decided to let it go.

"I already gave her a Christmas gift that I put a lot of thought into, but as it turns out, her birthday is four days after," he said. "I had thought perhaps just saying that the gift was meant for both Christmas and her birthday, but we haven't been together for very long, and I wondered if it might be better to celebrate them separately."

So, that's what was going on. It was certainly true that if someone's birthday was close to a major romantic event like Christmas, you might be lost as to how to go about celebrating it. It would be easier to celebrate both together, but there was the possibility that she might be someone who wouldn't be happy about having her birthday and Christmas combined.

"At any rate, a kouhai girlfriend, huh?" I said. "What's the story behind that?"

"We met through club activities. We are both in wind ensemble. She's my kouhai there," said Sanada.

Ah. I had virtually zero friends in cultural clubs, so that was a blind spot for me. From the sounds of it, Sanada and his girlfriend came to know each other and deepened their relationship as they shared time in their club activities.

"Also, wow, sounds like people come to you for advice in matters like these too, eh, Sakayanagi," I said, turning to her.

"I do not think I am the appropriate person to ask for these things, but Sanada-kun seems to be keeping his relationship secret for the time being. It seems there are things going on in his club," said Sakayanagi, while giving me a look that made it seem like she was still somewhat displeased.

I didn't know for sure, but I wondered if there existed restrictions on senpai and kouhai dating. Maybe no romance for a certain amount of time after joining a club, that sort of thing. Of course, even if there were such rules, it was more likely that they were something like unspoken rules agreed upon by students rather than actual school rules. Also, if those rules were explicitly stated, then it would be ridiculous that they would only be applied to wind ensemble.

"I suppose I should say I'd expect no less from her—Sakayanagi-san, I mean," Sanada said. "She ended up noticing what was going on."

The keen Sakayanagi must have detected a change in her classmate and had most likely had others gather information about him for her. It seemed that Sanada had decided to come to her for help for that reason.

"I get what's going on here, but why did you invite me along?" I asked.

If they had come to me asking for advice, that would've made sense. But neither of them had asked me for a single word of advice, and they picked out the present together anyway.

"That's..."

In contrast to the somewhat uncomfortable-looking Sanada, Sakayanagi came right out and told me the truth: "It's because I wanted to tease you a little, Ayanokouji-kun."

"So, was that the reason for what you said before, by any chance?" I asked.

"Yes. Though, much to my dismay, you found what I said neither surprising nor suspicious."

I'd been a little surprised, sure, but not suspicious. Besides, in the first place, I didn't have any interest whatsoever in who Sakayanagi dated or didn't date.

"Please don't take my last comment seriously," she added. "Ayanokouji-kun, I asked you to join us because I didn't want people to think that Sanada-kun and I were on a date. After all, what would Miya-san think if she happened to see the two of us walking around, just Sanada-kun and I?"

"Yeah," I agreed, "it's possible that could have led to a misunderstanding, sure."

If I were with them, that was two guys with one girl. This way, I supposed, Sanada's kouhai girlfriend wouldn't have any suspicions that he was on a date with Sakayanagi.

"It would have been better for us to have invited someone else to come along with us at an earlier stage, but that would've exposed the fact that Sanada-kun has a girlfriend. So, I decided to pretend that I just so happened to be here on the day in question, and invite whomever I ran into."

And I just so happened to be the first person they ran into. Had I made the right decision or the wrong decision in talking to them? I'd gotten to know Sanada from doing this, so I supposed I could say it was advantageous. I didn't see what the gift was that he had picked out, but he was holding it carefully, tenderly. I suppose that showed how much he cared about his girlfriend.

"Please do your best, Sanada-kun," said Sakayanagi.

"Yes, I will. Thank you very much, Sakayanagi-san," he replied.

Sanada bowed his head, clutching the gift he had just purchased close to his chest. Walking away happily, he straightened out his back—was he running off to go meet with his girlfriend? Maybe he would give her the gift on the spur of

the moment, riding the momentum he had now, before her birthday.

"That reminds me, Ayanokouji-kun," Sakayanagi said. "Am I correct in saying that you've given up on cake for today?"

"Hm? Yeah, that was the plan, originally. It's just, well, I figured since I came all this way, before I head back to the dorms, I might as well stop by the—"

"I would not recommend the sweets you'd find at the convenience store now," she interrupted me. "What they have at this time will be of inferior quality."

Well, I'd been about to say that I was going to stop by and peek inside the convenience store, but... Sakayanagi had anticipated my plans and gave me some helpful advice.

"If I were in your shoes, I would humbly recommend quietly returning to the dormitory and trying again next year," she told me. "If you were to settle for something you could find here, then, well... How should I put this? You would be a most unfortunate soul. A disappointment."

It was just cake. I felt like it was up to the individual to decide when and where to eat cake, but this conversation had sapped my desire.

"...Well, I guess I'd better do as you suggest, then," I replied.

It felt like if I went ahead and bought something for myself now, I'd be disappointed in the cake, and Sakayanagi would be disappointed in me.

## 4.4

**I**N THE END, I returned to my dormitory without buying any cake. Afterward, perhaps to rid myself of earthly desires, I went online and researched the imminent New Year holiday. I'd spent last year without thinking about it too deeply, and I still had some lingering regrets about it. Maybe it would be nice to do something appropriate for the holiday at the start of the new year. I never

even got a single mochi to celebrate the new year when I was in the White Room.

Then, around eight o'clock that evening, after I had finished dinner while doing various bits of research, something happened. I was just beginning to wonder whether I should take a bath when I received a phone call.

*"Good evening, Ayanokouji-kun."*

"I never thought I'd get a call from you at this hour, Sakayanagi," I replied.

*"I just thought I would confirm something with you in advance."*

"I'll just tell you this up front, but I didn't turn into a disappointment," I joked preemptively.

*"Ha ha. Yes, I'm sure you didn't. You're not a disappointment, Ayanokouji-kun."* Judging from her tone, though, it did seem like she'd called to check on that, too.

"I decided to save it for next year," I added. I wasn't being a loser. I had proactive plans to do better next year.

*"Is that so?"* Sakayanagi chuckled happily on the other end of the call. *"On a different note, has Karuizawa-san's condition improved?"*

"Seems like her fever has gone down," I replied. "All that's left is to hold out for two more days."

Even if the fever went down, we were required by the school to stay confined to our room for several days after the fever broke.

*"I see. That is rather convenient for me. Well then, would you mind if I were to make an appointment with you right now?"*

"Now? I don't really have a problem with it, but what's up?"

*"Let's save the fun for when we meet. May I come to your room?"*

"You want to come to my room?"

*"Is it an inconvenience for me to come by so suddenly?"*

"Nah, not really."

*"Well then, I shall proceed directly."*

She immediately hung up. Before I even had the time to think about how that was a rather rude way to end a conversation, I heard a gentle knock at the door.

"Oh, that's how it is," I remarked.

I got up and went to the front door. Upon opening it, I saw Sakayanagi there.

"Did you go out somewhere?" I asked.

She looked rather well-dressed for someone who had just come from her room. I noticed that there was a little bit of snow on her shoulders and her hat.

As soon as our eyes met, she held out a small box in one hand and pushed it into my chest. "Merry Christmas. Santa has arrived."

When I accepted the box, she nodded in satisfaction. But still—Santa?

"It's already the night of the 26th," I pointed out. "This is a rather late appearance from Santa Claus."

"Santa Claus is based on Saint Nicholas, who is said to have lived on the southern coast of Turkey," she replied. "I had to get on my sleigh and ride it from there to Japan once I finished distributing presents, so it can't be helped that I arrived here a little late. No?"

I wasn't sure if she was being serious or if she was screwing around. "Only you could come up with such a unique rebuttal as that, Sakayanagi."

At any rate, I decided to invite her inside, since I didn't want to leave her standing outside my room.

"Please pardon my intrusion," she said.

"So? What business does this belated Santa have?" I asked.

"As I am sure you have figured out by now, I have brought a Christmas cake," she informed me. "Since I have dubbed myself Santa, you may accept what I've given you as a present."

"You know, I'm feeling a strong sense of déjà vu from this box you gave me." Had Sakayanagi been planning for this moment ever since that last time?

"Yes. There is a reason for that. I promised to bring you another cake, didn't I?"

That was true. She most definitely noticed that I didn't enjoy the Mont Blanc, and she'd said she would try again...

"It wasn't a coincidence that we bumped into each other today, was it?" I asked.

"Of course it wasn't. Since you wanted to eat cake, I thought this was the opportune moment, Ayanokouji-kun. I recommended that you not purchase sweets from the convenience store in order to avoid redundancy."

"That's why you phrased things the way you did," I realized. "To keep me from going."

"Yes. Everything worked in accordance with my strategy rather brilliantly."

If I had stopped by the convenience store and decided to have some cake from there, it was a little doubtful that I'd be able to enjoy the cake that Sakayanagi brought with her when she came to my room.

"It would seem that you spent Christmas alone," she said. "I have come to save you."

"You sure this is okay? For the leader of Class A to just come into a boy's room like this in the middle of the night?"

She brushed me off. "If we were discovered, Ayanokouji-kun, you are the one who would suffer."

I couldn't deny that. Even if I claimed that Sakayanagi had barged in uninvited, the lion's share of the criticism would fall upon me, without a doubt.

"Besides," she added, "it is still only eight o'clock in the evening. Not such a particularly surprising time during winter vacation, wouldn't you agree?"

"I guess."

"It seems you are keeping your room tidy as always. I am impressed. I've visited several girls' rooms, but none of them keep their rooms this clean."

After complimenting me, Sakayanagi asked me for permission to sit on my bed. She took off the jacket she was wearing.

"What would you have done if you couldn't meet up with me today?" I asked.

I could have been sleeping, I could have been out—there were several conceivable possibilities.

"I intended to visit you at a time that had no relation whatsoever with Christmas," said Sakayanagi. Meaning she just so happened to do this today, then. And it sounded like she was keeping the matter of Karuizawa in mind with that, too. "As I am sure you already know, I have prepared two cakes."

When I took the box from her earlier, I'd noticed that it seemed to weigh more than a single cake would have. Apparently, she was planning to eat it with me and then return to her dormitory.

"Okay then, I'll fix some drinks," I said. "Same as last time okay?"

"Thank you, you are most kind," replied Sakayanagi.

I walked to the kitchen to prepare the coffee, just like last time.

"It seems like you belong there, standing in the kitchen," Sakayanagi remarked.

"Well, when you're living in a dormitory, you inevitably get more opportunities to cook," I replied.

"Doesn't that depend on how you value your time, though? In an environment like ours, with the convenience store and the cafeteria, even if you don't have money, you won't have to worry about eating."

"...Maybe. I guess I simply want to cook is all."

"Cooking would be unthinkable in the White Room, too, I suppose," she

mused. "Still, it really is a pity. Even if you were to improve enough to rise to a professional level of skill, there would be no place for you to put those skills to use after graduation, Ayanokouji-kun."

Just like at Keyaki Mall, she seemed very eager to talk about this topic today.

"That's true, but do you want to probe me for information or something?" I asked. "I can't imagine you can see everything that actually goes on in the White Room. And it's hard to believe that Chancellor Sakayanagi would carelessly divulge that kind of information to his daughter."

"Yes, it is certainly true that what I am saying is only in the realm of imagination." With my back turned to her, I couldn't see the look on Sakayanagi's face, but I was sure that she was smiling. "As you say, I do not have a grasp on the details of the White Room. However, while I may not be exactly on the mark, I'm sure I'm not far off, either. No?"

"I guess so. When I graduate, or if I'm expelled, I'll be brought back to the White Room and moved into a mentorship position. And then I will be given the role of training the following generation, over and over, until I'm no longer needed."

Up until a little while ago, I wouldn't have had any doubts about that. However, now, I'd been starting to feel some doubts about that outcome, albeit only a little. What were the advantages and disadvantages of having attended this school for three years? When I weighed them against each other, there was, inevitably, an irrational side to it. Of course, I didn't know what was happening outside this school. Even though that man claimed that the White Room was back in operation, I didn't have a grasp on the reality of the situation; I had no way of verifying whether that was the truth or a lie.

I brought the coffee over, along with two thin plates to serve the cake on. "By the way, is the cake any good?"

"I do not know what your tastes are, Ayanokouji-kun," Sakayanagi replied, "but if this cake isn't good either, then I will just arrange for another

opportunity. In fact, it might be better that this cake is a failure, so I may try yet again.”

That seemed paradoxical. *Maybe I should tell her that it's delicious anyway, even if it's a lie*, I thought to myself.

“If you put on an act, I have confidence in my ability to see through it,” she added.

“Don’t anticipate what I’m going to do.”

“Your thought process is quite easy to understand, though. It is extremely clear to me.”

Sakayanagi understood that I was still just an ordinary student; someone young and inexperienced. It seemed she had calculated and considered even the level of influence that life here at school and other external factors had on me.

When I opened the box, I saw two shortcakes, which you could call the classic standby, lined up next to each other.

“Where did you buy these? You didn’t prepare these in advance, did you?” I asked.

The box had what appeared to be the company’s logo on it. I didn’t imagine that this was normally sold in the convenience store or the supermarket here.

“It’s a somewhat peculiar chain of events, actually. I was planning to visit the convenience store to buy some sweets, but as I was on my way to the store, I happened upon my classmate, Sawada-san, who was on her way back from Keyaki Mall. She told me that she’d ordered some cakes from a famous establishment, but they were delayed due to the snow. Before Christmas had come, she had apparently given up on waiting and ended up eating a different cake. So, now that she’d belatedly received the original cakes, she was wondering what to do with them, and... Well, that’s the story,” said Sakayanagi.

“So, you robbed Sawada of delicious cakes,” I concluded.

At any rate, wow, what a string of coincidences. Actually, wait, no. This was Sakayanagi. It was possible that she'd gotten that information in advance. But either way, it would've been uncouth for me to pursue the matter.

"Please rest assured, I have properly paid for these with Private Points," Sakayanagi told me. "Whether Sawada-san was going to eat these two cakes by herself or whether she was going to eat them with a certain someone in particular, though, that is beyond the scope of my knowledge."

There were probably many more students than we imagined who were nurturing feelings of love for someone, in places that we didn't know about.

I decided to eat the cake that Sakayanagi gave me. I'd eaten shortcake several times now, but based on the claim that these cakes came from a famous store, I felt like these were totally different. Even the cream was better. The cake tasted much better than the Mont Blanc she'd brought last time.

"It would seem that it is to your taste, then?" she said.

"I haven't said anything yet."

Even though I was feeling like I had been exposed, I couldn't stop my hands from moving and went for a second bite.

"I understand, even without you saying anything. Though I feel somewhat conflicted, as I didn't choose these cakes myself." She brought a piece of cake to her mouth, nodding in satisfaction. "But even so, the flavor is simply outstanding, no?"

She seemed happy, satisfied with how this had gone. Not having anything in particular to talk about, we both finished eating our cakes, and then took a moment to rest. Just as the clock was about to strike nine, Sakayanagi spoke up once more.

"Would you walk with me outside for a short while?"

"Outside?" I asked.

I could have refused, but all I was going to be doing after this was taking a

bath and going to bed. It wasn't a bad idea to go out for a walk on the snow-covered path first, since that was an opportunity that I had limited chances to experience.

"Sure. I guess that's fine," I said.

I didn't have any particular reason to refuse her. More importantly, it seemed like Sakayanagi still had something she wanted to talk to me about, besides.

"Well then, I will go ahead and wait for you in the lobby."

Taking into account that I needed to change first, Sakayanagi got up, holding onto her cane. Well, I figured I'd get ready and head after her, then.

## 4.5

I MET UP WITH SAKAYANAGI, who was standing in the dormitory lobby waiting for me, and we went outside together. It wasn't like we would be spotted by other students right away, going out at this time of day.

"It really is cold outside, isn't it?" she said.

It had started snowing just on Christmas Eve, and the snow was starting to really accumulate, probably due to the low temperature.

"I was told last year that it was unusual to see snow," I remarked. "I can't believe there's been snow accumulation two years in a row."

The amount of snow on the ground made it somewhat difficult to walk, but, far from seeming bothered by it, Sakayanagi looked like she was enjoying it.

"It would be bothersome if it were to snow all year round, but when enjoyed occasionally, it really makes for a wonderful environment," she said.

"But isn't it inconvenient? Snow accumulation, I mean."

"Walking efficiency is significantly reduced, to be certain. But there is no need for concern. I have gained experience from even harder conditions than what

we went through on the social trip.”

Showing me a glimpse of her self-confidence, she began giving me a lecture on walking using a cane while on the snow. Her tone was happy and amused, as if she were revealing a strategy to me. However, just from watching her from the side, it looked like it was extremely dangerous. Just as that thought crossed my mind, Sakayanagi almost lost her balance, perhaps because when she tried to pull her cane out of the snow after it had gotten stuck, she hadn’t managed to get a good handle on it. I had already been thinking about supporting her just in case ahead of time, so I grabbed hold of her shoulder to stop her from failing before anything serious could happen.

“Be careful,” I cautioned.

“Ha ha.” Just when I was thinking she might’ve been shaken because she had almost fallen, Sakayanagi instead giggled like something was funny. “You’re that sort of person, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Hm?”

Did the fact that I didn’t understand make Sakayanagi even happier?

“I was confident that I could walk well,” she said. “However, it’s certainly true that doing something reckless will increase the risk of falling. That being said, I anticipated you would help me even if I failed.”

Her thoughts were right on the mark, that I’d reach out with a helping hand. That was what made her chuckle, from the sounds of it.

“Considering that it wasn’t a definite given, you did pretty well,” I replied.

It was like she tried to do a bungee jump with no guarantee of a safety net. Still, if the snow cover was full enough, the risk of injury would have been low, anyway.

“So why did you invite me out for a walk tonight?” I asked. “There’s something you wanted to talk about, right?”

“Do you think so?” she replied. When I nodded my head in response,

Sakayanagi smiled like usual, and then followed up with a question.

“Ayanokouji-kun, how do you see Class A as it is right now?”

“How do I see it?”

“I wanted you to tell me your impression. What do you feel our strengths and weaknesses are?”

“I see. I never imagined you’d ask me that.”

“Really?”

Sakayanagi had absolute confidence in herself. I didn’t expect her to come asking for advice on things that might affect her class’s policies.

“It goes without saying, but do you have the impression that I would give help to an enemy?”

“If you perceive Class A to be an enemy, Ayanokouji-kun, then I suppose there’s nothing I can do about that,” said Sakayanagi. Still, it seemed to make her happy, as she smiled a little. “But I am sure that you’ll answer my question.”

“May I ask the reason why you think so?” I asked.

“It’s because I can make a general prediction if I look objectively at what you are trying to do.”

It sounded like Sakayanagi could already see the picture that I was envisioning. She had been giving me that impression for a while now, behaving as though she knew, but I didn’t know the extent of her confidence in the matter.

“If you can declare that so confidently, then you don’t need me to tell you my overall evaluation of Class A, then, do you?” I said. “Or perhaps you’d become less confident in your own thinking if you don’t get a seal of approval?”

“Those are foolish questions,” said Sakayanagi.

I decided to go ahead and put my thoughts into words. I told her what I thought: that Class A was efficiently conducting a well-led fight under

Sakayanagi's guidance. They discarded the things that ought to be discarded and picked up the things that ought to be picked up. Their class was steadily and surely accumulating Class Points. Their overall Academic Ability scores were high, and while their Physical Ability scores were average, they were tactical about that shortcoming. The only thing that could be considered a flaw was that there were no students in their class who were well versed in some special skill, at least from what I could see.

Sakayanagi, walking alongside me, accepted all the things I said without objection.

"Honestly, though, anyone could have given the same answer that I did," I added.

"Well then, might I ask you for words that are uniquely yours, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

"Okay, then..." What I was going to say would be a little harsh, but it looked like that was what Sakayanagi wanted. "You're confident in yourself. It's certainly true that, even when compared to the other class leaders, you stand far above the rest in terms of ability. However, it's precisely because of that, that I get the impression that you currently lag a step behind in building genuine relationships with your classmates."

She could control her class, but in the end, she was only manipulating them. Class A students should be more, have more individual will. That could lead to improvement in their class. For that to happen, the monarch Sakayanagi would have to lower herself to the level of her classmates.

"That is unnecessary," she replied. "I wish to make my decisions separate from emotion. If you get too close to other people, you can't help but be overcome with feeling. When the time comes to abandon a beloved pet, hesitation leads to weakness."

"You're free to make that choice," I said. She wasn't wrong. If you could stick to that solitary strength, that was a fine weapon. "By the way, I am curious

about something.”

“What is it?”

“What’s your reason for keeping me under surveillance? I’ve been feeling more than a few pairs of eyes from Class A on me lately. If there’s something on your mind, you can just come and ask me directly, like right now.”

“That’s incorrect,” she told me. “I haven’t ordered anyone to get in contact with you, Ayanokouji-kun, so it cannot be so. There is no point in me having a third-party investigate you of all people. Your reluctance to stand out has weakened as of late. I am sure that those who have caught a glimpse of your inherent potential are simply starting to take the initiative to watch you of their own accord. And I’m sure that some of them will even report back to me in a devoted fashion, without me even asking.”

Sakayanagi dismissed what they were doing as trivial simply because it wouldn’t benefit her. That was precisely why she declared so confidently that there wasn’t any point in it.

“So, you’re saying that these people are doing it voluntarily out of consideration for Class A, then?” I asked.

“It is possible that they’re doing it to score points from me, but until they realize that it’s meaningless, they’re still not worthy,” she replied. No matter how many things they did, it wouldn’t earn them her favor.

Sakayanagi and I continued walking along, Sakayanagi poking holes in the snow with her cane with a *crunch, crunch*. There still wasn’t any sign of anyone else around.

“Let us end our walk here,” announced Sakayanagi.

“So, we’re heading back, then?” I asked.

“Yes. But you please go on back first, Ayanokouji-kun. I am going to enjoy feeling the night air for a little bit longer.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Even if I were to fall, I would land on snow, and it’s hardly as if we’re on a remote, freezing mountain.” That was certainly true. It wasn’t like there’d be some disaster and she’d end up stranded. “We may not see each other again before the year is out,” she added. “So, please enjoy a pleasant remainder of your year.”

“Thanks. Have a good New Year’s,” I answered.

With our New Year’s greetings taken care of, I decided to part ways with Sakayanagi. I started to trudge my way down the snow-covered path toward the dormitory. I walked for about ten seconds or so without hearing the sound of Sakayanagi walking.

“Ayanokouji-kun.”

Sakayanagi gently called my name, and I turned around. Even with the scarf around her mouth, she seemed cold as she looked intently at me.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“There is something I wish to tell you. Would you listen to me from where you’re standing?”

“I figured there was something else,” I said.

With some distance between us, Sakayanagi faced each other and resumed our conversation.

“Did you know that I still had something that I wanted to say?” she asked.

“I did think so.”

“There are times when even I need courage. It is this distance between us now that brings out that courage in me.” It was a distance of less than ten meters. This was the courage necessary for her to speak up. “I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Oh.

“Not as a human being,” she added, “but as a member of the opposite sex.”

I quietly listened to her words—unmistakably a confession of romantic love.

“Could you please keep that in mind?” she asked.

“Is a reply not necessary?”

“Correct. I am not asking for that now. Please, go on ahead. You may leave now.”

“I see.” I was about to turn around and walk away again, but then I stopped.

“Can I just say one thing?”

“What is it?”

“Despite appearances, I probably recognize you more than you think I do, Sakayanagi. That’s exactly why I want to ask you something,” I began. There was something I really wanted to know right now. “Can you turn that feeling into strength instead of weakness?”

Sakayanagi was clever, so I was sure that she would understand perfectly. That’s why I didn’t include any unnecessary explanations.

“That’s a foolish question,” she replied with a smile.

Her eyes shone brightly, even in the darkness.

After Ayanokouji had left, Sakayanagi quietly smiled to herself, still blushing.

“The other day, the day of the closing ceremony for the second semester, we all talked together, you, Ichinose-san, and I,” muttered Sakayanagi softly. Her words melted on the wind. “I am in a position to teach her. Or rather, I had *thought* that was always going to be so, but I’ve learned that is apparently not the case.”

That was the moment when Sakayanagi had become perfectly aware of her own love. Amid that snowy evening when no one else was around, Sakayanagi continued to talk to herself.

“You are my enemy. And I will defeat you.” That was the truth. Undeniably

the actual truth. “I, who pride myself on being a natural-born genius, cannot possibly be cowed by you, an artificial genius.” That was her foundational principle. “However, you noticed that a different perception had been born, one that is different from the recognition that you are to be defeated. Didn’t you?”

Ayanokouji’s back was no longer visible. Sakayanagi spoke, though her voice would not reach him. She put it into words once again.

“I love you.”

That was something that Ichinose made her realize; Ichinose, who, to Sakayanagi, was no different from garbage lying on the side of the road.

“Even if I had expressed my feelings more clearly, your face wouldn’t have changed a shade, though, would it?” That was the only reason she hadn’t said it in stronger words directly to his face earlier. Nevertheless, Sakayanagi wasn’t afraid of whether or not he would accept her feelings. “Yes, that’s right. You are that sort of person, Ayanokouji-kun. You are not the sort of person whose heart would be disturbed by something trivial, even of this magnitude.”

Usually, a maiden would have been hurt and distressed by something like that. Sakayanagi, however, was the opposite. Actually, she strongly felt that it was precisely for that reason she was attracted to Ayanokouji.

“You treat everyone in this school, including me, like children. You think that everything is going the way you want it, and you’ve taken actions to ensure it would be so.”

She took one step down the snowy path. She knew, concretely, what Ayanokouji’s plans were. The arrangement that he was envisioning for when they were in their third year. It would be no fun to let him proceed as he wished. In that case, Sakayanagi already had the answer for what she should do in that case.

*I want to get in his way. I want to see his troubled face. I want to show him that there are areas beyond even his calculations, to smear it in his face. I want*

*to draw out his emotions and then destroy him. I want to love him.*

"It really is a pity," she sighed. "Your plans have begun to go awry since the special exam on the uninhabited island this summer."

She couldn't help but want to tell him, but that was still a secret. It was precisely because she didn't know, because she couldn't anticipate it, that there was fun to be found in what lay ahead.

"I promise that this fact will be the first step in changing you, in a way you never thought possible."

She couldn't help but be excited to see what kind of decisions he would make in the coming year.

"I really cannot wait for the third semester."

## Chapter 5: Signs of Quiet

THE MORNING OF DECEMBER 28. The end of the year was approaching. I looked at my cell phone by my bedside and saw that I had received a message at around seven o'clock in the morning—about thirty minutes ago now. It was a mild message from Kei, telling me that she had recovered. I had been lying on my back, facing upward when I looked at my phone and saw that message, but then I changed position, lying face down.

*"Are you awake?"* I replied.

When I sent that message, I noticed that it was marked as read in less than three seconds. I assumed, then, that she had been clutching her cell phone the whole time, waiting for my reply.

*"Yeah, I'm up."*

I had contacted her a few times after she caught the flu to check on her condition, but that was it. Perhaps due to the fact she was just getting over being sick, or perhaps due to the distance between us, her messages didn't convey her usual elevated level of excitement. She didn't even send stickers.

*"What are your plans for today?"* I asked.

I figured I would start from there. If she replied that she was available, then I was planning to invite Kei out, but...

*"I'm sorry. I'm going to hang out with Maya-chan later. She cheered me up the whole time I was sick in bed and really supported me a lot, so I wanted to thank her for that. Is that okay?"*

There was no way that wouldn't be okay. You could say that it was something especially important, that ought to be a top priority. They wouldn't establish a true friendship if Kei put me first for no reason and disrespected Satou.

Naturally, I wouldn't do anything to put a damper on her plans in this matter. I shouldn't.

*"No worries. In that case, could I call you tonight? Say, around nine? I wanted to talk about tomorrow and the days after."*

There was also Christmas, which we had planned to spend together. We needed to talk about the distance between us lately. There was a mountain of things that we needed to say face-to-face, as people in a relationship. As boyfriend and girlfriend.

*"Okay."*

Shortly after receiving that short reply, I got another short text.

*"Then I'll wait up for your call."*

At any rate, the important thing was that she seemed to have recovered. The fact we were able to schedule something before the end of the year was major, too. Now, all that remained was how I was going to spend my day today. I didn't have any plans for the rest of the day, so would I show up at the gym for the first time in a few days or would I spend the entire day in my room? I didn't welcome the thought of doing something that might conflict with Kei and Satou spending time together.

So, that crossed out going to the gym, which I had briefly considered. It also eliminated the option of going to Keyaki Mall. Kei and Satou would probably end up too nervous and fidgety to be able to enjoy themselves if they were worrying about me. In the end, I picked up my phone once again, thinking that I would tell Kei that I was going to be in my room all day today. But just then, it started to ring.

I had briefly thought perhaps it might be Kei, but unfortunately, it was a phone number that wasn't registered in my contacts. However, I remembered the number. What was going on? I continued to stare at the display for a while. I thought I'd watch and see how long my phone was going to ring, but it didn't seem like it was going to stop, so I decided to answer.

*“Hey, pick up faster!”* Ryuuен expressed his dissatisfaction on the other end of the line before I could even say hello.

“I was in the bathroom,” I replied.

*“I ain’t so sure about that. You just figured it was a hassle and were plannin’ to let the call keep ringin’, weren’t ya?”*

Splendid deduction. Whether it was Sakayanagi or Ryuuен, both seemed to be getting better at getting a thorough read of my everyday thought processes.

*“Meet me. North entrance of Keyaki Mall. Half an hour.”* He didn’t seem to be interested in any of my excuses or anything; he simply conveyed his own business.

“You’re not going to ask about my plans?” I asked. “I’m on a tight schedule.”

“Postpone it.”

After spitting out his demand, he cut the call.

“As selfish as ever,” I thought aloud.

That wasn’t especially surprising behavior. It was very much in keeping with how Ryuuен usually acted.

## 5.1

THE PEAK OF THE SNOWFALL had passed, and the thick snow accumulation was starting to melt, running like paint. Snow remained in areas with shade, but I supposed it was just a matter of time. At any rate, getting a call from Ryuuен now, at the end of the year? We’d been strategically intertwined during the school cultural festival, and we just so happened to be put in the same group during the school trip. After that, though, we hadn’t really had anything to do with one another.

I arrived at the north entrance of Keyaki Mall at almost exactly the appointed time, not knowing what kind of business I was attending. Considering that we

were in the middle of winter vacation at present, I couldn't imagine that we'd be talking about exams. Ryuuen wasn't there, but I noticed that someone else was—leaning against the wall, arms crossed.

"Katsuragi? This isn't a coincidence, is it?" I asked.

Keyaki Mall still hadn't opened for business. I didn't see any reason for anyone to be here at this hour unless they needed to be the first to enter a store.

"You got a call from Ryuuen, right?" he said. "I did, too." If Katsuragi had been called as well, then it didn't seem likely that this was going to be a casual chat. "Whenever there's anything going on, he demands we talk. It's a bad habit he has."

Since transferring from Class A to Ryuuen's class, Katsuragi had worked together with Ryuuen on many occasions.

"You've really become his strategist, huh?" I observed. "It seems like even Ryuuen places a lot of trust in you, Katsuragi."

"That would be nice, if true." He didn't have a happy look on his face, but he didn't appear to be dissatisfied, either.

"So, why's he called us here?" I asked.

"Who knows? Ask Ryuuen about it."

It sounded like even Katsuragi, who had been called out here like I was, hadn't heard any details.

"At any rate, it's most likely some dubious scheme," he said. "I'm sure you've guessed as much."

"Well, I figured there was the possibility it would be trouble," I replied.

"In that case, you should have ignored him."

"That would've made more trouble for me later though, wouldn't it?"

"That only applies to normal students. Your name has come up from time to

time, but he always mentions it with the utmost praise. He definitely understands that you, as you are now, are an opponent that he is no match for.”

“Praise...? I can’t imagine.”

“I’ll eliminate him.’ ‘I’ll crush him.’ ‘I’ll kill him.’ Surely those statements are all flattering, right?”

“No, that’s not praise, that’s a certifiable threat.”

I wondered if Katsuragi was teasing me, because the corners of his mouth curved up ever so slightly into a smile. “It’s because there isn’t anyone outside our class who’s his equal or better, and there isn’t anyone he can talk to about his honest intentions. In that sense, that’s why you’re so important to him.”

In terms of people who were Ryuuuen’s equals or betters, Sakayanagi fit that description, but she was the opponent he needed to defeat. It was impossible for them to have the kind of relationship where they could share their honest thoughts.

“At any rate, even though you could say you held an advantage in that special exam, I’m surprised that you defeated Sakayanagi,” Katsuragi added. “I hope this takes her down a peg and shakes her confidence a little.”

“Sakayanagi did what she could and lost, and I’m sure the impact of her loss is limited,” I replied. “All that happened was we were allowed to win thanks to riding a peculiar wave of good fortune, which came about thanks to multiple things going well at the same time. Nothing more.”

“Riding a wave, hm. However, it’s also true that you couldn’t have won that exam without genuine competency on your side, regardless of how much effort you put in.” This was high praise, saying we won undeniably due to the strength of our class.

“So, Ichinose’s class scored quite a bit ahead of yours, huh,” I said.

“No matter what kind of special exam it is, that class puts in the effort, with a

positive, initiative-taking attitude, and they stick to the fundamentals. Their class leadership is well-organized, too.” Katsuragi offered his analysis: they weren’t an opponent that would be easily defeated, by any means. “Our class’s task is obvious. Our Academic Ability is overwhelmingly inferior in comparison to the other classes. If we don’t do anything about this, we’ll be forced to fight a number of disadvantageous battles in the future.”

He could see the issue, but working to improve the situation was going to be a Herculean task. Scholastic skill wasn’t something that you could simply acquire overnight, after all.

“In the last special exam, I urged Ryuuen to forego the immediate gains and instead work to raise the level of academic prowess of the entire class,” Katsuragi continued. “However, he was unwilling to listen.” That was likely because he had a strong tendency to resort to underhanded means and surprise attacks when he couldn’t win with a frontal assault. “Still, it’s not as though leaving things as they are will lead to a breakthrough in our current situation, or to a solution. People are interesting creatures; they’re unconsciously selective about whom they interact with. Ryuuen uses everyone in class like they’re extensions of him, his own arms and legs, but even so, there are inevitably some students who are especially useful, while there are others who are hardly utilized at all.”

“So, you’re saying it’s not simply a matter of whether people are competent, then?” I asked.

Given the choice between people like Ishizaki and Albert, who were relatively capable and willing to do bad things—and obediently too—versus students who were rebellious and hated doing bad things, it was only natural that Ryuuen would inevitably favor the former.

“That’s right,” said Katsuragi. “You can see the signs of that even in areas where it’s not a matter of competency. Strange, don’t you think?”

“Sure is.”

"Which is why I've been actively tutoring those students who Ryuuen tends to overlook and teaching them how to study, because I figure they have more time to spare, relatively speaking. I'm keeping it secret from Ryuuen, though, of course."

If Ryuuen heard about that, I wondered, would he scold Katsuragi and tell him not to do anything unnecessary? Even if he appeared angry on the surface, he might not actually do anything to stop Katsuragi. Ryuuen had grown and matured to this point, and he should judge something like that to be a necessary measure. Not to mention, Ryuuen had paid out a hefty sum to get Katsuragi into his class specifically so that he could entrust him with finding methods that Ryuuen couldn't on his own. That would factor in, too.

"Is it really all right for me to hear about something as important as that?" I asked Katsuragi.

"This is yet another strange thing, but sometimes, it's easier on you, mentally and emotionally, to tell someone a secret," he replied.

"I might go and tell Ryuuen, though."

"If you were that sort of person, it would be on me to calculate how badly I'd misjudged you."

It sounded like he trusted me, at least in this matter. It was a sort of threat, too—one not to betray him. At that point, Katsuragi put a stop to our conversation, looking over at someone coming up behind me.

"Shameless," he scoffed. "You don't look at all sorry about being late."

I followed Katsuragi's gaze. Katsuragi, exasperated, pushed off from the wall. We both started walking as Ryuuen came slowly toward us. A plastic bag was dangling from his left wrist—perhaps he had stopped by the convenience store,

"Looks like the gang's all here," he said.

"Shouldn't you at least say one word of apology to Ayanokouji first?" said Katsuragi.

But of course Ryuuuen ignored him and walked on. “Don’t care. Just be grateful I didn’t call you out on New Year’s.”

Katsuragi and I exchanged glances for just a moment: *We’ve sure got it rough, huh?* As soon as Ryuuuen started moving again, he took out a hamburger from the plastic bag and stuffed the now-empty bag into his pocket. He just ripped off the wrapper and started eating. Maybe he hadn’t had breakfast that morning? Katsuragi had an astonished look on his face, like he couldn’t help but wonder why Ryuuuen couldn’t have at least finished his meal before coming.

“First, let me ask you the reason why you’ve called Ayanokouji here,” said Katsuragi.

Despite Katsuragi’s strong tone, Ryuuuen didn’t seem willing to answer right away, and continued chewing in silence. Eventually, once his stomach was satisfied enough, he turned his attention to us.

“I heard an interesting story from a group of third-years,” he said. “Figured I’d share it with ya. Apparently, word is that there’s a huge, climactic battle where every class in our grade level’s gonna clash comin’ up in the third semester.”

“A huge, climactic battle?” Katsuragi repeated. “Surely they meant the final exam at the end of the semester. That’s not particularly surprising.”

The notion that the school was laying the groundwork for a grueling final exam at the end of the academic year had been confirmed in several ways thus far. I couldn’t imagine that Ryuuuen would call me and Katsuragi here to tell us something so obvious.

I belatedly jumped into the conversation. “You’re not just referring to the final exams alone, though, are you?”

“We’ve been focused entirely on the end of the third semester, but I suppose it is possible that it’s not just finals we need to worry about,” Katsuragi said.

“You hear anythin’ ‘bout this, Ayanokouji?” asked Ryuuuen.

“I’ve been told that there may be a special exam administered at the

beginning of the third semester,” I said, “one that could end in expulsions. I’m not sure how much we can trust that it’s true, though.”

Ryuuuen must have heard something similar, because he grinned. “When did you hear about it?”

“Three days ago, on the 25th of December,” I replied. “I heard it from Kiryuuin, from Class 3-B.”

“I heard it on the same day. Only I heard it from somebody named Momiyama from Class 3-D.”

“Even if we take it as fact that there really will be such a risky exam coming up, you both heard about it at almost the same time?” said Katsuragi. “Why?”

“It could be coincidence... Or—”



Ryuuuen finished my thought. “The school’s intentionally controllin’ the information, so that word comes out at this time, most likely.”

As he became increasingly convinced of this grim fact, he chewed his hamburger more vigorously. Horikita’s Class B got word from Kiryuuin, also from Class B. Ryuuuen’s Class D got word from Momiyama, also from Class D. It was curious that the sources of this information were consistent with the class rankings. If Sakayanagi got her information from Class A and Ichinose got her information from Class C respectively, that would make sense.

“But can we really come to that conclusion? Can we not consider the possibility that someone is exerting their influence on the third-year students into spreading misinformation? After all, we are in the middle of winter vacation,” argued Katsuragi.

“Heh,” Ryuuuen chuckled. “That’s exactly *why* it’s so credible, though.”

The students were in the middle of their break, so naturally, there was a pause in the usual feeling of wariness. Everyone was enjoying their days in a relaxed atmosphere. If it was a hoax, then it actually wouldn’t have much of an effect—all it would do was put the students into a state of readiness for the next battle. We couldn’t expect there to be a mental burden either. No anxiety to unfairly weigh us down.

“So, a warning: brace for a shock,” Katsuragi concluded. “It would be more natural to think of it that way.” If there were messages coming from third-year students that were going to specific classes, that would be a neat and tidy flow of information. “Has anyone else heard anything similar?”

I shook my head. Ryuuuen didn’t respond, but I supposed that in itself was his answer. After all, if Ishizaki and the others had heard anything about this, I was sure they would have immediately reported it to Ryuuuen.

“One representative from each class has been notified,” said Katsuragi. “Should we assume that?”

"I doubt we'll get confirmation, but I figure it's safe to say that Sakayanagi and Ichinose have got word of this, too," Ryuuen agreed. "They ain't stupid enough to overlook this kind of information, no matter how roundabout it might be."

"But in that case, one question comes to mind. Why was Ayanokouji selected to hear this information, representing Class 2-B? Shouldn't Horikita have been the one who was chosen? I suppose there's the possibility that you were chosen by coincidence, Ryuuen, and someone other than Sakayanagi and Ichinose heard the information in their respective classes, but—no, that's absurd."

Katsuragi promptly abandoned his new hypothesis before it could get off the ground. "The school is in an entirely neutral position, now and always. If they were going to give us some warning, then it would make sense that only the leaders would be notified so they can make preparations. At the very least, they need to select those who can accept and understand the warning coming from the third-years."

"Sure, Suzune's gettin' stronger too, but it wouldn't be weird if the school and the third-years interpreted Ayanokouji as the leader and chose him," Ryuuen pointed out. "That ain't particularly surprisin'."

It was certainly true that I'd had many opportunities to talk with both Nagumo and Kiriyama in close proximity, even including those instances where I got involved in student council business—although I still would've expected Kiriyama to choose Horikita. More than anything else, though, this didn't help to resolve the question of why Kiryuuin had contacted me.

If I were to force an interpretation of the situation, I'd say it would indicate that the school instructed the third-year leaders to deliver a message to the second-year leaders. Kiriyama was intending to tell Horikita, but Kiryuuin heard about the message and volunteered to handle it, and she chose to contact me and deliver the information...

I didn't know whether that interpretation was correct, but now that I knew the contents of the message, I had the obligation to inform Horikita as soon as possible.

"If we assume it went similarly last year," Katsuragi muttered softly to himself, "then it's possible this special exam they're hinting at could be held around the same as the mixed training camp." Then, he once again collected his scattered statements and organized his ideas into a coherent whole: "During the third semester, two special exams will be held between early and late January, followed by another special exam which we can expect to be based on an in-class vote in early March. Afterward, there will be a final exam at the end of the academic year, making for a total of four exams."

In addition to the three exams we expected, the same as we'd had in our first year, it was possible that in our second year we'd have a fourth. This was nothing more than speculation, though. Apparently, the in-class vote had been an unplanned event, which didn't necessarily happen every year. If the same event wasn't held this year, that would mean we'd have three special exams held in our third semester.

Ultimately, last year was last year. We couldn't anticipate how this year would go based on that. Just as an extreme example, it was still possible that there wouldn't be any special exams at all before the end of the academic year apart from the written final exam. Conversely, it was equally impossible to state with certainty that there wouldn't be an outsize number of special exams, like five or six, instead of just four.

"In-Class Voting, huh," said Ryuuen. "That's the one where Totsuka got expelled 'cause of Sakayanagi, right?"

"...That's right," Katsuragi replied. Perhaps he was recalling the bitter events of last year, because his face clouded over.

Ryuuen finished his burger and said happily, "Dependin' on the situation, I doubt it'll just be one or two people gettin' kicked out this time, either."

He said it rather casually, but he was right: it was best to assume that there was in fact a reasonable degree of risk.

"Expulsions, hm," Katsuragi said. "If possible, I would prefer there not be any,

though."

While Katsuragi might have been concerned about his classmates, Ryuuen seemed eager.

"Heh heh. Come on, don't say somethin' so soft. There's still way too many students in our grade. It wouldn't be fun at all if they didn't get us a test that'll thin things out—maybe by five or even ten people."

"Don't forget that there's a risk you'll be targeted too, Ryuuen," Katsuragi reminded him.

"Fine by me. I don't care if it's Sakayanagi or Ichinose, if they come at me, I'll just beat 'em into the ground."

"If it's an enemy who's easy to understand, then that's fine. But that doesn't mean that there aren't people from within who might try and take you down."

By "from within," Katsuragi meant in the class that he himself belonged to. I was sure that Ryuuen, who never feared making enemies, must have had quite a lot in his own class. But he wasn't the sort of man who felt anxious about such things.

"If we just didn't worry about pickin' and choosin' who to axe in our class, that'd solve the problem fast," said Ryuuen.

"Oh, for the love of..." Katsuragi sighed. "Look, I'll tell you this right now, if you make the decision to just casually discard your own allies, I will fight you on it."

"Suit yourself," shrugged Ryuuen.

Katsuragi had intervened before—if he were to get in Ryuuen's way, we could expect that Ryuuen wouldn't show him any mercy. Still, Katsuragi would function as a stopper, at least to a certain extent.

However...the really baffling thing here hadn't been cleared away. Perhaps Katsuragi had felt that as well, because his expression was rigid as he walked next to me. If the purpose of this meeting was only to bounce opinions back

and forth about the difficult special exam that could be just around the corner, then there was no need for the three of us to get together and discuss things like this in person.

"The next special exam. If the rules end up allowin' for a one-on-one match, I'm gonna take Sakayanagi on," announced Ryuuuen. This was really something he should have kept hidden, but he came out and said it anyway, as though he had seen through what Katsuragi and I were thinking.

"What are you thinking, Ryuuuen?" asked Katsuragi. "Is a direct confrontation with her in the final exam not enough?"

"Hell no it ain't enough. I wanna see that chick's face stained with disgrace at least once."

By naming the person he wanted to fight against, he was also telling me not to interfere.

"Even if Horikita isn't given any explicit warning, chances that she would voluntarily wish to fight against Sakayanagi's class are low," Katsuragi said. "At present, unless there's a special exam that greatly prioritizes teamwork alone, there is no merit in choosing to fight against Sakayanagi's class, which is superior in terms of overall ability."

If Horikita were to weigh her options between facing Sakayanagi and facing a class that was currently ranked lower than hers, she would probably choose Ichinose.

"I cannot say that it is advisable for us to nominate Class A at this point," Katsuragi went on. "It's possible that they could be the most difficult opponent we could face, if it is an exam based on Academic Ability, like last time."

It was certainly true that there wasn't any need to go out of their way to nominate Class A at this stage. But even so, Ryuuuen seemed like he wanted a fight, even if he had to take the risk that the test wouldn't suit his strengths.

"It's 'cause Sakayanagi thinks I'm somebody she can beat whenever she

wants. I'm gonna knock that naïve idea right outta her."

"...This isn't something I want to hear about," Katsuragi said.

"Okay, then, Katsuragi. You want Ichinose? She's gettin' to be a decent opponent. She could make a lot of trouble for us."

Ryuuuen had also noticed that Ichinose was beginning to change significantly, then. Katsuragi would probably need to change his perception on that point as well, but he still seemed disgruntled that Ryuuuen was nominating Sakayanagi.

"It's good to evaluate Ichinose as a threat," Katsuragi said. "Overall, though, Sakayanagi is still superior. Even if almost all my evaluations up until this point were overturned, I still cannot think of anyone better than her. At any rate, we should wait for information to be disclosed at the start of the third semester before we decide."

Katsuragi was hardly making light of or disrespecting Ichinose, but he was emphatic that they should wait to decide until after they understood the contents of the special exam before choosing who they'd fight.

"What does it matter the reason why?" I asked. "Ryuuuen simply wants to fight Sakayanagi."

"That's exactly the problem," Katsuragi replied. "He's our leader—he should choose a path with as high a chance as possible of leading us to victory. Deciding to fight a powerful enemy for strictly selfish reasons is as good as throwing the battle."

We kept walking as we talked, continuing our stroll around Keyaki Mall. It didn't seem like they were going to let me go for quite a while yet.

## 5.2

**K**ARUIZAWA STARED at the empty space where the large Christmas tree should have been standing, near the main entrance. As she stared at the blank space

that had already been cleared away, she wore a look of dejection on her face.

“*Sigh*—”

Satou, who had only just arrived at the place they were supposed to meet, heard her sigh as she came up behind Karuizawa.

“Were you waiting long, Kei-chan?” she asked.

“Oh, Maya-chan. No, not at all. I only just got here myself.”

It was the 28th, and Karuizawa had completely recovered by now. She'd invited Satou to hang out with her, because, as she had explained to Ayanokouji, Satou had helped her time and time again while she had the flu. If there was anything she needed, Satou offered to get it for her, regardless of the time. When Karuizawa was feeling lonely, Satou returned her messages immediately. Satou listened to Karuizawa's feelings of frustration the many times she wanted to send Ayanokouji a message but couldn't. And she readily accepted her sudden invitation to hang out without even the slightest hint of reluctance.

“Sorry for the sudden invitation,” said Karuizawa.

“It's no worries, seriously,” Satou replied. “Besides, I'm just glad that you're better, truly.”

“Thanks. But don't you think everyone was making too big a deal out of it, when it was just the flu?”

“It's 'cause there are people who get really sick from it.” Satou took Karuizawa's hands in hers, as happy as a child that her friend had recovered. “This might not be any of my business or anything, but... Did you make sure to tell Ayanokouji-kun? That you're all better, I mean.”

“Yeah, I did this morning,” Karuizawa said. “He said we'll talk tonight, including about the promise that we couldn't keep for Christmas.”

“Oh, I see! That's awesome, good for you!” said Satou happily. She'd jumped to the conclusion that everything turned out fine and that they had made up,

but upon seeing Karuizawa's lack of joyfulness, her face fell.

"I think we might be able to keep our promise to meet up," Karuizawa went on, "but I don't know about anything else beyond that..."

"W-wait, when you say you don't know, that's... I mean, you just had a little fight is all, right?"

From what Satou had heard, she couldn't imagine that it was so serious Karuizawa needed to feel bad. Ayanokouji was the one at fault. However, there was another problem on Karuizawa's mind, one that kept popping up repeatedly all this time.

"I think that maybe, Kiyotaka might be in love with Ichinose-san," said Karuizawa.

*He fell in love with someone else.* The entire time she'd been ill, that worst-case scenario kept preying on Karuizawa's mind.

"No way, absolutely not, there's no way he is," Satou said. "Come on, I'm sure it's fine, right? Okay?"

"Okay..."

Karuizawa's response came back smoothly, and Satou felt inwardly relieved to see that her words had reached her friend. At the same time though, she realized that she had inadvertently put her foot in her mouth, and she regretted it. She couldn't undo her mistake, so Satou desperately tried to change the topic, kicking her mind into full gear to think of something else to talk about.

"S-so hey, it's almost New Year's, right?" said Satou. "It's like, wow, the year just flies by so fast!"

The Christmas tree had been removed. Everywhere around them, they could see people already getting ready for the arrival of the new year.

"Yeah, for sure... I wanted to see the Christmas tree, though," said Karuizawa.  
"Uh... ?!"

Karuizawa, still feeling some lingering regrets, continued to stare at the spot where the tree would have been. Karuizawa had been planning to go on a date with Ayanokouji on the 24th, when the tree was still being set up. Then, with the ornaments sparkling brightly, she was supposed to have taken a commemorative photo with him. Satou, having ended up sticking her foot in her mouth yet again, tugged on her own cheeks as a show of regret.

"W-well, there's always next year. Right?" she said.

"Yeah... Yeah, you're right," said Karuizawa.

Next year. Currently, imagining something like what things would be like a year from now was completely beyond Karuizawa. Even tomorrow was completely uncertain, a deep darkness spreading. In contrast to Karuizawa, who didn't take her eyes off that spot, Satou was looking all around restlessly. Satou wanted Karuizawa to cheer up. That was her top priority, but, having readily accepted Karuizawa's invitation to hang out, Satou had another goal in mind as well. She was hoping they would bump into Ayanokouji while they were out.

If they still hadn't made up, it would be difficult for Satou to get the two of them to contact one another and arrange a meeting while they were intentionally avoiding each other. In that case, she had to rely on the power of coincidence. Fortunately for Satou, it sounded as though they had talked and had planned to meet tomorrow...but maybe that could be sped up with a chance encounter. If something could make Karuizawa feel better right now, then Satou didn't mind whatever it was, even if it was her boyfriend.

They just needed to run into Ayanokouji while they were together. If Satou could give them a good push right then and there and get them to kiss and make up, that would be best. It was tough to get people to meet up even on purpose sometimes, though. But Satou also figured that if Ayanokouji knew that they were going to be out today, he probably wouldn't just carelessly show up. Karuizawa, standing right in front of her, was proof of that.

Karuizawa hadn't even made a pretense of trying to go look for her boyfriend.

But Satou thought that rather than out of a sense of ill will, it was probably more like Karuizawa was refraining out of consideration for both Satou herself and Ayanokouji so as not to be a bother. If Satou couldn't expect there to be any chance encounters, then she had no other choice but to be strong and try her best.

Figuring that she'd just go with the flow, she firmly grabbed hold of both of Karuizawa's shoulders. "Come on, let's just forget all the bad stuff and have a blast, okay?"

Karuizawa looked into Satou's eyes. Her friend was desperately trying to cheer her up, and it made her reflect on how she was acting. She had invited her best friend out to say thank you, and she'd just ended up making Satou worry about her all over again. She thought she must be making Satou wonder just why in the world she had invited her out here in the first place.

"Yeah," said Karuizawa.

Karuizawa decided to try and quit looking so down in the dumps for now. She'd successfully managed to come to this school, as though she were running away from the past to find refuge here, and she'd made a true friend—a best friend, actually. Reflecting upon how grateful she was for the warmth of a genuine friend, she offered Satou her hand. For a moment, Satou didn't understand what that was supposed to mean, but once she saw the broad smile on Karuizawa's face, she quickly figured it out. Satou reached out and took Karuizawa's hand in hers.

Their fingers were still cold, and they both commented on it, sharing a laugh. It wasn't as though either of them would hold hands with just anyone. They weren't the kind to get swept up in the moment. They didn't feel embarrassed about it, though; they were just doing it just to adapt to the situation. Even now, there was a moment of awkwardness. Their feelings were connected.

If other people saw them, they might think they were childish, or maybe they'd wonder if they had romantic feelings for each other—or they'd say

whatever else they liked based on whatever they projected onto a pair of girls. They were just holding hands because they wanted to, as best friends. Nothing more. Right now, just in this moment alone, they felt confident that the gossip and noise around them didn't bother them at all.

"Ha ha ha," Satou cackled, "I will make you forget eeeeeeeverything!"

"Kyaaah! OMG, so scary!" Karuizawa squealed playfully.

A world with just the two of them. Satou and Karuizawa decided to have fun in Keyaki Mall from the morning until the evening.

### 5.3

**S**TARTING FROM KEYAKI MALL, we took our time on our walk, passing the path that led to the school buildings, instead going on the path that gave a view of the ocean, before once again returning to a spot near the mall. Three guys walking around aimlessly during winter vacation normally wouldn't attract attention. However, the abnormal combination of Ryuuen, who easily drew the attention of the public eye, his advisor Katsuragi, and me, made us a little conspicuous.

Even so, Ryuuen hadn't chosen any kind of private option, like using an indoor space on campus or having a conversation over the phone. It was a bit of a careless choice for a discussion about special exams. Maybe it was thoughtlessness, but it could also be a contrived act made to look that way, and my evaluation of Ryuuen would differ greatly depending on which was the truth.

Just as our original meeting place came into view, Katsuragi stopped, just one step ahead of Ryuuen and me.

"I take it we're finished talking, then?" he said, looking to us for assent. "If we discuss this any further, we'll simply be talking in circles."

It was impossible for us to determine precisely how many special exams there

would be and what they would be like, and Katsuragi would not approve of Ryuuen's desire to fight Sakayanagi. They wouldn't be able to spend their time in any meaningful way if they continued the conversation as it was going, no matter how many times they went over it.

"Yeah, probably, so. Let's just call it," said Ryuuen with a casual wave of his hand, not even bothering to turn around.

"At any rate, thank you for all you've done, Ayanokouji," Katsuragi added. "If you happen to run into any problems, come and talk to me. I may be able to lend you a hand in some situations outside of class competitions."

I responded with an appreciative nod to Katsuragi's thoughtfulness, which belied his appearance. With that, he turned his back and walked on ahead, leaving me with Ryuuen.

*Well, guess it's probably about time I should be going too, then,* I thought to myself.

"I'm gonna hit up Keyaki Mall now," Ryuuen said. "What about you? If you wanna hold hands and go on a date, I'll consider it, eh?" He playacted like he welcomed the idea, casually extending his right hand. It wouldn't have been as bad if Katsuragi were still accompanying us, but going shopping alone with Ryuuen would definitely draw people's attention. More importantly, though, chances were high that Kei and Satou were in the mall somewhere right now.

"I'll be going, actually," I replied.

I figured I'd just head straight back, since I wasn't in the mood to stop in the mall on a hand-holding date with Ryuuen. It didn't seem like he was going to stop me either, so I just started walking.

"My fight with you is gonna start in our third year. Don't forget that," Ryuuen called out, giving me one final parting shot as I walked away from Keyaki Mall.

It wasn't something that'd crossed my mind to begin with, but whether that fight would actually happen or not was a different story. At any rate... Even

though I had only gone for a short walk, I was feeling strangely exhausted— even more so than I had after spending practically an hour sweating it out in the gym. I figured it was probably psychological.

Once Katsuragi and Ryuuen were no longer in sight, I started walking once again. I figured I'd head on back to the dormitory and spend the entire day cooped up in my room as I had originally planned.

*But first, let's clear up something that's been bothering me,* I thought to myself. After walking for about half a minute or so, I stopped when I sensed that there was someone close by, just in front of the vending machines set up in a row along the outer wall of Keyaki Mall.

To a third party, I probably looked like I was simply considering buying a drink as I stared at the products lined up on display in the machines. I looked between a vending machine and a decorative plant that seemed to have been placed by an employee at the same time the store opened.

“What are you doing there?” I called out to Yamamura, who was hiding secretly in a blind spot, concealed from view.

“Huh?!”

“You've been following me for the last ten minutes or so, haven't you?” I said. “Earlier, you were hiding behind a tree on the other side of the path, I think.”



The path was lined with several thick-trunked trees, which made it easy to hide. Managing to keep Ryuuен and Katsuragi from noticing her presence as she followed us on our walk was quite a feat.

“N-no, that’s...” Yamamura tried to talk her way out of it at first, but she seemed to give up almost immediately, perhaps because I had correctly identified her position. “How...d-did you know?”

“How?” I repeated.

*I don’t know, I just did.* That’s what I thought at first, but the old me probably wouldn’t have paid any attention to Yamamura’s presence at all. Also, we had spent time together during the school trip, so I’d already had her in mind. To use an analogy, think of it like an image. At first glance, its shape and composition just looks like A. But when you change your viewpoint and see that the shape and composition is B. From that point onward, you can’t help but perceive the image not as A, but as B. This scenario might have been something like that.

She went from simply being Female Student A from another class to me, to being Yamamura Miki. That was all there was to it. I had known that I was being followed and that some of my earlier conversation with Ryuuен and Katsuragi had been overheard, but I didn’t do anything to stop it. Yamamura was a student from Class A and an ally of Sakayanagi’s. If she were engaged in some covert operation, telling Ryuuен and Katsuragi about it would mean that I was supporting them. Of course, while I was free to support them, that wasn’t in my best interests at present.

“Relax. There wasn’t any indication that Ryuuен or Katsuragi noticed,” I told her.

“Really? It felt like Ryuuен-kun was trying to lure me out into the open, though...” said Yamamura.

Yamamura’s hunch was probably correct. Ryuuен didn’t stay in one spot; he deliberately went around to conspicuous places. I thought he was probably

trying to catch his prey in a trap. It all seemed like Ryuuен had been playing with his food.

"If that's the case, then you don't even need to ask me whether they found out, do you?" I pointed out. Yamamura must have been certain that no one had discovered her. Otherwise, she wouldn't have looked so surprised when I found her. "It seems like you weren't just tailing yesterday and today."

She neither confirmed nor denied it, instead responding with silence. Yamamura was good at tailing people, and even though Ryuuен was rather wary, she had performed excellently. Once it became clear to Ryuuен that his attempt to lure her out wouldn't work, he was probably forced to give up. I couldn't see any signs of him following me after we'd gone our separate ways, either. That was another reason I was able to approach Yamamura with peace of mind.

"To be honest, I wasn't sure whether to come up and talk to you," I went on. "But we were in the same group during the school trip, so I thought I'd at least say hello."

Given I'd noticed her presence, not talking to Yamamura would have been like ignoring her. I supposed it felt odd to me to ignore a familiar face when I encountered them somewhere that wasn't that busy. In fact, by now I was fairly sure that Yamamura would have concluded that I hadn't discovered her and must have been hoping I'd just look the other way.

"You're not...going to ask me the reason I've been tailing him?" she asked.

It had been confirmed that Sakayanagi and Ryuuен would be facing off in the final exams—that Ryuuен wanted to fight Sakayanagi. Sakayanagi likely wanted to know Ryuuен's every move and aim, and there wasn't any harm in gathering information.

"I don't need to ask," I replied.

"I see."

"You can rest easy, I have no intention of reporting anything about you to Ryuuен." I thought that just saying those two hadn't noticed her would be enough to reassure her.

"But...it looked like you were friendly with them, Ayanokouji-kun. At the very least, it didn't seem as though you perceive them as your enemies. Which means, if you put it another way, that you're on Ryuuен-kun's side, right?" Yamamura's words were laced with doubt, as though she were asking a question.

"Sorry, but I'm not on Ryuuен's side," I replied. "That being said though, it's not like I'm on Class A's side, either. Anyway, I don't intend to tell anyone that I met you here. You can trust me on that."

"...Really?"

Just as I was about to give her a nod to dispel her anxiety, the faint sound of footsteps caused my neck to go stiff. The next thing I knew, I heard the slow, repeated sound of dry clapping.

"I knew you'd come through, Ayanokouji," Ryuuен drawled. "Great work on finding the rat."

Yamamura had already taken her eyes off me to look at him. He had seemed to disappear so completely, but now he suddenly made himself known... So, that's how it was, huh?

"Guessin' you're probably the one that Sakayanagi bitch told to collect information about me, eh?" he said.

"It's not like that..." Even though she denied it, she couldn't deceive Ryuuен at all. She wasn't a good actor.

Ryuuен chuckled. "Looks like I made the right choice following you, Ayanokouji. Even someone as observant as you—you let your guard down just 'cause no one's chasing you. Right?"

He was exactly right. I was confident that if someone were obviously

following me, whether it be Ryuuen or anyone else, I would notice them. But apparently Ryuuen had outmaneuvered me. There were only two paths I could have taken from the spot where Ryuuen and I had parted ways: I could have either chosen the path leading to Keyaki Mall or the path leading to the school and dormitory. Ryuuen had disappeared inside Keyaki Mall.

Even if he did follow me afterward, if he stayed at a distance where he wouldn't be spotted or if he quickly went after me after waiting for a period of time first, there was a good chance that he would catch up with me naturally. No matter how sensitive my radar was, if no one was actually tailing me, there was nothing I could do to prevent him from following. The reason Ryuuen had pressed me for an answer earlier, about whether I was going to Keyaki Mall, was to narrow down the route I was going to take.

Moreover...

I felt even more apologetic toward Yamamura when I saw Katsuragi coming back too, just ahead of me.

"I hadn't imagined there was a connection between Yamamura and Sakayanagi," he remarked.

Katsuragi looked surprised to see that she must have been the one conducting reconnaissance. I guessed that meant he was a necessary part of the operation to smoke out the person who was watching them, scouting the area for people under the pretense he had left, huh?

"Sorry, Ayanokouji," he added. "I only came back when Ryuuen called me just a few minutes ago."

So, Ryuuen had figured that if he were going to track his target down anyway, his chances of success would improve if he got Katsuragi involved. That was his move. From the sounds of it, Ryuuen hadn't even told his allies anything about this plan of his, so that they wouldn't perceive anything unnatural about it.

"Is it surprising that she's connected to Sakayanagi?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Katsuragi. "There weren't any signs that she had any such relationship with Sakayanagi when I was in their class, at the very least. I assumed that, at best, she was nothing more than just one of many scouts."

Was that something Katsuragi had a particularly good understanding of because of his time in that class, then? Obviously, Yamamura was in far more trouble than she had been before.

"Pft, even though I went through all this hassle, all I could catch was one small fry, huh?" Ryuuen scoffed. "I was expectin' Hashimoto or someone... Or were you given the job because Sakayanagi trusts you?"

Ryuuen's sharp gaze pierced Yamamura, heavy with suspicion. She hadn't expected to find herself surrounded, and she couldn't hide her anxiety—which, conversely, prevented her from realizing that her very anxiety answered Ryuuen's question.

"I gotta say, your powers of observation are top-notch, Ayanokouji. But your role for today is done." Ryuuen dismissed me; his target was the frightened Yamamura. "If Sakayanagi thinks she can beat me just by sneakin' around and spyan' on me, then she ain't no big deal neither."

Even if I hadn't spotted Yamamura this time and she had been able to keep on gathering information over and over, whether that would allow her to pass useful information on to Sakayanagi was another matter. If you wanted to establish contact with someone without letting anyone else find out about it, then naturally, you wouldn't do it outdoors. Inside the room of an ally who wouldn't betray you, inside a karaoke room, or in the restrooms, if you were the same sex. It would be easy to simply go about your normal business without drawing suspicion.

However, for Sakayanagi, there were some things she couldn't do anything about. Information was a necessity, and Ryuuen must have been investigating Class A in just the same way they were investigating him. But unlike Ryuuen, who could gather information even on his own, Sakayanagi had difficulty in that

regard. She had to use students like Yamamura, Kamuro, and Hashimoto to gather information for her.

"Y'know, it sure doesn't feel too good, havin' somebody stick their nose in your business," sneered Ryuuuen.

"Do you have any integrity at all?" Katsuragi asked him. "You're investigating Sakayanagi in much the same way."

The surveillance operation wasn't a one-sided affair. It sounded like they were investigating each other, perhaps in preparation for final exams at the end of the year.

"In that case, you gonna do somethin' different? If you've got a better idea, then I'm all ears, Katsuragi."

Ryuuuen's implicit suggestion was that they set a trap for Sakayanagi, but Katsuragi rejected the idea. "I do not intend to make any major moves. Keeping an eye on Sakayanagi is the only move we need to make right now."

Katsuragi and Ryuuuen glared at one another in a standoff, maintaining their physical distance. It seemed like Katsuragi especially was on his guard.

"Don't forget," he added, "it's only the special exam that will decide who wins, not what happens off the battlefield."

"Oh, for the love of..." Ryuuuen sighed. "You're a stubborn mule." Ryuuuen and Katsuragi's fundamental plans of action were practically opposites of each other. But even so, Ryuuuen happily listened to what Katsuragi had to say, and smiled in response. He turned to Yamamura. "Okay, let's you and us hang out for a little while, huh?"

"Stop," commanded Katsuragi.

"Huh? Stop? We finally caught her. We gotta grill 'er for information, otherwise it's a waste."

"You intend to stoop to threats? Just finding out about Yamamura's role is good enough," said Katsuragi. He turned to Yamamura, shooing her with his

hand. "Go. Now."

"P-please excuse me..." she stammered, clearly eager to escape.

But Ryuuен wasn't going to let that happen. "Wait," he barked, and she stopped in her tracks with a startled yelp. Frozen in place, she was like a frog being eyed up by a snake.

"We'll keep quiet about the fact we found you," he said.

"Why...?" asked Yamamura.

"Because you look so pathetic. I'm sure I don't need to tell you what'll happen if Sakayanagi finds out we found you, right?"

"I..."

"We didn't find you. Got it? You won't lose your value if you don't report this. It's up to you whether to believe me or not, I guess." Ryuuен spoke as though he were dangling a thread of salvation above her. "If you can't keep your trap shut, then go tell your boss this: 'If you want information about me, come to my room, alone, anytime you want.' That is, if she's got the guts, and you got the guts to tell her."

Yamamura responded with a meek nod and then quietly started to leave. Perhaps she was intending to head back to the dormitory via Keyaki Mall, since she was heading in that direction. After Yamamura had gotten far enough away, Katsuragi aggressively drew up to Ryuuен.

"Ryuuен...! You barbarian!"

"What?"

"Your 'preference' certainly is not praiseworthy."

"Huh?"

"I won't tell you not to be interested in the opposite sex," Katsuragi told him. "But Sakayanagi is a child. She is not someone you should lay a hand on."

I was wondering what Katsuragi was about to say with such a serious look on

his face, and he came out and gave Ryuuen an absurd warning. That was his interpretation of the “come to my room” part of Ryuuen’s earlier statement. That had been a joke on Ryuuen’s part, but I supposed Katsuragi didn’t get it.

“There are quite a few girls in this school, too. Don’t do anything rash,” added Katsuragi.

“What kinda stupid shit are you goin’ on about, you dumb bastard?” Ryuuen retorted. “Do you seriously think I’d have any interest in that cocky little brat? I was just getting her going.”

“Hm? Wait, no, but you just said to have her come visit you in your room, alone. Isn’t that what you meant?”

Ryuuen, shaking his head in exasperation, proceeded to go back and address Katsuragi’s original argument. “It ain’t my ‘preference’ or whatever. Anyway, Sakayanagi’s the same age as the rest of us, ain’t she?”

Katsuragi seemed to think it was fine to lay a hand on someone your own age, but not Sakayanagi. Apparently he hadn’t noticed this himself until now, because he froze, lost in thought for a while. Then, finally understanding the meaning behind Ryuuen’s statement, he came back to Earth.

“...Yes, you’re certainly right,” he conceded. “It’s just, well, her size makes her look younger. She’s even smaller than my little sister! I can’t help but—”

While Katsuragi did perceive Sakayanagi to be a strong enemy, he was also an older brother. Sakayanagi reminded him of his little sister, who he hadn’t seen in a while, so his sense of righteousness had probably gotten the better of him, making him feel that it wouldn’t be right for Sakayanagi to be regarded as a sexual object. One thing was for certain: if Sakayanagi heard what these two were saying, she would be angry. They were clearly treating her like a child based solely on her appearance.

“Sides, when it comes to chicks, normal is best, as far as I’m concerned,” Ryuuen said. “I ain’t got a preference for anythin’ too flashy, anythin’ too plain, too big or too small.”

Not that I wanted to know, but apparently, Ryuuen's type was extremely ordinary women. Rather than sounding like a selfish wish on his part, it sounded more like a mature preference, based on being experienced in the ways of the world, on things bitter and sweet. I didn't know about his life here in high school now, but I guessed that he must have had some experience with girls when he was in junior high.

"I am relieved that you haven't fallen as far as I had thought," said Katsuragi. Whatever he felt relieved by, it was a problem he'd made up himself.

"What? You still got somethin' to say, Ayanokouji?" asked Ryuuen.

"That's a rather rude way of speaking to me, after you used me for your own convenience," I answered.

"It's your own fault for gettin' used," he sneered. "If you wanna hold a grudge, blame your own bad intuition."

It was certainly true that there was no point in holding it against Ryuuen that he'd pulled one over on me in this situation. Even so, it was tough, because it didn't seem like I could use this as a lesson for the future. Following someone by deliberately choosing *not* to follow them closely. Even if Ryuuen tried the same trick again, it would be difficult for me to stop it. Being vigilant even when you didn't sense any signs of anything would only be paranoid.

Keeping the thought in mind that I could be followed everywhere I went was going to hang over me. Anyway, there wasn't any point in staying around here. I still had some things I wanted to talk to Yamamura about, and I might be able to catch up with her if I left now.

As soon as I started in the direction of Keyaki Mall, Ryuuen called out to me. "Weren't ya headin' back?"

"There are countless routes within the mall," I replied. "I don't want you chasing after me any more today."

Ryuuen responded with a scornful chuckle when he heard I needed multiple

escape routes to get away from him.

## 5.4

**A**LL RIGHT, now that I've entered Keyaki Mall, what to do about Yamamura? I wondered. It was possible that she already left via another exit to head back to the dormitory, but...

I tried putting myself in Yamamura's shoes, to figure out what I'd do in her position. I was sure she must be agonizing over whether to report her blunder to Sakayanagi, that she had ultimately been discovered when tailing Ryuuen. People sought somewhere peaceful when they were feeling mentally and emotionally unstable. If I were to operate under the assumption she hadn't made a beeline back to the dormitory, for her own safety, and she remained here in the mall, where would she be?

Yamamura was the sort of person who hated crowds and preferred to be alone, so any places with lots of people coming and going could be ruled out, and so could store interiors. She might be alone in a karaoke room, but going in there solo would have required a lot of work. A private restroom was a relatively highly likely candidate, but I couldn't imagine that she wouldn't have a sense of hesitation over preventing other people from using it.

In that case...

Earlier, she'd hidden in the space between the outdoor vending machines and some decorative plants. There were several vending machines installed in the back of the mall too, near the rest area. Since they were over in that area, they were less conspicuous and not visited as often. As an added blessing, perhaps due to the time of day, I couldn't see any sign of anyone near the rest area, either. And there were no other people by the vending machines further back, naturally. I approached and stealthily took a peek around the side of the vending machines, into the blind spot.

"Huh?!" Yamamura squeaked.

I found her sitting next to the vending machine, holding a small plastic bottle of tea in both hands. She dropped her tea in shock, but fortunately the cap was on, so it was okay.

"So, you really were here after all," I said.

Although I'd narrowed down the list, I'd come here without any evidence. But still... I picked up the plastic bottle that rolled on the floor and handed it to Yamamura.

"H-h-h-how did you know I was here...?" Flustered, she searched her pockets.

"Um, no, I didn't plant a GPS tracker on you or anything."

"B-but, I can't think of anything else th—d-did you maybe track my phone's location...?"

"No, I didn't."

Those were outlandish fantasies on her part, but I supposed she was just so shocked that it made her want to explain it that way. She stood up and took a little peek out from the vending machines, to check her surroundings.

"If you're looking for Ryuuen and Katsuragi, they aren't here," I assured her.

"I-I see... U-um, do you have some business with me still?" she asked.

"I didn't apologize for what happened earlier. I'm sorry, Yamamura. If I hadn't called out to you, they wouldn't have found you." If I hadn't done that, then there wouldn't have been the need for her to sit around worrying by the vending machines like this right now.

But Yamamura responded politely, not outwardly blaming me at all. "It was my fault that you found me, Ayanokouji-kun, so... Please don't worry about it."

"Have you reported to Sakayanagi that you were found?" I asked.

"Well, yes. I told her. I think this means my role is finished now." A surprisingly frank answer. It looked like she was at a loss over Ryuuen's rasped

invitation, but... Well, I supposed, if she had already reported it, then there was no need to worry about that anymore. As for me, though, there were still some things I had to do for Yamamura.

"Let me make it up to you, somehow," I offered.

"...Huh?"

We had been in the same group during the school trip; it wouldn't be surprising if Yamamura and Kitou had been monitoring Ryuuен then. Chances were high that Sakayanagi would have instructed them to simply watch him. Even without direct orders, if they were in the same group, it would only be natural for them to keep a watchful eye on Ryuuен. Yamamura was constantly alert, concerned about everything, even the movements of Ichinose's class, too.

But in this case, things were completely different. The surprise that Katsuragi had shown. The fact that Sakayanagi could be using Yamamura as an asset and spy. Ryuuен's analysis of the strength that Sakayanagi's class possessed had advanced one step further from this fact. From this point forward, Ryuuен's response in dealing with Yamamura would be more intense. If I hadn't noticed Yamamura and carelessly called out to her earlier, then it was highly likely that Ryuuен and Katsuragi wouldn't have been able to capture her, and there would have been no need for me to apologize to her.

"You don't have to make it up to me or anything like that," she said. "This matter has nothing to do with you, Ayanokouji-kun, you're in a different class."

She was exactly right on that point, but I was looking ahead to something. It wasn't something I wanted to explain to anyone yet, though, so I thought up another reason. "It's simply because I feel bad about this. No matter how you slice it, all I've done is create problems for you, Yamamura."

"But... Wouldn't you say that I was the one in the wrong in the first place, for spying on people?"

Yamamura felt guilty, then. That was probably why she wasn't complaining about the situation, even to the person who caused it.

"Really, it's all right, you don't have to worry about it anymore," she insisted.

It sounded like it was going to be a challenge to get a good response out of Yamamura here. If anything, if I dragged this out, all I'd achieve would be making her feel embarrassed and perplexed.

"All right," I said. "In that case, if you're ever in trouble, come and talk to me, anytime. I'm not sure if I can be of any help to you, but let me know." If I put it like that, then even Yamamura should be able to accept it without any difficulty. It was out of my hands, now. It'd be up to Yamamura to reach out and contact me if she needed something.

Yamamura nodded in acceptance. "Okay. I understand."

"All right then, I guess I'll be going now."

"...Take care."

Yamamura didn't move from out front of the vending machines—she must have been intending to stay here a while. Having said my goodbyes, I moved to leave, but then...

Just as soon as I turned around, I saw Kei and Satou walking toward me. I reflexively hid by the vending machines, with Yamamura behind me.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun...?!"

Poor Yamamura was bewildered by what was going on, but I placed my index finger to my lips, telling her to be quiet. She must have understood because she quickly went silent.

"Hey, so, where do you wanna go next?!" I heard Satou ask.

"Hm, let's see," Kei replied.

Only the sound of their voices from their joyful conversation reached me. They drew closer. If they cast a casual glance in this direction, they likely wouldn't be able to see me, but that would change if they had any business with the vending machines. No matter how hidden I was now, I'd be in full view if they approached to buy something.

"Hey, how about we take a little break? Want something to drink?" asked Satou, proposing the worst-case scenario for me.

"Hmm." Kei sounded unsure.

If they did find me now, I'm sure that the fact that I was here hiding would come back to bite me. I was huddled closely together with someone of the opposite sex in a narrow space between the vending machines. It would be difficult to make the excuse that there was nothing going on.

"Yeah, maybe we should take a break for a minute, sure," said Kei.

"Yeah, that's a good idea. You're just getting over being sick," said Satou.

For a moment, I was prepared for what was to come, resigning myself. But it looked as if they didn't intend to use the vending machines after all. They were just going to take a breather on the bench in the rest area. However, it wasn't like the problem was now solved. There was only one escape route from my hiding place, and as long as Kei and Satou were sitting on the bench, I couldn't leave.

"Thanks. I'm really sorry for making you worry about me and stuff," said Kei.

"Nah, it's not that big a deal," Satou replied. "I mean, it's, like, perfectly normal for friends to help out when you get a cold."

"Yeah, if you ever get sick, I'll definitely take care of you, Maya-chan."

"Thanks. That makes me happy."

"You know, Maya-chan, it's like, you're always there, supporting me."

"R-really?"

"Do you remember when we weren't as close friends as we are now, and you were pressing me about Kiyotaka, Maya-chan?" Kei asked. "Like, you know, when we just started our second year."

"Oh, you mean when I asked you when you started liking Ayanokouji-kun? I was all like, 'Don't dodge the question, tell me...' Or something like that, I

think.” For some reason, Satou seemed to be somewhat embarrassed to recall it, turning red as she hid her face with her hands.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Kei. “It was like, you just cut straight to it with zero chill and, like, wouldn’t let me get out of it...”

They were speaking at a normal volume, but I could hear their voices well as they carried over to this quiet area. Yamamura wordlessly looked up at me. I lightly raised one hand, a way of offering her an apology for making her be here for a conversation she probably didn’t want to hear. If she didn’t want to hear it, she didn’t need to force herself for my sake. If she covered her ears with her hands, she could block the sound out with minimal difficulty.

However, to my surprise, Yamamura seemed to be enjoying this a little. She listened to their conversation in silence, with an air of interest. Yamamura must have been assigned the role of collecting information on people daily, on Sakayanagi’s orders. If that was true, then something like listening in on others must have been an ordinary, everyday occurrence for her. Anyone might find enjoyment in playing detective if they were to take part in some covert operation once or twice, but not many would be able to eavesdrop on truly private conversations without any feelings of guilt.

I had assumed that Yamamura herself would be tired of handling such a role, but apparently, that was not the case. That, combined with her natural ability to make effective use of her lack of presence, made her extremely at home in the role.

Satou and Kei talked for a while, but eventually, their break came to an end.

“I think it’s time we get going,” Kei said.

“Are you feeling okay already?” asked Satou.

“Yeah. It’s been a while since we’ve been out, so we gotta have lots of fun today, y’know?”

“Yeah, totally. But, make sure you make up with Ayanokouji-kun, okay?”

Satou reminded her.

“Y-yeah. I’ll do my best...!”

Those last words I heard from both of them came while they were already a ways away. At that time, I thought of telling Yamamura that we should remain here for a while because of the risk that the two of them might unexpectedly turn around and come back, but before I could do anything, Yamamura gently stopped me from making a move with a wave of her hand.

After a few moments longer, I figured we should be okay. As that thought went through my mind, Yamamura made her move.

“I think they’ve gone,” she said.

“Yeah.”

First, Yamamura crept out from behind the vending machines ahead of me, and after making sure that there wouldn’t be any problems even if we left now, she gave me a small signal to join her.

“You really are quite deft,” I remarked.

“Really? I’m always doing this sort of thing, so...” Yamamura quietly cleared her throat, and then said something unexpected. “Are you going to make up with Karuizawa-san, properly?”

“Why do you sound like Satou?” I asked.

“Because I’m curious, I guess. She’s your girlfriend, isn’t she? I didn’t know that you were fighting.”

“I guess there are things even an information gathering specialist doesn’t know.”

“Are you teasing me?”

“Look who’s talking.” Yamamura looked a little surprised at my comeback, but then the corners of her mouth relaxed ever so slightly into a smile.

“It’s kind of strange,” she said. “You’re a mysterious person, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“So I’m told.”

“Is that true? Or is that a joke, too?” she asked.

“We may never know,” I replied.

Although Yamamura still seemed quite reserved, she spoke calmly, and her manner of speaking was easy to understand and not unpleasant. Perhaps it was because she always seemed to be so mellow, so low energy, she somehow reminded me of myself.

“By the way... What about my earlier question?” she asked.

“You didn’t forget, huh?”

“I remember.”

Perhaps it was because Yamamura was so persistent in some regards, or because this experience had taken down one of her walls, but she came out and pressed me on her question once again.

“I will make up with her, properly,” I answered. “I’ve made plans to do so.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” said Yamamura. This matter had nothing to do with her, nor should she have had any contact with Karuizawa, and yet she seemed somewhat happy.

“You don’t have to report that to Sakayanagi,” I added.

“I can’t make any promises.”

“Harsh.”

After catching her breath, Yamamura took out her cell phone and looked at the dark screen. She hesitated a moment, then turned to look at me. “About that matter with Ryuu-en-kun earlier... To tell you the truth, I actually haven’t reported it yet.”

“About you being found?”

“Yes... I’m sorry for lying to you. It was because I wanted you to leave as soon as possible...”

"I see."

"I understand that I have to report it. But...I think maybe I'm afraid of being thrown away. I have nothing else to offer. This was the only thing I'm good at. If she sees that I can't even do this, then...I'll be useless, even in my own class."

I guessed that things like Academic Ability and Physical Ability didn't matter so much; it wasn't about those things. Yamamura had low self-esteem and couldn't see how much she had to offer.

"I wouldn't mind if you wanted to have me take the blame for this, but I'm guessing that's not what this is about," I said.

Whether it was Yamamura's fault or mine, once the truth was revealed, the important thing to Sakayanagi would be the fact that Yamamura had been discovered. There was no changing the fact that it would weaken Yamamura's potential as a future operative.

"I wonder if I should keep quiet about this..." she said.

"Do you believe what Ryuuken said?" I asked.

"The only way for me to survive right now is to put my faith in that, I suppose..."

"I understand how you feel, but you should report it, honestly."

"But...I can maintain how things are at present until the truth comes out. Or maybe I really will keep quiet. Or maybe...Ryuuken-kun will get expelled by Sakayanagi-san and the matter will...be left unresolved."

Deciding to put off disclosing her failure. She was fantasizing that hiding things might save her.

"That would be the worst possible choice," I told her. "Ryuuken is just exploiting an opening in your heart, and he will definitely expose the truth if it's necessary. Even if you do manage to get him expelled, there's still a risk that he'd do it as a parting gift."

For Ryuuken, uncovering Yamamura wasn't a major advantage. However, if

Yamamura didn't report on her discovery, then he would be able to use that to his advantage. It could cost everyone far more than Yamamura just being relieved of her position.

"Don't be taken advantage of so easily," I added.

"But..."

"I don't want you to get expelled. That's why I want you to take this advice."

"W-why? I'm nothing to you. We don't have any kind of relationship."

"We were partners in the same group on the school trip. Isn't that enough of a relationship?"

"I-I—" Yamamura clasped her hands together tightly, then brought them up to her face, covering her eyes. Then, afterward, she opened her eyes wide, took out her phone, and composed a message.

*"Ryuu-en-kun and Katsuragi-kun discovered that I was tailing them. I will call you with the details."*

After showing me the message that she had typed, Yamamura sent it to Sakayanagi.

"I felt that if I hesitated, I might end up running away again," she said. It sounded as though she had decided to close off the path of retreat by reporting the matter to Sakayanagi right here and now.

"U-um. I think it's time," she said nervously. "I... If you'll please excuse me...!" Perhaps it was because Yamamura suddenly felt uncomfortable about this situation, but she hurriedly announced she was leaving, bringing the conversation to an abrupt end. Yamamura bowed deeply to me, even though she didn't have to, before walking away timidly.

"She's easy to talk to, even more than I had imagined she'd be," I thought aloud. It was true—I had told her this earlier myself, but I honestly felt that I did not want her to get expelled. I didn't think that Sakayanagi would punish Yamamura when she reported the incident, but I figured it would be a good

idea to keep a close eye on her in the days to come, to be safe.

"Oh, oops... That's right. I should contact Horikita, just in case," I muttered.

A phone call would have been too much of a hassle, so I figured that it would be best to just summarize the key points in a text message and send that. Besides, Kei and Satou were in the middle of having fun in Keyaki Mall right now. I decided to leave the mall—it would be best to call it a day and head back so as not to run into them.

## 5.5

THAT EVENING, with utmost reverence, I performed the ceremony of unboxing the product that had arrived after I had ordered it online. It was the yogurt maker, which I had snagged for three thousand yen. I read through the thin instruction manual and mastered usage of the machine, operating the apparatus by touch. Then, after taking care of things that needed to be done, I went and bought the necessary items: yogurt and milk.

"Okay. Let's do this," I said to myself.

I hadn't thought too deeply about it before, but making yogurt was extremely simple. First, you had to pour one hundred milliliters of milk out of a one-liter carton. You could drink the one hundred milliliters you took out or you could use it in cooking. In this case, I decided to just drink it. Then, you added one hundred grams of yogurt into the carton, which would have some empty space after you poured the one hundred milliliters out of it. Now that you had a ratio of nine to one in the carton (nine parts milk to one part yogurt), all that was left was to configure the yogurt maker.

The timer was set for nine hours: once that time was up, the entire contents of the carton would be turned into yogurt. People might just say it would be simpler to go ahead and buy yogurt, but the true value of this device came into play when you used it a second time and onward. Tomorrow morning, I could

eat the one thousand grams of yogurt that would be made, but I'd leave one hundred grams in there. By just buying new milk and adding it, it was possible to continue the growth process, using it as a starter for the next batch. The power of lactobacilli.

Even if it were something I knew about in an academic sense, by actually making it for real, I could get a better feel for it. I'd only just turned the thing on, though, so I may have been overdramatizing it.

Anyway, I'd already said the best part about it, but if I could repeat this process forever, I wouldn't have any worries at all. Milk was fermented by the lactobacilli and turned into yogurt, but it was inevitable that the activity of the lactobacilli would weaken over time. As a result, the matrix of the yogurt would grow weaker. There was the method of allowing for a longer period of fermentation time in order to get around this issue, but ultimately, the energy of the starter culture would be lost.

As long as I was going to be re-using cultures, even though I intended to be careful about sanitation, the activity of the lactobacilli would also be weakened due to certain things that couldn't be avoided, like saprophytic bacteria floating in the air. Even if I was being economical, I figured that I should stop using a culture after three times, four at most. By making it myself and getting experience, I could get an intuitive feel for it. Enjoying this aspect was yet another pleasure of making your own yogurt.

I set the timer at just around nine o'clock at night. It should be ready at six o'clock in the morning.

"Now then," I said to myself, picking up my phone while it was still charging by my bed.

I had thought it was about time I gave Kei a call, but... Just as I was selecting Kei's number from my call history, I received a call. For a moment, I wondered if Kei had called me herself after losing her patience, but that didn't seem to be the case.

“Hello?”

“Oh, uh... G-good evening.”

“This is unusual, I don’t often get a call from you, Satou.”

I thought back to the Sports Festival last year, when we had exchanged contact information. It’d been quite some time.

“Um, so, hey. There’s something I really wanted to check with you, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“What’s that?”

“...It’s about Kei-chan.”

It wasn’t hard to understand that Satou was concerned. She was Kei’s best friend. Perhaps her purpose for calling was to find out what I was feeling, without telling Kei.

“About Kei? What about?” I decided to deliberately refrain from answering honestly, instead thinking I’d try hitting her with a single curveball.

“Well, you’ve been...fighting recently, right?”

“Is that what you heard?”

“Well, kinda. It’s like, part of it was me just, like, guessing, based on the flow of the conversation, though.” Perhaps Satou felt it would’ve been difficult to say that Kei had explicitly consulted with her about the matter, because she only said that she noticed something unnatural when she had been talking with her.  
“It’s almost the end of the year... You’re gonna make up with her for real, right?”

Rather than doubting whether I was going to meet with Kei or not, Satou was more concerned about what was going to happen when we did meet. She probably felt something very wrong was going on, and was worried for Kei. She hadn’t been able to take into account things like the impact this phone call would have on Kei, but first, I wanted to appreciate the thoughtfulness of a close friend.

"Actually, I was just about to give Kei a call right now," I told her. "About something we promised."

*"O-oh, I see. That means...you're going to make up, right?"*

"That's the idea. Unless Kei has other plans, of course."

Even though this was a prior commitment, I hadn't re-confirmed it at all. It was only natural that I couldn't force Kei to meet with me.

Of course, since I hadn't received any word from her before now that she had some personal business come up, I saw no problem in assuming that we would stick to our commitment. I could faintly hear the sound of Satou gasping in surprise on the other end of the line.

*"Y-yay, I'm so glad! Yeah, yeah, that's awesome! Okay, I won't get in your way, so I'll hang up now!"*

Deciding that wasting any more time talking with me on the phone would only keep Kei waiting and anxious, Satou decided to end the call.

"Hold on a minute," I stopped her. "There are a few things I want to tell you, Satou."

*"What about?"*



Satou seemed in pretty high spirits after hearing I'd be calling Kei. It was a genuinely stout-hearted person who could support someone else while making their own feelings secondary. That was precisely why I could talk about things a little more in depth with Satou.

"It's certainly true that I am in a position to protect Kei as her boyfriend," I said. "But that alone isn't good enough."

"*What does that mean?*"

"I mean that you never know what kind of trouble can come your way, or even when or where it'll come. It's not just about romantic love, right? Trouble can come from friendships, and there's also the risk of expulsion too, due to this school's rules. Just like how you were feeling worried about things with me and Kei, Satou, you never know when, where, or how a relationship with someone could fall apart. Even if you think something seems totally, absolutely safe, that doesn't mean it won't start to crumble."

"*That's—*"

That was an undeniable fact, even for Satou. I'm sure that when Kei and I established our relationship, Satou must have felt relieved. *Ayanokouji will protect and cherish Kei.* She must have had baseless confidence in that idea. However, one unexpected situation had left her feeling flustered and uneasy about us. That was precisely why Satou was calling me like this, taking a risk herself.

"Satou, as her friend... No, as her best friend, you need to support her," I said. "Of course, I'm saying this while knowing Kei recognizes that you share that relationship, Satou."

Satou replied without a second's pause. "*Of course I will, obviously!*"

"That's good. In response, I will guarantee the opposite."

"*...Opposite?*"

"If there's ever a situation where you can't protect Kei, Satou, I'll protect her,

Satou."

"Can I...trust you?"

"Of course."

My true intentions, my true nature and my true opinion were irrelevant. For now, it was best for Satou to think we'd agreed to something. Even if I were to throw Kei away without a second thought, the odds that Satou would continue to help her out of devotion would increase. If Satou ended up being expelled or something, there would be no way for her to confirm whether I would protect Kei afterward anyway. She would have no way of holding a grudge against me for going back on my word. However, at the moment, Kei had a role to play. She was an important piece in maintaining Horikita's class.

"Kei told me that she was going to meet you today," I added. "She said it was because she wanted to thank you for everything."

"Oh, yeah, she did."

"Thanks."

*"You don't have to thank me for anything, really. As long as you two make up, that's all that matters."*

"I see. Well then, you'll be hearing from Kei tomorrow."

*"Gotcha, I'll be ready to listen to her go on and on, gushing about her sweetheart."*

After the call ended, I felt a faint change in my mental state as I sat there in my empty room. Manipulating others... I supposed this was "fun" for me. It didn't matter whether what I said was true or false. I felt that even the statements of those who would try to manipulate me were also "fun." I would even welcome being deceived, actually. I wanted it.

To know people and learn about them. For others to learn about me. More and more people...or even bigger, enormous, unknown foes. I couldn't help but feel like it would be even more fun if I could control someone like that.

At any rate, I'd noticed that Satou was gradually becoming more competent, little by little. Even from a single phone call, I could tell that she was maturing.

"Now then..."

It was slightly past the appointed time, but I decided to give Kei a call.

## Chapter 6: Remaining Time

I'D HAD A DISAGREEMENT with Kei over a matter related to Ichinose. Quite some time had passed since I had started to intentionally minimize contact with her. Due to an unforeseen accident—namely, Kei catching the flu—she and I were unable to meet for Christmas, and before we knew it, it was already the end of the year. December 29th had arrived. We'd agreed to meet at three o'clock, somewhat late in the day, in a very businesslike manner. Until then, I spent an ordinary day off in my room, not doing anything in particular. I watched TV, read books, surfed the internet, and listened to music. I had thought it would be boring, but it was precisely how mundane it was that made it so fulfilling.

With twenty minutes to go before we were scheduled to meet, I decided to leave the dormitory. I was planning to meet her at the entrance to Keyaki Mall, but we might just happen to bump into one another on the way there. That's what I thought, anyway, but there was no sign of Kei in the dormitory lobby or outside the building.

I immersed myself in my thoughts once more.

*What does “dating” mean to me? What is “love,” in the first place?*

When I looked up the definition for dating in the dictionary, I found several, but I figured that the most applicable meaning to me and Kei right now would be “(romantic) involvement with a lover.” Straightforward enough. I could interpret it literally. On the other hand, when I looked up the definition of “love” in the dictionary, one definition was, “A feeling of romantic yearning.”

*Yearning. Feeling. Could I know what love is after tomorrow?*

That was the first thing I thought about. I had discovered many emotions at this school. Classes, chatting with friends, conversations with teachers,

shopping, hanging out. Along the way I'd learned a great many things, like what was interesting, what wasn't interesting, what was fun, what wasn't fun, what was delicious, what wasn't delicious. More than that.

By going out with Kei, I'd gained a great deal of information, going through the experience firsthand. The sorts of things that you could only do when you were lovers—the conversations, the dates, and the act of sleeping with them, feeling their bare skin against yours. I could probably say that I had performed optimally in all situations required of me.

In that case...could I say that I had learned the feeling of yearning? The answer would be no, absolutely not. I had not learned that emotion. My heart still hadn't ever been stirred in any way, even since before I started dating Kei. That was something I had still been searching for deep down, day after day after day.

I didn't know the exact answer, but I had an idea. I was looking at Kei as a tool by which I would learn about love. Meaning, in other words, I prioritized gaining the experience exclusive to lovers. I never lingered on any particular emotion because I went on to the next steps before my mind could dwell on simply wanting Kei. I had no regrets though, of course: I had learned a lot of things from Kei. However, the time for me to decide how long this relationship was going to continue was approaching.

Kei was the student in Horikita's class with the most intense, depressing darkness in her heart. She tried to be strong, but at the same time, she had dependency issues. I used that and took control of her. However, if these intense dependency issues remained, I would not be able to realize my goal. Now that I had new plans, it was essential to rid myself of that dependency. It was for that very reason I would earn the freedom to learn things anew. Would I be hesitant to break up with Kei or not? If I felt regret in letting her go, I supposed that might be called "love."

There was still close to five minutes before we were scheduled to meet, but Kei was already waiting for me. She was looking down, still unaware of my

presence. Considering the time, though, she should have been paying attention to her surroundings. Did she have feelings of fear in her heart, that even when she looked up, she might not see me approach? Or was she reluctant to look at me, face-to-face?

“You’re early.” I called to Kei as I approached, making sure to do so early enough that I would not startle her greatly.

“Ah!” Kei looked up. The look on her face didn’t say, *“Let’s go out on the date that we couldn’t have on Christmas, just the two of us!”* It was riddled with anxiety and worry. At the very least, though, she didn’t show any feeling of disgust, disappointment, or loss of interest.

“H-hey,” she managed, “i-it’s, uh, been a while...”

“Yes. I think it’s been about three weeks since we’ve been alone together like this.”

After exchanging those brief words, we stood facing each other, just out of reach. Even though Kei and I used to get close enough to each other that we could touch each other naturally, right now, it was like there was something wedged between us. Perhaps it’d been so long that there was an awkward feeling hanging in the air.

“So, I hear that you’re feeling completely better now?” I asked.

“Yeah. Who told you?”

“I got a phone call from Satou last night, she was worried. I heard then.”

“Oh, I see...”

Kei still didn’t seem like her usual self at all, still acting somewhat distant and cold. Wow, even after sharing so many secrets, someone could change in their demeanor like this just out of insecurity, huh?

“Anyway, how about we head on inside for now?” I asked.

“Sure...”

It was cold outside in winter. So I decided to take Kei inside the mall first.

“What are we going to do?” she asked.

“Good question. Originally, the plan was to go see the Christmas tree...”

“Yeah...”

The Christmas tree had already been taken down, leaving only a large empty space. That area wouldn’t be filled with people like that again until next Halloween and next Christmas.

“It’s too bad you didn’t get to see it,” I told her.

“Yeah...”

Even now we had met up and started walking around, Kei simply repeated “Yeah” to everything over and over, cold and distant. Well, I supposed that was only natural. Besides, the estrangement that we were going through now had originated from me in the first place. It wasn’t strange for there to be tension if one member of the couple spent time with members of the opposite sex. Any objective observer would interpret what I did as cheating. Kei likely didn’t have the courage to be able to broach that subject.

I had Kei stand directly in front of me, then I put my hands together and bowed my head deeply. “Anyway, please allow me to apologize for what happened as a result of the misunderstanding about that matter with Ichinose.”

“Kiyotaka...” said Kei.

“It’s reasonable that you would feel angry and anxious, Kei,” I went on. “To be clear, you are not at fault at all.”

“Th—that’s not... I’m the one who... I said lots of mean things, I—”

“That’s not true. In fact, I think you put up with a lot from me.”

Kei didn’t subject me to all manner of verbal abuse or name-calling at all back then. All she did was voice her dissatisfaction, which was perfectly in her rights to do.

"I really wanted to apologize much earlier, but ultimately, this ended up coming late." As I made my apology, I took out the box that I had tucked into my pocket ahead of time.

"What's that...?" asked Kei.

"It's a late Christmas present. Please accept it."

Kei slowly reached out her hand, and then pulled it back. A frightened reaction, showing that she still hadn't fully rid herself of her anxiety. Touching her stiffened hand, I gently slipped the box into it. Then, I took her coat and urged her to open the box.

"It's okay for me to open it?" she asked.

"Of course," I replied.

Kei, having made up her mind, opened the lid while holding onto the bottom of the box with her left. Inside the box was a glittering necklace. She stared at it for a while and then looked up in surprise.

"I... Did I tell you that I wanted this, Kiyotaka...?!"

"I knew you wanted it, without having to ask you directly. I saw you looking it up many times on your phone. I looked at a bunch of other things too, but this one in particular seemed special."

Some of the precious jewelry I had looked at had been even more expensive than this item, but I couldn't imagine that Kei, who knew me and understood our position as students, would have aimed too high, asking for anything absurdly expensive. At first, I thought that I had definitely made the correct decision in picking out this item, but...

"..." Kei remained frozen in place, necklace in hand.

"Did I make the wrong choice?" I asked.

If I had messed up, then that would mean that I failed because of my own self-serving behavior. However, Kei, still clutching the necklace tightly, frantically shook her head from side to side.

“No, no, it’s perfect...!”

“I see. I’m glad to hear that.”

“This...isn’t a dream, is it?!”

Kei was so overjoyed she started crying right on the spot, not caring that she might be seen. I could judge that her dependency on me had reached its complete peak at this current moment in time. Even if I forced her to do something unspeakable, she would probably agree. However, I was not going to end our relationship right here and now. Even if I were to cut myself off from Kei right now, that wouldn’t lead to a fundamental solution.

“Kiyotaka?” As I was thinking, Kei looked up at me, puzzled, her eyes moist.

“You’re staying over tonight, right?” I asked.

With a big, contented smile on her face, Kei wrapped around my arm. “I-I was worried that you didn’t think I was good enough anymore, I...!”

“So, will you accept my gift?”

“Of course!” Kei, still clutching the necklace in her hands, cried, large teardrops streaming down her face. “So, does this really mean...that everything will be how it used to be?”

“Yes. Things are back to how they used to be,” I assured her.

“Really, really? Like, for real? I can trust you?”

“You can trust me.” As Kei repeatedly asked me for confirmation, I held her close, telling her the same answer.

“I’m so glad! I’m so glad!” she wept.

“We couldn’t celebrate Christmas together, but let’s definitely make sure we celebrate your birthday together, Kei.”



“Yes! Yeah!”

Kei’s birthday was March 8th. If everything went as it should, then that should be before our final exams were held. Until that time, nothing would change. I would stay by her side and protect her if she had any problems, just as I had done in the past. That was the arrangement: parasite and host. Kei put on the necklace and then somewhat shyly wrapped herself around my arm again.

“It’s...been a while, hasn’t it,” she said.

“Yes, it has. Where to?”

“Anywhere is fine. As long as I’m with you, Kiyotaka, anywhere is fine.” There was nothing she wished for more than that. As Kei gave me that answer, she brought her body even closer to mine. “So, I can come to your room again, Kiyotaka? Tonight?”

“It would be difficult for me to find a reason to refuse,” I replied.

“How about a bath? Can we take a bath together?”

“Of course.”

Kei giggled. Her cheeks relaxed happily into a smile, and she wiped the corner of her eyes with the tip of her finger, perhaps because tears were welling up again.

I had repaired my relationship with my girlfriend. A joyful thing to do. Why didn’t my heart tremor even in the slightest? Shouldn’t I have been delighted, shaking, rejoicing together with her? I didn’t understand.

“I’m glad we made up,” I said.

Just lies. Kei was pleased and happy with those words. But there was no sadness in me over not understanding. If I didn’t understand, then I could just repeat things over and over until I did. If Kei was no good, I could test things out with another person. If I repeatedly went out with and broke up with people in this way, there would come a time when I would learn about love.

I might find myself abandoned, distressed, reduced to tears. Desire welled up. I was spurred on by my inquisitive mind, which was bottomless in its appetite. That was what it meant not to know. There was still infinite room for learning. For the time being, I should think only about building a relationship with Kei, just as I had been before.

"It's been a long time since I've been to karaoke. How about that?" I asked, suddenly making a suggestion so as not to let the conversation sink into a silence she might find uneasy.

"Huh, wow, Kiyotaka. It's unusual for you to suggest something like karaoke, isn't it?"

I could agree that yes, it might be unusual, just as Kei said, Although I did actually go to karaoke relatively often, I rarely ever wanted to sing without prompting. "I guess it's because I've been hearing some popular hits playing on the TV more and more often lately," I said.

Kei was a good partner for me to verify whether my singing quality was good enough to avoid embarrassing myself in front of peers at a later date. She raised her hand with a smile, as if to indicate she was in favor of my suggestion, and the two of us started walking. While on the way there, the vending machines in the rest area caught my eye. I wondered if Yamamura might be sitting between the vending machines again today.

"What's up...?" Kei tilted her head in puzzlement, following my gaze over to the vending machines. "You thirsty?"

"No, that's not it."

I wondered what Sakayanagi had said to Yamamura after she gave her report. Had she been relieved of her role? Or was she assigned to watch someone else —someone not related to Ryuuken?

"Oh, yeah, that reminds me," said Kei. "Can I talk to Maya-chan for a sec?"

I told her that was fine and had her sit down on a nearby bench so as not to

text while walking.

“Gonna sit next to me?” she asked.

“Actually, I think I’ll check out the vending machines,” I replied. “There might be a new product there.”

“Okay.”

Kei started texting with Satou, her bouncing happily in place. I assumed that she was probably reporting to Satou that we successfully made up, thanking her once again, and so on. Meanwhile, I decided to walk over to the vending machines in the back. While I didn’t necessarily think she’d be there, I thought I’d look, just in case. And sure enough, when I took a casual peek between the vending machines...

“?!”

Lo and behold, there she was. She was sitting the same way as before, even holding a plastic bottle in one hand like before, too. The only difference from last time was that there was a reusable shopping bag placed on the floor, which had something in it.

“We meet again,” I said. “Are you always here?”

“No, not always...” But Yamamura averted her eyes. So perhaps she was.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh, this? This is... It’s a hand towel that I bought as a reward for myself.”

“A reward?”

“...Please don’t pay me any mind. More importantly, it sounds like you and Karuizawa-san have made up.”

“You heard?”

“That’s what I’m good at,” said Yamamura. She was being vague about her eavesdropping skill. “I think you’d best leave quickly,” she added. “I know you

told Karuizawa-san that you were looking at a new product, she'll probably figure out something's strange if she thinks about it."

Apparently, Yamamura had even picked up on the entire contents of my conversation with Kei. Genuinely rather brilliant. I wanted to hear what Sakayanagi's reaction had been, but I figured that she probably wouldn't give me the answer to that question so easily, since it concerned the internal affairs of her class. I'd just bother her all the more by asking, so I preferred not to.

"See you," I replied.

"...Yeah. Later," said Yamamura.

I walked away from a scene that would have looked like I was talking to a vending machine, to an outside observer. When I returned to the bench, it looked like Kei had just finished her conversation with Satou. It had been the right choice to return quickly.

"Anything there?" she asked.

"Nah, nothing in particular. Want to get going?"

"Yeah!" An energetic Kei got up and once again drew close, crossing arms with me.

Kei was back in good spirits, so much so that it was almost unbelievable. Actually, no, it felt like her degree of dependency had increased. She wanted to eat, bathe, and sleep with me. She laced her fingers between mine, very forward about her desire to not let me go, even for a moment.

The parasite burrowed deeper and deeper. She couldn't remove herself on her own. She pressed forward, no fear of being absorbed. And thus, before the year was out, Kei and I had established an even stronger relationship than before, welcoming the new year as lovers.

The image of a certain someone—someone else—humming a tune, back turning to face other friends, was still etched into my memory.

## 6.1

GOING OUT TO KEYAKI MALL on your day off. Going with friends, going with a significant other, or going alone. The only recreation options available to us during our lives here at this school were packed into this facility. The mall certainly kept us entertained, and we never truly tired of it. However, students were prone to spend their Private Points there as a result. It would be more efficient if students silently went back and forth only between the dormitory and the gym (despite its monthly fee), but that wasn't the case.

The battle against temptation continued, whether it was going out to eat with someone, going out to karaoke, or absently reaching for an alluring product. That was precisely why I wanted to spend my time without spending Private Points. I could shut myself away in my room, but that was something I only wanted to do when I was in trouble. As I thought about it, I realized there wasn't much left to do.

Wearing my school uniform for the first time in ten days, I left the dormitory. I was headed for someplace inside the school, during winter vacation. My destination was the library. Shortly before winter vacation, I saw a certain person's back for just a moment when I headed over to the bookstore. Remembering that was what made me decide to go to the library. I didn't know whether she would be visiting the library at this present moment, though.

Although the school had been closed for the first three days of the New Year, it had just re-opened starting today, January 4th. Though it was still early, not even 11:00 a.m., I wasn't the only person headed to school. There were other students there, giving their all to their club activities. As I stepped inside the school building, I could hear the energetic voices of students coming from all around. While on my way to the library, I happened upon Sakagami-sensei. I couldn't just ignore him as I walked past, so I gave him a slight bow and a polite New Year's greeting.

"A very Happy New Year to you," I said.

"Yeah, Happy New Year." Sakagami-sensei greeted me in return, though he looked to be somewhat uncomfortable around me, someone who wasn't involved in any club activities. I was about to continue past him, but he called out to me from behind, stopping me in my tracks.

"It seems you've been making quite a lot of progress lately in your Academic Ability score," he said. "Sudou-kun's growth is especially magnificent, but you've grown too."

"The truth is that Sudou has been putting in quite a lot of effort," I replied.

"An incredible rate of growth, actually," Sakagami-sensei agreed. "It's unbelievable, considering how he was constantly causing problems when he just started here. He's become the school's pride and joy, even among the faculty."

That was excellent. I supposed that Sudou was constantly attracting the attention of the teachers because of how prominent his negative features were. Why were we talking about this, though?

"You've gone from Class D to Class B, eh? And now Class A is within reach," added Sakagami-sensei, lightly touching the frame of his glasses.

The vibe that I was getting from him was different from when I first knew him as the homeroom teacher for Ryuu'en's class. His behavior, the kind of worminess others found loathsome, seemed toned down compared to before. He'd certainly mellowed since our time on the uninhabited island over the summer, but...

Perhaps it was because Chabashira-sensei, Mashima-sensei, and Hoshinomiya-sensei were colleagues all teaching in my grade level, but I'd talked to all of them an awful lot. By contrast, I had little contact with Sakagami-sensei. I wondered if it was just that my impression of him changed because of how long it'd been since we'd spoken.

"To be honest, I didn't think that your class would grow this much." Words of praise from Sakagami-sensei, but it was very backhanded. His gaze sharpened

behind the lens of his glasses. “You’re behind whipping up that defective class into shape, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Heavens, no. I haven’t done anything of note. I think we’ve all pulled together behind Horikita. Don’t you?” Though I denied the assertion with a response that smacked heavily of modesty, I wasn’t certain if Sakagami-sensei bought it. Three of the homeroom instructors in my grade level knew to some extent that I was a student of special circumstance. It would make sense if they’d shared this knowledge with Sakagami-sensei. Even if they hadn’t, it wouldn’t be strange if he’d figured something out.

“It certainly is true that Sudou-kun’s attitude, his dedication to his studies, the results he has achieved, and so on, are things that couldn’t have been forced upon him,” Sakagami-sensei said. “Well, never mind, I suppose. Individual ability aside, if your class really is gaining strength, then the day will come when you’ll need to cooperate with them in the not-too-distant future. Even if you don’t want to.”

I figured that by that, what he meant was, “*Show me what you’ve got.*”

“Are you headed to the library?” he asked.

“That’s an excellent guess,” I replied.

“Students who aren’t in clubs have limited choices this time of year, after all. Besides, I already know that you’re a student who makes frequent visits to the library.”

If I were pressed on it, I’d say I was a frequent library-goer, but I had no idea that Sakagami-sensei knew it. I didn’t think I had seen Sakagami-sensei in the library even once. He must have heard it secondhand.

“Can teachers view a student’s checkout history?” I asked.

“Checkout history? Only the librarians can do that. If a teacher were to do that without permission, it would be an invasion of privacy.”

“Then how did you know I visit the library?”

"Well, I—that may be something you can find out by going to the library. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a faculty meeting."

Sakagami-sensei dodged the question and walked away. I found the way he phrased his answer to be curious, but since I couldn't stop a teacher who was in a hurry, I decided to head to the library as planned. When I opened the door to the library and stepped inside, I was enveloped in stillness.

The library was a place that was supposed to be quiet by nature, but this was different from the silence of a building full of quiet people. There was a complete lack of sound, with no one in sight. There wasn't even any sign of a receptionist, either. Perhaps the librarian had stepped away.

The library was unlocked, so I didn't think that entering would be a problem, but I did feel a little awkward about it. I thought that I might just wait by the entrance for a while, but I figured the librarian would probably come back soon. I decided to give a slight bow to the empty space where no one sat, for some reason or another, then went around and looked at the books. At the moment, it wasn't like I was thinking "*What do I want to read?*" or "*What should I check out?*" or anything. I was just casually browsing, thinking that I'd just go around and pick up whatever, and if something felt right, I'd go with that. That was about it.

As I was rummaging around to see what I wanted to check out, I heard a voice come from the other side of the bookshelf.

"A Happy New Year to you, Ayanokouji-kun."

I walked around to the end of the aisle to see who it was. Apparently, the other person had the same idea, going around on the other side. We passed each other and ended up on opposite sides. I caught a glimpse of the person's side profile for a moment. The other person soon realized that we ended up switching places and came back over.

"We wound up changing places, huh?"

"Guess so," I answered.

It was none other than Shiina Hiyori, whom I hadn't seen for quite a while after talking to her a little during the school festival. She was a true bookworm, someone who visited the library quite often, but she had stopped showing up to the library temporarily. I had heard that she had recently gone back to how she was before, and apparently, it was true.

I returned her greeting. "Happy New Year. It's been a while since we saw each other in the library."

"Yes, it has. Anything new with you?" she asked.

"Same old. And you?"

"I caught a slight cold near the end of the year. Luckily, it wasn't the flu that was going around, though, so I was back to normal in about two days."

We proceeded to casually give each other updates on our recent goings on, and before long the topic of conversation turned to books.

"Well, since we're both here, and if it's not too much trouble, could you give me a recommendation on what book to check out?" I asked.

"Really, are you sure? I'd be happy to." Hiyori must not have gotten the chance to choose books for other people to read very often, because she eagerly accepted my request.

"Well, that's because I know perfectly well that your choice of book would be the right one, Hiyori," I said.

"Well then, please allow me to be your guide." Far from feeling annoyed by my one-sided request, she seemed rather happy, bringing her hands together. "Getting right to it, what genre are you in the mood for?"

"Good question. We've been on holiday for a while, and I've been spacing out a lot, so I think something with a little mystery, to get my mind going, might be good."

"Mystery, hm..."

Hiyori walked on ahead as though beckoning me to come along, without

appearing especially bothered at all. Apparently, that genre was something she had extensive knowledge about. As we were walking through the library together, she must have quickly spotted a book, because she pulled one from the shelf and asked me about it.

“Have you read *The Glass Key*?” she asked.

Dashiell Hammett, huh? That book was a masterpiece, chosen as one of the top one hundred best mystery novels of all time.

“Unfortunately, I already read it a couple of years ago,” I replied.

“That’s not unfortunate at all. I’m impressed, I should have expected as much. The search continues, then.”

With that, Hiyori continued, recommending a few great mystery novels of yesteryear, starting with the famous ones and then going more obscure.

“By the way...this has nothing to do with mystery novels, but... Have you read any works written by the author Kaminai Tsushi?” she asked.

“Kaminai Tsushi? I don’t know that name, so I probably haven’t read any of their works.”

I was relatively familiar with literature, but of course I didn’t know every author. I did remember authors if I’d read their books, though.

“That’s understandable. He’s not well-known and his books haven’t sold well.” She said that with a smile, as though she found it somewhat amusing. I thought maybe she was going to recommend one of his works to me as well, but she must have been satisfied confirming I hadn’t heard of him, because she went back to talking about mystery novels without a transition.

“Have you read *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*? It’s the debut work of Fergus Hume.”

“I haven’t, no.”

“Well then, it doesn’t appear to be checked out right now, so that might be the perfect choice.”

I picked out three books with Hiyori, including the aforementioned *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, and then we strolled to the reception desk and found that the librarian had returned. After exchanging New Year's greetings, the librarian checked us out with efficiency, clearly well-practiced in the routine.

"Well then, Ayanokouji-kun, please come and visit again, if you'd like," said Hiyori.

"I think I'll probably stop in a couple times before we get to our third year," I said. "Are you going to stick around in the library for a while yet, Hiyori?"

"Yes. Even though we have a lot of days off, I'm running out of things to do."

"What about going to Keyaki Mall with your friends?" I asked.

"I don't really do that sort of thing very much," she replied.

Thinking back on it now, I suddenly realized I didn't recall ever seeing Hiyori hanging out with friends at school. Of course, I did see her engaged in activities with her classmates, but... Perhaps she had fewer friends than I'd thought. It seemed like a lot of the students in Ryuuuen's class weren't exactly lovers of the arts.

Hiyori waved me goodbye, and even went through the trouble of closing the library door after I left.

## 6.2

**S**HORTLY AFTER I stepped out into the hallway though, Hiyori came chasing after me in a hurry. Although it was only a short distance, she was slightly out of breath.

"Here—" After catching her breath, Hiyori held out a paper bag to me. Judging from the shape, I could infer that it was a book, but it probably wasn't something from the library. She removed the book from the bag with her slender fingers and offered it to me once more. "This is my favorite book. If

you'd like, I was wondering if you might read it."

There was a slip covering up the book, but I had some idea what it was.

"Is this a book by the author you asked me about earlier, by any chance?" I asked.

"Oh, you figured it out?" A book by an obscure author who didn't have anything to do with the genre we were talking about. Seemed obvious. "I figured that, if you had read it, I wouldn't be able to just hand it over to you as a gift."

I supposed if she wanted to give me a book as a gift, she would want to check if I'd read it first.

"If there's something you just want to read, you can always borrow it from the library," she said, "but I like to have my own copies of books that resonate with me."

"So, you went out of your way to purchase it with your own money?" I asked.

"Well, yes, but also... This book is not available in the library, either."

Even if she wanted to borrow it, she couldn't. I suppose she could have asked the librarian to add it to the collection, but I could tell from looking at Hiyori that this book wasn't popular. While she might personally like it, maybe she didn't feel like singing its praises to everyone.

"You sure?" I asked. "About letting me have it, I mean."

Sure, it was just one book, but it wasn't a pocket-sized paperback that a student could purchase on the cheap.

"Yes. To tell you the truth, it's the third copy I've bought. The first copy I bought while I was in junior high, and I still have it in my room, even now. The second copy I bought shortly after coming to this school."



And the third copy was a gift for me.

"I feel like I've got a feel for your interests, Ayanokouji-kun, so I'm confident you'll like it," she added.

"Sorry to make you go through all this trouble," I said. I couldn't just leave her hanging forever, holding the book out to me, so I took it. But a small question arose. "Have you been carrying this around the whole time until we ran into each other?" I asked. I supposed it was inevitable we'd bump into each other eventually. "If you'd said something, I would've met you."

"Yes, I suppose, but... It's only been a few days, so it wasn't really a big problem," said Hiyori.

"Huh, okay then. Well, see ya."

She looked like she was reluctant to part ways. I wondered if I was just reading too much into it.

## 6.3

I WATCHED HIYORI'S BACK as she returned to the library, and then I headed for the school entrance to leave the building. It was just around lunchtime, and I could see some people from clubs here and there. Just as soon as I arrived at the school entrance, I saw two of my classmates talking with each other.

"Oh, Ayanokouji? Why're you here at school?" Sudou was the first to notice me. He was still wearing his basketball clothes. Yousuke was in his soccer uniform.

"Happy New Year," Yousuke said. "I just happened to run into Sudou-kun earlier by chance. We were talking about having lunch together."

"I have to say, it's unusual to see the two of you together," I remarked.

"Really? I feel like we've been seeing each other pretty often lately," said Yousuke.

"Yeah," Sudou agreed.

I didn't think the two of them had originally been close, but now they were grabbing lunch together. Perhaps Sudou's growth had put him on the same wavelength as Yousuke.

"Is Onodera-san free today?" asked Yousuke.

"Guess she caught a cold or somethin' yesterday, so she took today off from club activities, too," said Sudou.

Onodera, too? The kinds of relationships kids in clubs formed, I supposed.

"Kiyotaka-kun, are you on your way back from the library?" Yousuke asked, eyeing the books I was carrying. I told him yes, I was on my way back from the library. Sudou led the way, and we ended up at the convenience store.

"Guess even the cafeteria ain't open during winter break," remarked Sudou.

"Yeah. I think that, fundamentally speaking, the usual thing to do is bring food from your dorm or get it from the convenience store," said Yousuke.

So students would buy something, take it with them into the school building, and eat it there. In spring and fall, students would often be eating on benches outside the school, but right now it was too cold. However, from what I had heard, there were several places that were open, such as a heated dining hall where they could go.

"Anyway, though, it's still been snowing off and on," remarked Yousuke.

"Yeah, talk about depressin', dude," Sudou sighed. "The weather hasn't made up its mind for like two weeks now, has it?"

"I can't move when it's this cold out," Yousuke said. "I sure hope it warms up soon."

I couldn't really comment on the conversation, as the only club I belonged to was the go-home-straight-after-class-club. However, I didn't feel like I was being given the cold shoulder, and I simply felt at ease just listening to the natural conversation between these two people I wouldn't have thought would

pair up.

"By the way, Kiyotaka-kun," Yousuke said, "regarding that thing with Karuizawa-san, is everything okay? It seemed like you two were going through a tough time."

"Wow, I should've known," I said. "So, you heard about that after all, huh?"

"Well, things seemed strange even before winter vacation. I could tell something was up just from seeing her in the classroom, even if I didn't want to know."

"What're ya talkin' about?" Sudou cut in. "What's okay? Wait, you mean they finally broke up?" said Sudou.

At that blunt question, Yousuke looked at him with a strained smile. "I don't think so. But I think they were having a little trouble. Right?"

Apparently, even the impressive Yousuke had stopped getting information around Christmas.

"The problem has already been resolved," I told him. "Things went back to normal around the end of the year."

"Oh, I see," he said. "That's good to hear."

"Wait, what? You didn't split up?" Sudou weaved his fingers together behind the back of his head, looking like he was disappointed.

"Did you want us to break up?" I asked.

"N-nah dude, it ain't like that. I was just jokin' around a little is all. Just jealousy, dude. I'm jealous because I ain't got a girlfriend yet. Sorry." Clearly, he felt bad about sounding like he was celebrating our near-split. It seemed like spring had not yet come for Sudou, but there must have been signs of it on the horizon.

"You haven't made any progress with Onodera?" I asked.

"H-hey, dude, come on, don't say unnecessary stuff. Yer gonna give Hirata the

wrong idea.”

Sudou panicked as soon as her name was mentioned, but Yousuke looked at him warmly.

“I think Yousuke probably already knows,” I said.

“...Seriously?” said Sudou. Did he think that Yousuke hadn’t picked up on the complex situation between them at all?

“I can at least tell that Onodera-san has been paying a little extra attention to you for a little while now, Sudou-kun.” Yousuke was exceedingly sensitive to where his classmates looked and how they felt. He wasn’t going to say anything unnecessary, but it wasn’t surprising that he already knew.

“So, how are things going with her?” I asked.

“I’m not really—h-hey,” Sudou protested, “Onodera and I are just friends.”

Perhaps because Sudou hadn’t awakened to his true feelings for Onodera yet, he denied anything was going on, pursing his lips with a sour look. I thought it might have been because he still had lingering feelings for Horikita too, but I didn’t get the sense that that was the main issue. Sudou was continuing to behave in a good-hearted manner, like a man who didn’t want to take advantage of Onodera’s feelings.

After stopping by the convenience store, the three of us returned to the school, the feeling of the cold seeping into our skin. When we went to the dining hall, we saw that it was quite lively, full of students who were in clubs, from underclassmen to upperclassmen. You could still come inside even if you weren’t part of a club, like me, so there were probably some students who were here just to have lunch together with friends. Some kouhai would occasionally come into the dining hall and say hello to Sudou and Yousuke.

“You two are looking like real senpai,” I observed.

“I mean, we *are* close to the end of our second year already, for whatever that’s worth,” Sudou said. “And after the third semester’s done, we’re finally

gonna be third-years. It's like it still hasn't sunk in with me at all."

Sudou chomped into his onigiri. Some salmon peeked out from between the white rice and the nori.

"Y'know though, somethin' strange happened the other day," he added, seeming to remember something after another girl came up and greeted him. "Some girl in our grade was askin' me a ton of weird questions 'n' stuff."

"Weird questions?" I asked.

"Stuff like when did I start studyin'? Why didn't I study before now? Things like that. It felt like she wanted to know the reason why my Academic Ability score in OAA improved."

"Well, you do boast the best rate of growth in Academic Ability, Sudou-kun," Yousuke said. "I'm sure she must have been wondering about that."

Even people in our own class were extremely impressed. I was sure that for people in the other classes, it must have felt like they were seeing magic.

"I'm sure it didn't feel bad, though, having a girl ask you a bunch of questions," I said. "Right?"

"Nah, dude, I wouldn't say that at all," he replied. "Sure, she was cute and all on the outside, but it's like, she came off feelin' combative the whole time. Kinda snooty, even. All I could think about was how this was happening before I had club and I wanted her to let me go as soon as possible."

Apparently a crush was out of the question, then.

"Who was she anyway, by the way?" I asked.

"Dude, I dunno... I don't remember all the girls' names or nothin'," replied Sudou, chewing all the while, his cheeks stuffed with food after having inhaled the entire onigiri in about three bites.

"Maybe we should find out who she is, just in case?" Yousuke went to take out his phone, perhaps intending to open the OAA app. "You never know, you might run into one another again."

Sudou rejected the idea with a flickering wave of his hand. “Nah dude, it ain’t worth it. If it was a girl who said she liked me or something, that’d be different, but that definitely wasn’t it.” It must have been an especially painful moment for him. He didn’t even want to know her name.

“Whatever the case, it sounds like you’re attracting attention for reasons other than just your athleticism, Sudou,” I observed.

“If that means they’re scared, then I s’pose that don’t feel so bad,” he conceded. He didn’t sound conceited. He clenched his fist, revving up his determination. “It ain’t over yet, and I’m just gettin’ started.”

It seemed he was determined to surprise us all even more.

## 6.4

“I NEED TO TAKE A PISS,” announced Sudou.

After draining the water in his paper cup and getting up from his seat, he thrust his hands into his pockets and walked away. After we watched Sudou go, Yousuke turned to me and began to talk about the latest goings-on.

“This is something I heard from a first-year in the basketball club,” he said, “but apparently, Sudou-kun is regarded as a good senpai. He’s got high standards but he’s intensely caring for anyone, guys and girls. They seem to really idolize him. Since Sudou-kun’s stance when he joined the club last year was that all he needed to do was play the game well himself, even the third-year students are surprised by the change.”

It was precisely because Yousuke had an extensive social circle that he seemed to know a side to Sudou that even he himself couldn’t see.

“I imagine if he plays basketball well and he can keep up in his studies, then the girls might not be able to leave him alone in the future,” I replied.

“Well, this is just between you and me, but some of the first-year girls were

asking me for Sudou-kun's contact information."

"Sudou would cry tears of joy if he heard that, I bet. Right?" Being popular should have been one of Sudou's dearest wishes. However, a bitter smile appeared on Yousuke's face, like there were some complex feelings.

"Well, I thought I should get Sudou-kun's permission first, so I went to check with him, just in case. But he said that the girls were just teasing him anyway, so he said no. He didn't seem to be all that happy."

Apparently, Sudou was unaware that his popular phase had arrived, starting with attention from Onodera. I supposed that since he hadn't ever experienced this sort of thing before, he was completely unaware.

"I guess that it might be a little while longer before spring arrives for him," I replied.

"You might be right about that," Yousuke answered me with a warm smile. He looked down at the books that I had with me, and added, "I was wondering about something. I noticed that only one of your books has a slipcover on it."

There were cases where books checked out from the library had a clear protective film on them to keep them in good condition, but this one book was clearly different. It seemed like that had caught Yousuke's attention.

"It's a gift," I answered. "You know Shiina Hiyori, from Ryuuen's class?"

"Yeah. Now that you mention it, I think I've seen her together with you a few times, Kiyotaka-kun... So, it's from her?"

"She recommended it to me because we both enjoy reading. Our tastes are similar, and she said it was interesting."

"I see..." Yousuke had been calm and amicable throughout this entire conversation thus far, but at that, he furrowed his eyebrows slightly. He seemed dissatisfied about something.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Oh no, nothing." Though that's what Yousuke said, he still had a somewhat

concerned look on his face. Our conversation suddenly came to a screeching halt, and silence fell. *Should I change the subject...?* I thought to myself.

"That reminds me, how long do people stick with their club activities?" I asked. "Once we become third-years, we have to think about university entrance exams, right?"

Though Yousuke appeared puzzled over me mentioning this completely unrelated topic, he still gave me his answer. "That's a good question... I don't really have an exact answer as to when, but I think that generally, most people quit doing club stuff around June. If they need to devote themselves to their studies, I think that would be around the time they'd do it. There are some people who continue until a little later, though, like if their club puts more importance on summer activity."

I understood college was important, but June was earlier than I had expected.

"Do you have any idea what you're going to do, Yousuke?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. There's no guarantee that I can graduate from Class A, and I think that my parents will want me to go on to university. My plans will come together after I talk to them about it, but I think I'll probably quit the club some time around June."

Fundamentally speaking, we could not make contact with anyone outside the campus while at this school. However, there were a few exceptions. One was conversations about higher education and employment. We had a lot of latitude to decide things by ourselves, such as which university or vocational school to go to, how it would be paid for, and so on, but all the same, a lot of students wanted a parent's advice on careers and education.

In such cases, discussions related to higher education would be conducted under the supervision of the school. This system and these rules didn't apply to me, but they were unavoidable for the students who wished to continue their education. However, this means of contact could only be used starting in the third semester of a student's second year and onward. By deciding on the level

of university they wanted to test for and what course of study they wanted to pursue, students could set goals and avoid unneeded effort if they had a general idea of what they were shooting for.

Even if there was a high-level university that you were interested in, the acceptance announcements for general entrance examinations were made in February or March. It would be decided before you graduated from this school. The question that arose in that case was the benefit that came from graduating from Class A. This school had the ability to fulfill a student's wish to go on to the college or career of their choice, and in the event that student was originally turned down from their college of choice, the school would follow up with that school and overturn the decision.

The school could only grant your wish for admission, though. It was up to the student's individual talents to determine whether they would be able to successfully navigate their way to graduation from that university. An extreme example, but if a student with a middling level of academic prowess were to enter the University of Tokyo, they likely would not make serious progress. Granted, that would be a problem for after admission, but still, that edge case was very illustrative.

There would, of course, be cases where a student was able to get into their college of choice on their own merits while at the same time getting the benefit of graduating from Class A here. In such cases, there were several things that the school could do for you, but there were two major benefits. One of them was that the school would shoulder the costs for college—especially beneficial for the students who struggled with their finances.

This was a benefit for students who did not want to take out loans to pay for tuition, or those who could not borrow for some reason but still wanted to go on to higher education. However, the school would only shoulder the cost for tuition, meaning that living expenses needed to be handled separately. If students had to repeat a year, they'd get no additional help. The school would only cover tuition expenses based on the standard length of time that it would

take to graduate from that university.

The second major benefit came post-college graduation. Students could leverage the fact that they had graduated from Class A as one of their achievements. Meaning, in other words, it was possible for students to employ a strategy of deliberately *not* using the special privileges that came with graduating from Class A right away in going to university. In an extreme case, if a student were to go on to a low-level university and then use their Class A privileges after graduation from that university, they could force their way into a prestigious, top-rate company where being a college graduate was a prerequisite.

Even so, that just covered getting the job. Whether that person had acquired the skills to do the work for that company was another matter. It was a tightrope walk. No matter how many benefits the ANHS provided, it wouldn't cover everything. If you were one of the students who was part of that 1 percent fail rate, you'd be left with only regrets.

"What about you, Kiyotaka-kun?" Yousuke asked. "Are you going to college?"

"I'm not sure. I know it might sound like I'm late in coming to a plan, but I still haven't decided yet. I might go on to higher education, or I might get a job. I guess it's one of those 'God only knows' type situations."

"I don't think there's any need to rush. Knowing you, Ayanokouji-kun, I'm sure you can do most everything really well."

I was glad that he thought so highly of me, but unfortunately, I didn't have a choice. At any rate, though, even while we were talking about paths in life, I noticed that Yousuke was acting somewhat strangely. Once we had come to a pause in that topic of conversation, he mentioned something.

"...Are you and Shiina-san close?" he asked. Though he had allowed the conversation to move away from the top of Hiyori for a time earlier, it seemed like his concern had not faded.

"With Hiyori? I dunno. I think we're reading buddies, at the very least. Why?"

“Is there something on your mind?” I asked.

“I was just curious because it seems like you call her by her given name. It’s the first time I’ve heard you do that with someone outside of our class.” It was true that it was unusual for me. “Since when have you been on a first-name basis?”

“Since when? I’m not sure. I don’t really remember exactly.”

I had been calling Hiyori by her given name before I even realized. Looking back, it felt like I had been calling her that since shortly after we had met. But it was just one part of my everyday routine, and my brain hadn’t registered the change.

“So, it wasn’t like there was some major event that led to you being on a first-name basis,” said Yousuke.

“Yeah, there’s no particularly deep reason behind it. I guess I just kind of found myself calling her by her first name before I knew it.”

“I see...”

“Is that not good?”

“Oh no, I don’t mean to say it’s not, no. Having a lot of people that you’re close to is generally a good thing.”

*Generally.* So there were exceptions, and those exceptions were on his mind. However, Yousuke didn’t seem to want to continue the conversation any further, and I didn’t urge him to keep going. We both quietly waited for Sudou to return.

## 6.5

BOOTH SUDOU AND YOUSUKE had been actively involved in their respective clubs since the beginning of their first year, and they continued to produce results. Thinking about how they would be retiring from their clubs around this time

next year, I felt that the passage of time was a mysterious thing. I thought back to a little bit of my conversation with Kiryuuin, the one we had near the end of the year.

I hadn't regretted any experience at school up to that point, but I sometimes wondered about what my future would have been like if I'd been part of a club. Aside from the issue of whether I would have taken the club seriously, I think that life here at school might have been more glamorous had I been involved in basketball or soccer. Been a part of a team.

Although it was easy for me to imagine what that would have been like, the reality would have been harder to achieve. I did not know how to socialize, and I wasn't the kind to make friends quickly. For someone like me, jumping into the world of club activity would have been too great a hurdle.

I figured I'd head back to my dormitory and read the books I checked out from the library, and then the book I received from Hiyori. While I was on my way back from school though, something happened.

"Please wait."

"Hm?"

It was a girl's voice, polite but full of urgency. When I wheeled around, I saw her standing there, her long scarf slightly swaying in the wind. "I would like to speak with you," she said.

Normally, people were a little bewildered when they were suddenly approached by someone whom they've never met...but this had happened to me several times in the past year, so I was growing accustomed to it. It was at times like these that I was truly, deeply grateful for the OAA system, which was born from Nagumo's proposals. It made it easier to match names and faces and access their basic capabilities.

This girl was from Class 2-A, the same class Sakayanagi belonged to. Her name was Morishita Ai. Her OAA scores were as follows.

Academic Ability: B+

Physical Ability: C+

Adaptability: B+

Societal Contribution: B

Overall Ability: B

She was a model student. Based on the data shown in OAA, she was far above average. I noticed that she was like Sanada, whom I had met the other day. There were a lot of students like them in Class A.

“You are Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, yes?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

Morishita seemed to know who I was, which was not surprising—she had called out to me, after all.

Hm? Wait, hold on a minute. Did she not use any honorific at all in addressing me?

It wasn’t like I had any aversion to people addressing me without an honorific, regardless of whether they were older or younger than me, but I guess it just kind of stuck out to me as a little odd. She was otherwise very polite.



Before I could say anything, though, Morishita continued: “This place is conspicuous. Let’s go somewhere else.”

The school. The dormitory. Keyaki Mall. Where we were standing now was a place where people would pass by on their way to any of those places, so it was certainly conspicuous. It was also an effective location for an ambush if there was someone you were looking for.

“Please allow me to find another location,” she said.

Morishita immediately turned her back to me and started walking away, even though I hadn’t said anything. I hadn’t intended to respond, but it was fine for her to assume, I supposed. It was winter vacation. I had time enough to enjoy unexpected encounters like this.

“Have we met?” I asked.

“No. We’ve never spoken.” Morishita answered me without even turning around. Again, perfectly polite, but somehow overbearing. While we were on the path leading to the dormitory, she veered off, taking one of the side roads, and came to a stop. The deserted location, coupled with how cold it was outside, meant we were alone.

“Okay, so? Now that we’ve changed places, what did you want to talk about?” I asked. What now? The year was only a few days old.

“I have not yet decided,” she replied.

“You haven’t decided?” I was somewhat taken aback.

“I have not decided what I wish to talk to you about, but I have been wanting to speak with you for some time now, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.”

I thought perhaps I’d misheard the first couple of times, but no. She was calling me by my full name, and for some reason, without any honorific. Aside from that, she spoke in a polite fashion, but her bluntness was extremely striking. I didn’t know if she was only like this with me or if it was the same for other students as well, but I figured I’d just ignore it for the time being, since it

would be difficult for me to mention.

It seemed like I was really making some strange connections with students from other classes lately.

"Is it strange? That I called out to you?" she asked.

"Well, yeah, I guess it is," I replied. "I've never had any previous contact with you, Morishita."

"I see."

"Moreover, when it's coming from a person of the opposite sex, I might take it a certain way," I added.

I deliberately decided to respond with something that suggested I was thinking her talking to me was romantic in nature, to see what kind of reaction she would give. I thought it might make her upset or flustered, but while she showed some very slight signs of worry, she remained calm. She immediately began to set the direction of her conversation.

"This is not the first time that I have called out to someone that I am not close to, in this way," she said. She thrust out her hand in a shoving motion as if to say, "*Please do not get the wrong idea.*"

"Hm?"

"I spoke with Sudou Ken the day before yesterday and with Kouenji Rokusuke yesterday," she went on. "I am telling you this because I have learned that it is possible for there to be misunderstandings when a man and a woman talk alone."

I was grateful for the clarification. I wasn't the only person she addressed this way. Although, the mention of Sudou's name matched up with a certain conversation that I just had earlier.

*"Some girl in our grade was askin' me a ton of weird questions 'n' stuff."*

That's what Sudou had said, bewildered. This was probably her. I certainly felt that she was cute in terms of physical appearance, but I could also understand

why Sudou had denied that there was anything romantic involved. The way she looked at me lacked any trace of romantic intent.

"Over this winter vacation, I wanted to ask about your class," Morishita said.  
"I was driven by that desire."

I suppose if I were to put that in simpler terms, that meant she was scouting out a rival class, then? That sort of thing? She seemed incredibly straightforward, however, so I had no idea how to judge the situation. It was hard to imagine that she was acting on orders from Sakayanagi. If Sakayanagi were to send someone to approach students from other classes, like Sudou, there wouldn't be any merit in deliberately assigning the task to someone like Morishita, who, to me, appeared to be something of an eccentric.

Or was it that someone quirky like this was disarming? I considered this and that, but I arrived at a different conclusion: this came from Morishita's own judgment, her own independent thoughts. As far as conclusions that I could draw right now, that seemed to be the closest to being right.

"Kouenji Rokusuke already asked me this as well, so I will tell you. I am doing this all at my own discretion," added Morishita. So that ruled out my speculation.

"I see," I said. For the time being, I would trust what Morishita said and proceed with the conversation. "I thought Class A was full of students who only acted based on Sakayanagi's orders."

"I do not know about that. I do not share my thoughts with others," said Morishita. An odd way to phrase it, I thought. She continued. "Just as your class, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, has been rising in the ranks and watching Class A, vigilantly looking for an opportunity, it is certainly true that many of us in Class A are wary of Class B as well. It was within this context that I became interested."

"It's true that Class B's reputation has improved considerably, yeah," I agreed.  
"But if you want to find more detailed information, wouldn't you be better off

contacting our leader, Horikita? I can give you her contact information if you need it.”

I took out my phone, but Morishita rejected my offer with a wave of her hand and began speaking once more, staring into the middle distance. I couldn’t tell where, exactly. “I thought so too, recently. However, the people around me are evaluating you differently. There are some who say that you have something to do with Class B’s rise. A student who deviates from their OAA scores stands out that much more.”

So that was why she wanted to speak to me?

That was one of the significant things about the special exam that had been held at the end of our second semester, since the accuracy of our answers on the test was made available publicly. I had been attracting new attention from highly capable students, such as Sanada and this Morishita girl. When you compared my accomplishments to my OAA scores, the glaring discrepancy was obvious. Even if I were to tell people that I had gotten correct answers as the result of random guessing, they would likely disbelieve me.

This meeting felt too careless, too sloppy to be Sakayanagi’s orders. It wouldn’t lead to any answers Sakayanagi would care about.

“So? Does it seem like you’ve gotten any results by coming to me directly? Is there anything I should answer?” I asked. I tried to demonstrate an attitude that showed I welcomed questions, but even so, she rejected the offer with a wave of her hand again.

“I have indeed gathered some,” she said. “It appears that you, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, are a considerable threat after all.”

“...Was there anything that made you think so?”

“My own subjective analysis, yes.” Morishita nodded in satisfaction. I was getting the impression she was quite the oddball. “If you will please excuse me. I still have quite a few people left to investigate.”

It sounded like there were many people of interest in Horikita's class.

"I see. Well, good luck with that," I replied.

I figured she must have been like this with Sudou and the others, too. Even though I hadn't been there to see it happen, I could very easily picture how it must have looked.

Morishita headed back toward the dormitory. It would've been a hassle to follow her and easy to provoke a misunderstanding if I had. I decided to take in the frigid air for a while and give myself some time before heading back myself.

## 6.6

ON RETURNING TO MY ROOM, I immediately reached for the books that I had brought back with me, holding them in my cold hands.

*Which to read first?* I thought about it for a little while, but I figured the book I received from Hiyori would probably be the topic of conversation when I showed up at the library next, perhaps as soon as tomorrow. So I decided to start with Hiyori's gift.

The book wasn't especially old—released about fifteen years ago. I was curious as to the reason Hiyori liked it, so I tried looking up the author's bibliography, but it seemed like he was just one of many authors who were all but unknown. He did have a fervent, if very small, fan base, though. Perhaps it was precisely because Hiyori was a book lover that this book might be some sort of hidden masterpiece she'd discovered. So much so that she even purchased it several times over just to have copies on hand. From the looks of it, the author released a new book once every three years or so. I thought that if maybe this book suited my taste, then I'd try reading another one of his works sometime.

"Hmm...?"

Just as I was about to start reading, I noticed that there was a bookmark

already inserted between the pages. That in itself wasn't a big deal, but what caught my attention was the pattern on the bookmark. When shopping at Keyaki Mall, you could sometimes receive a free bookmark as part of a promotional campaign, but depending on the time of year, the bookmark might feature a special, limited-edition illustration or pattern.

The bookmark I held in my hand was adorned with Christmas imagery: a fir tree and snow. It was the same one that came with some books that I had bought at the bookstore before Christmas. The bookmarks had changed after Christmas, so she must have bought this then. If she'd walked around this whole time with it until we'd run into each other, I felt badly about it. She must have downplayed how long she'd had it, out of consideration for my feelings.

"It must have been important to her," I mused.

Of course, I couldn't jump to conclusions. She might have simply given it to me as a fellow book lover. I figured I wouldn't think too deeply about it now, but it only felt natural to consider it momentarily, to think about how someone had you on their mind. I wondered what I could do now to show my thanks. And I wondered what would be good to do for Hiyori.

Before starting on the book, I decided to think about that as I sat down on my bed.

## Chapter 7: Changing Relationships

ONLY TWO DAYS of winter vacation remained. My relationship with Kei had gone back to how it used to... Actually, no. From Kei's perspective, it was beyond fixed, even better than before. On the school side of things, even though Sudou used to have a one-sided dislike of Yousuke, they were now getting along. I'd seen an unexpected side to Sakayanagi, which led to encounters with her classmates.

Furthermore, I'd discovered some positive developments within classes that might lead to concerns down the road: Ryuuuen and Katsuragi had already begun preparing for the start of the third semester, and Ichinose had blossomed into a new personal stability. It was safe to say that, all things considered, winter break had been very pleasant indeed. There was just one thing. I felt that I still had some unfinished business to take care of during this winter vacation.

The book that I had received as a gift from Hiyori. How to respond? After several days of racking my brain over it, I had reached a conclusion, but I needed to make preparations to pull it off. I had been causing Kei a great deal of anxiety lately due to the matter of Ichinose. I did not want to bring back that awkwardness between us.

I needed to repay Hiyori quietly, without causing any misunderstandings. What would I repay her with? The clue to that lay in the past, in something I had thought about shortly after starting school here.

"Kiyotaka! Listen up, okay? This is definitely, absolutely *just* for today!" shouted Kei as she hugged me from behind, still clad in her pajamas, just as I was leaving my room.

"I understand. That's why I made sure to tell you exactly what was going on."

Didn't I?" I replied.

"Yes, you did, but... And you did tell me the reason why, and everything... But I'm still worried!"

I urged Kei to let me go and turned back around, only for her to embrace me from the front.

"You'll be back by nightfall, right?" she said.

"If you're that anxious, why don't you just do as I asked?" I asked.

"But that kind of thing is, like, totally impossible for me. I mean, I'm just not a reader. Anyway, we wouldn't be able to even have a conversation! We couldn't even talk about anything."

Well, I supposed that was true. Forcing Kei to cooperate probably wouldn't make either of them happy.

"Okay, then, in that case, kiss me!" she declared.

"Okay, hold on, how does that follow?"

Kei's eyes were already closed, and she was already bringing her lips closer to me. When I obediently responded to her wishes and sealed it with a kiss, she gave me a playful, cutesy smile.

"Have a good day and hurry on back!" she said.

It was as if the angry huff she had been in up until about five seconds ago was a complete lie. Kei watched me go as I left the room.

## 7.1

**W**ITHOUT HESITATION, I got onto the elevator and rode it down. As soon as I was outside the dormitory, I powered on my phone. I'd probably hear something any moment now. It would have been more simple to check before I had left my room, but I was trying to avoid worrying Kei as much as possible.

This was out of consideration for her. Sure enough, I saw that I had received an incoming call earlier, but since I hadn't been able to answer it, there was a message.

Apparently, she had gone out for a walk before our meeting time. While I felt astonished at her behavior, thinking that was just so like her, I decided to chase after her. Away from Keyaki Mall, in a spot close to the main entrance, I saw the back of a girl who was simply wandering around, not looking for anything in particular.

"Find anything?" I asked.

"Good morning. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything special. But anyway, it's really pleasant weather, isn't it?" Even though temperatures were low, today was a clear day, so most of the snow had melted. "Thank you for inviting me out today."

"Well, it would've been a waste of a winter vacation if you spent all your time holed up in the library every day."

I had heard from the librarian that Hiyori, who rarely hung out with friends, would come to the library when it opened and stay there until closing time all by herself. Thinking that entering the third semester like this, being all alone, sounded lonely, I invited her out. Of course, I understood that Hiyori didn't mind. She might even get upset with me over my unnecessary show of concern. But I thought that while inviting her out this way, for her, would be an unnecessary pressu—well. I mean, I'm sure it probably felt like an imposition, like I was forcing myself to spend time with her as a friend.

"Why did you call me?" asked Hiyori.

That was exactly why I needed to be honest.

"I just wanted to invite you out, is all," I replied.

I just wanted to invite her out, as a fellow person. That was all it was. Needless to say, Hiyori had the right to refuse my offer if she thought I was

inadequate.

"I was thinking about how I wanted to show my thanks for the book," I added. "I couldn't feel satisfied just thanking you with words for the gift. So, I wanted to spend a day together with you, Hiyori. A day that would make you happy."

I was aware my words reeked of something a little unsavory coming from a boy to a girl, but I'm sure that Hiyori understood what I really meant.

"Oh, I'm glad." Hiyori's gentle tone conveyed both gratitude and a note of apology.

I figured that someone well-behaved and sensible like Hiyori thought I was taking pity on her. No matter how many words I used to deny this, preconceived notions couldn't be easily dispelled. Even so, she hadn't rejected my invitation, and now we were out and about like this.

In that case, all I needed to do was show her through my actions. Usually, when two or more people were doing things together, they'd rarely act spontaneously. Most of the time, I handed the reins over to the other student or students and let them introduce me to new experiences. Not today. I had decided to take the initiative in escorting Hiyori.

That being said, our choices for activities were limited this time of year.

"So, um, was Karuizawa-san...all right with this?" Hiyori asked. "I can't imagine she'd be very happy for you to be out alone with a girl like this."

When talking with a member of the opposite sex, there were a certain number of concerns, regardless of the situation. This wasn't exclusive to me, but rather to anyone who was already dating. Like, someone could ask me, "*Ayanokouji, if Kei were to go out alone with a guy, just the two of them, would you be okay with it?*" Of course, you didn't always have to ask about these things. Only those who believed any alone time with the opposite sex was an indication of something would say these things. I had already taken the fact that Hiyori was such a person into consideration.

"At first, she wouldn't listen, saying that she'd come along," I said. "That would've been fine, but it wouldn't have been very fun then. She would have only been here to chaperone. Plus, it would have been disrespectful to you, Hiyori."

"How did you convince her?" asked Hiyori.

"I told her to at least read a book so that you'd be able to find some common ground and have something to talk about."

Hiyori's eyes widened, and a welcoming smile spread across her face.

"I'm sure you can guess how it went, considering she's not here," I said. Yesterday, Kei cracked open a book, gave up on the first page, and collapsed on the spot.

"Oh...I see. Yes, you're certainly right," said Hiyori.

"So, anyway, yes, I made sure to get proper permission. Of course, I still got some grumbling out of her, up until the very last minute."

Hiyori smiled warmly, relieved to know that I wasn't up to anything furtive.

## 7.2

HIYORI AND I arrived at Keyaki Mall, chatting about things we encountered and experienced in the library, the all-too-familiar library occurrences people could relate to. Just then, a certain female student spotted us, came up, and said something.

"Wow, starting off the year shameless, huh?"

It was Kamuro Masumi, who I normally didn't have much contact with. For some reason, she was looking at me with an expression of obvious disgust on her face. When Hiyori approached Kamuro, Hiyori gently bowed and offered a greeting, but Kamuro ignored her and continued to one-sidedly call me out.

"I just saw you out on a date with Karuizawa at the end of the year. And you

start going out with a different girl as soon as the new year's started?" Pure contempt in her eyes. It was certainly true that if someone saw only this scene, they probably couldn't help but take it that way. "And she and Karuizawa are completely different types of people, too. What are you thinking?" Kamuro asked

"Um, good morning, Kamuro-san," said Hiyori.

"You're Shiina, right?" said Kamuro. "I didn't think you and Ayanokouji were that close."

This misunderstanding would continue unless I said something, I thought.

But Hiyori explained first. "He invited me to have fun today, as friends."

"And I got proper permission from Kei," I added.

I thought that might've convinced her a little, but her expression remained stern even then. "Even if that's true, it doesn't change how it looks."

That statement was valid. I didn't know what the situation looked like from an outsider's view.

"But if that's how it is, doesn't that mean it's fundamentally impossible for men and women to be friends?" I asked.

"There's just the vibe, y'know," Kamuro said. "Even from a distance, you can sense something is not normal about this."

That was Kamuro's own personal interpretation, but I couldn't say with certainty that she was completely wrong. Among the female students, Hiyori was someone I regarded quite highly. Though she didn't have a reputation for it, she was erudite; she shared my hobby of reading books, and despite that, she wasn't someone who talked too much. We were on the same wavelength. On the other hand, it could be inferred that Hiyori looked at me in a similar light. In that case, I supposed it was not unreasonable for people to assume that we had a relationship that was deeper than a normal friendship.

"I take care to avoid misunderstandings as best as I can," I replied.

"That would be the wise thing to do," said Kamuro.

"Did you come all the way here just to give me that warning?" I asked.

"No, I have business with you. There's something else I want to confirm." Still without having even offered a proper New Year's greeting, Kamuro marched up to me, shortening the distance between us even further. "This conversation is gonna get a little involved. That okay?"

I shot Hiyori a look, asking her with my eyes if she was okay with sticking around for this, just in case. She didn't seem to mind, so I figured I'd just proceed with the conversation.



"It's fine," I said. "If there's something you want to say, come out and say it."

"Okay, then, I won't be shy," Kamuro said. "What's your game here, with what you've been doing lately?"

"What I've 'been doing'? What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb. We know you've been snooping around Class A recently."

"I've been *what* with Class A?"

I didn't remember anything like that at all. Snooping around Class A. I could recall just one thing that I supposed could have been interpreted that way. "Are you talking about what happened with Morishita, by any chance?"

"So, you *do* remember, huh? Someone saw you and Morishita deep in conversation."

They must have spotted the moment Morishita approached me. It wouldn't have been strange if someone had witnessed it.

"Morishita-san?" murmured Hiyori from next to me. Perhaps she wasn't familiar with that name, because she sounded puzzled. Perhaps Hiyori wasn't even aware that she was someone in her same grade level.

"Don't know her? Her name's Morishita Ai, she's a student in Class A," said Kamuro.

"I feel like I may have heard the name before somewhere, but we've never spoken," said Hiyori.

"She doesn't usually talk to people outside of our class. So, this is pretty suspicious."

"Really?" I said. "It didn't seem that way to me..."

After all, Morishita had said herself that she had talked to Sudou and Kouenji. Though I was somewhat curious about the way she referred to people by their full names, with no honorifics, I didn't get the impression that she was clumsy with her words or anything.

"So, you weren't probing into Class A, then?" Kamuro asked me.

"That wasn't my intention. Granted, I can't convince you either way." There was no reason to deny the situation. "I never imagined you were the type of person to do things for Class A's sake, Kamuro."

"If it weren't you, I probably wouldn't have cared so much," she replied.

"Oh?"

"You're the only one who can influence Sakayanagi, after all."

"I didn't imagine you would notice or care. I thought you'd always disliked Sakayanagi."

Sakayanagi had discovered Kamuro's shoplifting and held that over her, halfway threateningly, using Kamuro as her pawn. Kamuro should have been disgusted with Sakayanagi's methods from the beginning. But this was different from the image I had in my mind.

"I guess after spending a year sharing meals at the same table, some things change, huh?" I remarked.

"Don't speculate and assume you get it," Kamuro snapped. "Anyway, I still don't like Sakayanagi, but we are in the same class, and I do have obligations. If you mean well, then I'll leave things alone, but if not, then that needs to be dealt with."

So, this was about duty—something she seemed to really feel strongly.

"Anyway..." Kamuro turned to Hiyori. "You seem to know a lot, huh, Shiina?"

"What about?" asked Hiyori.

"Your face didn't even budge when I was talking to Ayanokouji. Am I wrong?"

"Well, it's just that... I'm sorry. I wasn't listening very attentively."

"...Huh?"

"It was a conversation between you and Ayanokouji-kun, Kamuro-san. I was just spacing out, looking at the scenery. Did I miss something?" Hiyori cocked

her head to the side, puzzled.

In response, Kamuro let out an exasperated sigh. “Not really, no.”

Kamuro must have decided that it was an overreaction on her part. She was certainly trying to rattle Shiina to see what her reaction was, but she’d gotten nothing. Hiyori had been right here, and I was sure she’d been listening. However, she was the sort of person who didn’t let you realize she was listening. She’d pretend to just be an airhead.

Kamuro addressed me again. “I know that you’re not normal.”

“That’s a rather coarse way of putting it,” I replied.

“It’s the truth, isn’t it? If not, you wouldn’t have been able to get that Sakura girl expelled without feeling anything.”

She was bringing up the Unanimous Special Exam. Kamuro had gained information that should have stayed within my class.

“And today, you—”

But just as Kamuro was about to say something else, her gaze was momentarily diverted.

“Oh ho, what’s this? Well now, it sure is unusual to see the two of you together like this, ain’t it?”

Just as Kamuro was about to begin her tenacious interrogation, Hashimoto, acting all nonchalant, appeared along with Kitou, standing next to him. I didn’t fail to notice the dramatic shift in Kamuro’s facial expression in that moment. I thought it was the kind of look that said she’d happened to run into someone she didn’t like. She should have taken into consideration the fact that if she were to continue haranguing me in this place, with people coming and going, Hashimoto could appear, too.

I might have thought longer about what that change in facial expression meant, but what caught my eye was what Kitou was wearing. Kitou had declared that he aspired to be a fashion designer, which wasn’t how people

typically thought of him. Why people felt so strongly either way was something that I, as someone with no fashion sense, couldn't understand, but right now, his peculiar fashion sense was on full display.

"Ahh man, I gotta tell ya, when I saw Ayanokouji here surrounded by beautiful women, I couldn't help but feel the flames of jealousy," said Hashimoto.

"Are you *joking*?" asked Kamuro sharply.

"I mean, Shiina-chan and Kamuro-chan? Ayanokouji's sure got a discernin' eye. Right, Kitou?" Hashimoto turned to Kitou, seeking his agreement, but Kitou showed no reaction at all. "Anyway, we're just two guys out by ourselves, all lonely. You'll let us tag along, wontcha?"

"As if. I'm leaving," snapped Kamuro.

She was about to stalk off, but Hashimoto grabbed her by the arm and whispered something in her ear. She pushed him away and immediately put space between herself and him, but she couldn't squirm away.

"It's not like the two of you are on a date now, is it?" he said. "I mean, you've got a girlfriend, Ayanokouji."

I nodded to that last part, thinking that it was probably inevitable that the conversation would turn out to be something similar to the one I had been having with Kamuro after she called me out.

"So, there's no problem if us two join you, and the five of us all hang out together, is there?" asked Hashimoto.

"If Hiyori is fine with it, then I don't have any particular reason to oppose," I replied.

"Sounds like fun." Hiyori showed no signs of displeasure whatsoever. "I've hardly ever spoken with Kamuro-san or anyone from Class A before."

Hiyori was probably not the type of person who would actively go out of her way to do things, but she might have been interested in hanging out in a group like this if invited. It wasn't like I was especially close with Hashimoto and the

others either, but I figured getting to know these people wouldn't be a waste of time.

"We didn't have anything specific in mind to do today, so would it be okay if we left the planning to you, Hashimoto?" I asked.

Perhaps he was accustomed to leading large groups of people, because Hashimoto agreed without hesitation. "Sure, if you wanna leave it to me, I'm fine with deciding."

## 7.3

RECENTLY, I'd been getting more and more opportunities to interact with people from other classes, like with Ryuuuen and Katsuragi, or with Ichinose and Shiranami. Today I spent time with members of Class A, starting with Kamuro. And what's more, these weren't just any students. Each one of them were something like executives, people close to Sakayanagi.

"Good morning, Hashimoto-senpai, Kamuro-senpai, Kitou-senpai."

"Good morning."

"Mornin'!"

As we got closer to Keyaki Mall, many, many first-year students came over and called over to us.

"They sure idolize you," I observed.

"Nah, this is pretty much normal, since we're in Class A," said Hashimoto.

I could tell that they were working together closely with their first-year kouhai counterparts, seeing as they could match names with faces.

"It's hard to imagine Sakayanagi being accosted like that when she's out and about, though," I said.

"That's 'cause the Princess is special," Hashimoto said. "Even our kouhai can't

just approach her. I guess you could say she's like a flower on a high peak, out of reach."

Even kouhai envied her, I supposed.

"By the way, where are we going?" I asked him.

"Hm? Oh yeah, that's a good question. Ayanokouji, are you in the camp that prefers to avoid conspicuous places? Or in the camp that doesn't mind them?"

"I don't like to stand," I answered.

"Yeah, I figured. Well, the go-to would be something like karaoke, but—" Hashimoto stopped, directing a fleeting glance over at Kamuro to see if it was okay.

She shot him a fierce glare. "No."

"Should've known, huh?" said Hashimoto. He gave up on the idea of karaoke with just that one word and began to think of another idea.

"You don't like karaoke, Kamuro-san?" asked Hiyori, keeping pace with Kamuro.

"It's whatever. Don't ask me the reasons for every little thing," snapped Kamuro, brushing her off. Meanwhile, Kitou and I were walking behind them.

"...She's tone-deaf," muttered Kitou.

He didn't say it very loudly, but Kamuro must have heard, because she wheeled around, a look of fury on her face. "Kitou!"

"Tone-deaf?" I asked. Made sense she'd hate karaoke, and why she wouldn't want to talk about the reason.

"Shut up," snapped Kamuro.

"...But she also has incredibly sharp ears," Kitou added in a whisper. Perhaps he was sorry for what he'd said, or perhaps he just knew it'd make her angry to keep talking.

"I heard that too. Don't tell Ayanokouji unnecessary stuff."

"It's not like it's a deep dark secret," Kitou replied.

Were they on good terms or bad? Contextually, I'd have to guess they were close.

"Okay, okay, let's all just keep walkin' on calmly, eh, Kamuro-chan?" Hashimoto said. "We're not goin' to karaoke."

Kitou placed his hand on my shoulder and gestured to me, telling me to slow down my pace a little. Once we had gotten far enough away from the others so that even Kamuro's sharp ears wouldn't pick up what we were saying, he opened his mouth to speak.

"Hashimoto and Kamuro are bothering you," he said.

"Oh, no, not really. Don't worry about it. Besides, Shiina's having fun."

"Well, that's good."

Kitou had a terrifying face, but I wasn't surprised by his behavior. I'd seen a side to him during the school trip that you didn't normally see. He was a fundamentally decent, considerate guy.

"The way you respond to me is different than when you're with Ryuu'en," I remarked. "I'm guessing that's because you still don't see me as an enemy?"

"It's not as though I snap at anyone and everyone. Even if they are an enemy. As long as someone behaves in proper fashion, I will show at least the minimum level of courtesy."

So he wouldn't be aggressive even if we found ourselves as enemies.

"Hey, Shiina-chan," said Hashimoto. "There's somethin' I wanna ask ya. Ya mind?"

"What is it?" said Hiyori.

"I was wonderin' what kinda relationship you have with Ayanokouji."

"I've already told Kamuro-san about it," she replied. "We're good friends."

"So, that means you're a free agent right now, huh?"

“Free agent?” Hiyori repeated.

“Meaning you don’t got a boyfriend,” Hashimoto clarified.

“Are you seriously trying your pick-up game in this situation?” asked Kamuro.

“Hey, if both sides are free agents, then there’s no problem, is there? Or do you want some, Kamuro-chan?”

Kamuro walked right up to him and kicked him in the buttocks. She didn’t go easy on him, either.

“Ow!” wailed Hashimoto. He hopped up and down, holding his butt, before bringing his hands together and apologizing. “Sorry, sorry!”

“It’s a farce, isn’t it?” Kitou said to me as we watched all this. “Sorry.”

There was really nothing for him to apologize for. “To be honest,” I said, “I had the impression that Class A was full of lots of bookish, stuffy students. It’s good to know I was wrong.”

“Hashimoto pretends to be the life of the party, as it were, for better or worse,” said Kitou. I thought it was a strange answer. His face was still as scary as ever, and I couldn’t tell whether what he said was meant to be a compliment or not.

## 7.4

I LEARNED SOMETHING NEW by allowing Hashimoto to escort the group. Ultimately, no matter how unconventional the proposal, it would not happen unless the rest of the group consented to it. Hashimoto had made several suggestions after karaoke, but Kamuro had rejected every one of them. In the end, the one that Kamuro had agreed to was to have a friendly chat at the café. I guessed that was the only plan that we could have gone with in the end, since we were out of other options.

“You sure this is okay, Kamuro-chan?” Hashimoto said. “I mean, we’ve got

Ayanokouji and Shiina-chan with us, a rare opportunity that we don't usually come by. Y'know?"

"Why don't you just go somewhere without me, then? I told you that over and over." It was true that as Kamuro continued to reject Hashimoto's proposals, she did say that it was fine if we went without her.

"Ain't no way I could do something like exclude somebody," said Hashimoto.

"Um, well, I think this sort of thing is nice, personally," Hiyori piped up.  
"Actually, I like it, because it's calm."

"Wow, you're such a good girl, Shiina-chan. And cute, too."

Perhaps Hashimoto had taken a liking to Shiina, because he took the initiative and sat down next to her. I sat down next to Kitou.

"I gotta say, though, wow, Ayanokouji," said Hashimoto. "Most of the time people end up lookin' freaked out when they sit next to Kitou."

"I already know that he's a good guy," I replied. I supposed that my experiences from the school trip had come in handy after all, because if anything, I was feeling relieved.

"I agree with Ayanokouji-kun," said Hiyori. "I don't get the impression that Kitou-kun is a bad person."

"Where'd you get your eyes?" asked Kamuro.

"For real. You two are in a pretty unusual class of people," said Hashimoto.

"Really?" asked Hiyori. She stared intently at Kitou as though to confirm it. Kitou stared (or rather glared) back at Hiyori, but she didn't seem to be scared at all. In fact, it was Kitou who averted his gaze first.

"You really are a good guy after all," I remarked.

"No. I am not a good person." Kitou, only moving the pupils of his eyes, met me with a silent glare. His look told me not to get the wrong idea, warning me to shut my mouth.

"Now then, I think it's about time we hear what you have to say, Ayanokouji." Hashimoto had been acting playful up to this point, rested his elbows on the table, and now, holding a cup in his hand, he held his arm out toward me as though it were a microphone and this was a street interview.

Kamuro had been slouching, looking far off into the distance in some other direction, but she now sat up straight, correcting her posture. Kamuro had walked up to me because there was something she wanted to ask me. I had an idea of what that might have been, but I wondered what she wanted to know.

"...Okay, give it to us straight. Are you planning to ditch Karuizawa and start seeing Shiina? After all, what you're doing today is like a date with Shiina, isn't it? Isn't it?" asked Hashimoto as he shoved the cup closer and closer to my face, hounding me like a reporter.

Kamuro put a stop to it, grabbing hold of his outstretched arm. "Hashimoto."

"Hmm? What's up, Kamuro-chan? I'm getting to it. I'm gonna get him to spill everything and—"

"If all you're going to do is beat around the bush like this, I'm going to get straight to the point," said Kamuro harshly. She was tired of this tedious chitchat.

"Wow, scary, Kamuro-chan. Well, that's one of the attractive things abou—ow!" Hashimoto suddenly doubled over, clutching his leg, a look of agony flashing across his face. "You kicked me right in the shin...!"

"It was an accident," replied Kamuro coolly, looking the other way.

After the peak of his agony had passed, Hashimoto cut down to business. ""I—no, I mean we in Class A, can't help but be curious about you."

"Why?" I asked.

"You already know without me having to say it, don't you? You can handle yourself academically, you're athletic, and Ichinose seems to like you an awful lot, yeah? Plus, you can talk to Ryuuken without hesitation. And, to top it all off,

you seem like you're pretty friendly with the Princess, too... That's unusual, ain't it?"

Over winter vacation, people must have been paying close attention. If I were to combine that knowledge with all the reconnaissance that Hashimoto had done before that, I could say that his question was perfectly on point.

"Class B's rapid progress," he added. "You're the real leader working behind the scenes, in Horikita's shadow... Right?"

Kamuro and Kitou both stopped moving, casting a look over in my direction just with their eyes. This meeting was not set up by chance. Kamuro coming up to me a little earlier—it had all been planned. Considering Kamuro's current reaction, while it looked like Hashimoto had taken the initiative and stirred things up in the situation, this must have been carefully choreographed. As if drawn in by the seeds I had sown, they were scouting and making speculation, rumors circulating from the information they'd found. Rumors had run rampant.

Whether it was the truth or not, when information was disseminated in this way, at least I'd gained a new perspective. I had thought this was still a long way off, but it wasn't so early it was completely unexpected. In that case, I figured I'd water the seeds I had planted now.

"The real leader, huh?" I said. "And if I were?"

"Wow, I figured you'd be quick to play dumb or deny it, but you're admitting it?" Hashimoto let out a long, low whistle.

"I haven't admitted anything. I'm just interested in what you would do if it were true."

"Hm, I think I'll wait until there's some proof," he said.

"Conclusive proof, huh? Well then, I guess I should say what you want me to say. Since it's clear what you want: I admit. I am the real leader, Hashimoto."

The corners of Hashimoto's mouth, which had been curved upward into a

smile all this time, drooped slightly, turning into a bitter grin. “Now that sure is a tricky answer.”

When Hashimoto pressed me for answers, I would get shaken because he hit the bull’s-eye. I could have admitted it aggressively. Or I could have denied it with all my might. Whichever option I chose out of those, Hashimoto would have been sure he’d hit the mark. In that case, Hashimoto would be the one in trouble if I were to take a stance that was none of the above.

This was the only answer that left him completely unsure. By answering in this way, I made it more difficult for him to reach the confirmation he wanted—who was the leader? I was drawing fire from Horikita. If they arbitrarily assumed that I was the true leader and started making moves with that in mind, they would lose their footing in future battles.

“What do you think, Kamuro-chan?” asked Hashimoto.

“He’s definitely shady.”

“What about you, Kitou?”

Unlike Kamuro, who had answered immediately, Kitou didn’t say anything, but he didn’t take his eyes off of me.

Hashimoto turned back to me. “Allow me to correct a little of what I said earlier. I might have gone too far in calling you the real leader. But I don’t think there’s any doubt that you are a leading figure behind the scenes. I think you’ve been guiding Class B.”

“If that’s what you and Class A have determined, I can’t convince you otherwise,” I replied.

“Hey, Shiina-chan, what do you think about Ayanokouji?” he asked Hiyori.

“Me?”

“Yes. I’d love to hear your point of view, Shiina-chan.”

“I’m just wondering, what will you do with this information, Hashimoto-kun?” she asked.

“Hm? What will I do?”

“You’re concerned about Ayanokouji-kun...about what might happen in the future,” Hiyori said.

“...You hit the nail on the head,” said Hashimoto. It seemed like he was re-evaluating Shiina after just that brief response. Before, he’d only responded to her looks.

“Hashimoto, what is she talking about?” asked Kamuro, not understanding the meaning behind Shiina’s question.

“I was talking with Kamuro-chan a little while ago,” said Hashimoto. “About what to do to graduate from Class A. The most surefire method is to save up twenty million points as an individual and secure your path up, but it’s not that easy. That being said, though, even if you wanted to rely on the new system the school has, the Class Transfer Tickets or whatever, the timeframe you have to actually use ‘em is short, so that’s not viable, either.”

“That’s true,” I said.

“It’s important to keep an eye on the classes that are likely to win. If you curry favor with ‘em, then it’s possible they might pick you up. But really, the idea that just by doing a favor or two, someone would pay twenty million to take me in? Get real. If I suggested anything like that, then...what do you think?”

“They wouldn’t, obviously,” said Kamuro. “Unless there was a strict contract.”

“Exactly. Then, in that case, what do you think you should do to improve your chances of graduating from Class A? Cooperate with your class and work hard? Knock down your rivals? No, that’s not it, is it?”

Before Hashimoto himself came out and said it, Hiyori deduced what he was getting at and mumbled the answer: “You’re thinking of sniping other powerful classmates.”

“Wow, you sure are bright, Shiina-chan.”

While Hashimoto praised Hiyori, Kamuro and Kitou looked over their

shoulders at each other, their eyes meeting. They were both realizing now how quick-witted Shiina Hiyori was. There were plenty of students with a high Academic Ability in OAA. However, determining whether they were capable in areas other than their studies could only be seen firsthand.

“Even if you can’t save up twenty million points by yourself, if you do it on the consensus of the entire class, it’s possible,” Hiyori said. “If Class A can entice exceptional people from other classes, the way Ryuuen-kun took in Katsuragi-kun, then Class A will become even more solid, and the power of its rivals would be diminished.”

Hashimoto responded with generous applause, commending Hiyori and saying that she was exactly right. “Show me, Ayanokouji. If you prove your strength to us in Class A, we’ll use our Class Points to recruit you. That’d be to your advantage. Am I right?”

I couldn’t assume Hashimoto was telling a total lie. However, I could think of several reasons that what he was saying wasn’t entirely true.

“Headhunting... Huh,” said Kamuro. “But do you think that Sakayanagi will welcome Ayanokouji with open arms?”

That was one of them. Sakayanagi would likely not want me entering her class.

“I understand that the Princess has her own thoughts on the matter,” said Hashimoto. “I think there’s a good chance she would.”

“What’s your basis for that?” asked Kamuro.

“I can show you my basis for saying so, but first, let’s hear what Ayanokouji thinks, eh?” Hashimoto turned to me to see how I felt.

“If you can bring me into Class A, then there’s no better offer than that,” I answered.

“Exactly. There’s nothing better than Class A. So, if Class A were to invite you, would you accept? I’m asking you this hypothetically. What do you say?”

"If you invited me to Class A immediately, I would want to give it serious consideration."

Hashimoto drew back in an interesting way. "Okay. So that means there's no issue here; you're sure you want to do this. In that case, it sounds like we can move to the next step."

I supposed this meant there was more to the conversation, then, because Hashimoto smiled more happily than anyone else present. However, one of his classmates pulled her chair back and shot up.

"If you're going to just continue this discussion without authorization, then I'm not going to be involved in your recklessness. Bye."

"W-wai—hey, Kamuro-chan?" Hamuro sputtered. "You're seriously leaving?!"

"You won't listen no matter what I say anyway."

"Look, if you're referring to that promise from earlier, I'm sorry." A flustered Hashimoto tried to stop Kamuro, but she quickly left, walking away at a brisk pace.

"Ah, damn... Guess I went a little overboard, maybe?" He looked to Kitou, who had been silently watching, to see if he really had gone too far. Kitou silently nodded. "I'll go call her back. Just hang on a minute."

Scratching his head, Hashimoto ran off after Kamuro at a short trot.

"You are all such interesting people," said Hiyori, her eyes creased in a warm smile as she watched. "I'm having so much fun."

"...Really?" Kitou seemed taken aback by that. Perhaps he didn't imagine that she would have found this enjoyable.

After Hashimoto returned with a grumpy-looking Kamuro in tow, the conversation resumed, though we didn't go back to talking about me. Instead, it turned into idle chitchat, about nothing in particular. Hiyori wasn't talkative, but she participated in the conversation. With Hashimoto livening things up, it certainly wasn't boring.

## 7.5

WE PARTED WAYS with Hashimoto and the other two students from Class A after we were finished at the café. Judging from how hurriedly they left, I guessed that Sakayanagi might have summoned them. On our way back to the dormitory, Hiyori and I stopped by the bookstore and exchanged opinions.

“It turned out to be a really fun day,” said Hiyori. It was just before sunset. Walking slightly ahead of me, she must have just remembered something about what happened earlier, because she chuckled softly. “I had no idea that Kitou-kun talked so much.”

“So much?” I repeated.

Thinking back on it though, I was pretty sure he’d only muttered a few words...

“And on top of that, I think Kamuro-san and Hashimoto-kun were very relatable,” she added.

“If you’re satisfied, Hiyori, then I’m glad,” I said. “In the end, I didn’t really get much of a say in how things went.”

“That’s not true. You went to the bookstore with me, remember? That alone was quite a lot of fun.”

“Really? Well, I’m glad that you’re pleased.”

I had not yet improved when it came to making plans with the other person in mind. I guessed that I’d just have to keep spending time with other people, men and women, to gain more experience in that arena.

Before I knew it, Hiyori and I were talking less and less, and we both fell silent. Hiyori was walking more slowly than before, perhaps because she was thinking about something. We were walking down the tree-lined path and had gotten about halfway to the dormitory.

“Um...Ayanokouji-kun.” Hiyori had been smiling like she had been having fun

up until moments ago, but now she looked nervous, albeit only slightly. “Could I ask you something? And please don’t get mad.”

“I don’t think there’s anything I’d get angry about. But sure, I won’t get mad. Ask away.”

“It’s about the book that I gave you earlier. That book, it’s... My father wrote that book.”

“Your father, Hiyori...? Ohhh, I see. Could his pen name have been an anagram of his real name, by any chance?”

“That’s incredible. You figured it out?”

“Well, once I heard that he had a family, I thought about how the name was a little strange and put two and two together.”

“Shiina Katsumi. That’s my father’s name,” said Hiyori.

“So, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, huh? You both love books.” I might have caught a glimpse of the background that had led to the birth of this girl who loved literature.

“I’ve never talked about my father being a writer before with anyone,” she said. “That was partly because I didn’t have friends who shared my same hobby, but... But that’s not all there is to it. I wanted you to know that, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Even if it wasn’t something to be ashamed of, that didn’t mean she wanted to share something she considered private. But why was she talking about it now, I wondered?

“How do you imagine the battles ahead will unfold?” she asked me. “I understand that it’s difficult to predict, of course, but if you don’t mind, Ayanokouji-kun, would you please share your opinion?”

“The battle between Ryuuen and Sakayanagi will have an enormous impact on how things will play out in the future,” I said. “Assuming their Class Point totals remain in similar positions until the end of the year, if Sakayanagi wins,

Class A will have a significant advantage. However, if Ryuuen wins, then that advantage could effectively be erased. That's what we need to pay attention to, more than any movements in Horikita's class or Ichinose's class."

It was an analysis anyone could have given. If I were asked to give my personal thoughts, though, I would need to think about what came beyond that.

"Most students will assume Sakayanagi's class has the upper hand," I added.

"Yes, you're right," Hiyori agreed. "They have maintained their position as Class A for close to two years now, and they have never once lost a considerable number of Class Points, either. More than a few of the students in my class are dreading the special exam at the end of the school year."

If Ryuuen's class lost, then it would become extremely difficult for them to graduate from Class A.

"As long as we don't know what the special exam will be exactly," I said, "we can only judge based on the leaders, and on the strength and chemistry between classmates. We can see that even Ryuuen has a sufficient chance of winning."

For my part, I saw that as the most ideal outcome. I didn't mind which way the battle between Horikita and Ichinose went, but if Ryuuen lost, then that meant Hiyori's class would lose any chance of victory.

"...Yes, you're right," Hiyori said.

As someone from the class in question, I'm sure that Hiyori likely felt that more strongly. Sakayanagi's class was strong. That was why they'd feel so crushed when they lose.

"I'm sorry for asking you these things," she said.

"I don't mind. I'm glad to know that you care about your class too, Hiyori."

Hiyori looked a little bashful at that. She started to run, which was unusual, and got ahead of me. Then she turned around, still embarrassed, to speak up

again. "We're in different classes and no matter what we do, we'll be competing. But...let's make sure we graduate together."

We didn't know which class would graduate as Class A. That didn't mean that we needed to hate people from the other classes. Whether you graduated from Class C or Class D, you wanted to graduate together with your companions, your best friend, your significant other, at your side.

"Yeah, okay," I agreed. Hiyori smiled, soft and happy.

Winter break was coming to an end. A chilly wind blew. It was probably going to get even colder as the third semester closed in on us.

## Postscript

IT'S DEFINITELY the warm season now, huh? Anywho! Hey, y'all. Kinugasa here.

I think people awaken to hobbies throughout their lives. I started trying to cook a while ago, and I've been increasing my repertoire of dishes, trying to make them even tastier through trial and error. I even got carried away and bought my own personal kitchen knife. In the past, my only hobby was watching baseball. While I'm impressed that I can still acquire new hobbies even at my age, I noticed something unusual regarding my hobbies...

As my children have been growing up, I've had to buy big blocks and stuffed toys for them, so I've inevitably had more opportunities to visit the toy store. During these trips, I unexpectedly felt an interest surge within me, and I reached for the Plarail toys. I know absolutely nothing about trains, but I was just like 'Oh, hey, what? Just moving them around is surprisingly fun, huh?' and well, that led to me buying them, and I started collecting tracks and making my own routes, running trains in parallel, buying RC trains...

I also started to get interested in stuff like mini 4WD, Nerf, board games, and more, and—oh no! Too many hobbies! I used to only buy toys for my children, but before I knew it, I ended up starting to buy toys for myself to play with. My recent favorites are Bottleman toys. They're toys that can shoot plastic bottle caps. I remember that I used to play with toys called B-Daman (the predecessor to Bottleman?), and being, like, super hooked on them. That brought back some memories, which made me go out and collect them.

If I were hard pressed to describe myself, though, I'd say that I'm more of a minimalist, and I never had much interest in collecting things. And yet things have still turned out like this... Anyway, I wonder if the reason I feel like B-Daman is by far the most interesting is because I've grown up into an adult. Personally, I've wanted to try out Lego, which I yearned for ever since I was little, but I just can't take that last step. Maybe because I think that if I try them

out, it'll *really* be over for me then. Someone stop me! (Or give me a push!)

Okay, with my status report out of the way, let's talk a little bit about the books. Finally, the second semester and winter vacation have come to an end. Starting with the next volume, we'll be getting to the story of the third semester. Unlike the second semester, which was rather long, I'm expecting that the third semester story will be about the same length as the third semester for the first-year arc. Perhaps even shorter, with slightly fewer books.

Anyway, I hope that you all keep cool during this hot season! Please take care not to get heatstroke and such. Let's meet again around the time it gets cooler out.



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# Table of Contents

[Table of Contents](#)

[Character Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 1: Irreplaceable Today](#)

[Chapter 2: Song of Loneliness](#)

[Chapter 3: Just A Hunch](#)

[Chapter 4: Casing Each Other Out](#)

[Chapter 5: Signs of Quiet](#)

[Chapter 6: Remaining Time](#)

[Chapter 7: Changing Relationships](#)

[Postscript](#)

[Newsletter](#)