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CLASROOM OF
THE ELITE

NOVEL 2

STORY BY

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Seven Seas Entertainment

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE VOL. 2

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Art by Tomoseshunsaku

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PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64275-139-0

Printed in Canada

First Printing: August 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 1: Sakura Airi's Soliloquy

I don't know how to interact with other people. I'm bad at talking while making eye contact. I'm horrible with crowds. I don't remember how or when I became so hopeless.

However, one thing I do know for certain is that a person cannot live entirely in isolation. No matter how much I may love my solitude, I can't remain totally by myself. So, I came up with a solution. I would adopt a false face and hide my true self. Then, I wouldn't be completely honest, but I could be a version of myself. I could continue to live in this dark, lonely world.

The world isn't entirely beautiful. Everyone knows this, but in their hearts they still wish for that perfect, idyllic place. A bit of a contradiction.

I don't care who answers me, but I need to know. Is everyone else putting on a façade, just like me? Or do most people show their true selves to the outside world? Since I can't connect with people, I suppose there's no way for me to find out the answer. Therefore, I remain alone.

I'm all right by myself.

I'm all right with being alone.

I...

I want to connect with someone from the bottom of my heart.

And so I will continue to live quietly, with my eyes downcast. Alone.

Chapter 2: The Sudden Beginning of Our Tumultuous Troubles

The timing couldn't have been worse.

While searching for a place to take a good selfie, I stumbled into something. Even a certain famous, diminutive detective would have held his breath when witnessing such a tense situation.

The whole thing had started about ten seconds ago. Someone made a trivial comment, which upset the other party. That led to vicious insults, which turned into a fistfight. No, a “fight” wasn't the right way of putting it. The other three male students lay on the floor, writhing in pain. A red-haired boy stood over them, looking down in victory. It was an entirely one-sided ordeal.

His right fist was covered in blood from the students he'd pummeled. This was the first brawl I'd ever witnessed. In elementary school I saw boys quarrel with each other in class, pulling clothes and pinching arms. This was different, though. I could feel the tension in the air.

Though I was terrified, I began capturing the scene with my camera. The shutter didn't make a sound. After taking the pictures, I asked myself what I was doing. I couldn't think clearly in my panicked state. I tried to quickly get away. However, my brain no longer seemed to function properly. My legs didn't obey my command to move, like I was paralyzed.

“He he, so. Do you really think that this is the end of it, Sudou?”

Despite being barely able to move, one of the male students on the ground tried to taunt Sudou.

“Do you wanna make me laugh? You're in the sorriest state possible. You want to go for another round, huh? Next time I won't hold back.”

Sudou-kun grabbed the beaten boy's collar, and brought him closer. They were eye-to-eye now, only a few centimeters apart. Sudou looked as though he was going to kill and then devour his opponent, which was so overwhelming that the defeated boy looked away.

“Are you scared? Did you really think you’d beat me if you had more people?”

Sudou-kun snorted, dropped the student, picked up his bag, and then turned and walked away as if the defeated three completely disinterested him. My heart rate skyrocketed. Well, that was natural. Sudou-kun was headed for my hiding spot. My potential escape routes from this building were limited.

I had the idea to turn back down the staircase I’d used to come up here. However, I still couldn’t move, and my window of opportunity was closing. I’d heard that that when someone was involved in a crisis, his or her body would lock up, exactly like what was happening now.

“What a waste of time. Tiring me out after practice. Give me a break,” Sudou-kun said.

The distance between us was closing. He was only a few short meters away.

“You’re the one who’s going to regret this later, Sudou.”

The boy’s words stopped Sudou-kun in his tracks.

“Nothing’s more pathetic than a sore loser. No matter how many times you come at me, you won’t win.”

He wasn’t bluffing. He clearly had the confidence to back up what he said. After all, Sudou-kun had emerged victorious and unscathed from a three-on-one fight.

Tomorrow was the first of July, but given how much I was sweating you’d think summer was already here. I remained completely still in my hiding place. Sweat poured down the nape of my neck. I decided to leave calmly, quietly, and without panicking. I’d hate it if someone were to spot me and involve me in this mess. If that happened, it would cast a dark cloud over my otherwise peaceful school life.

I left the scene quickly and carefully.

“Is someone there?”

Sudou-kun, sensing my movement, looked to where I’d been mere moments before. However, I’d successfully escaped by a hair’s breadth. If I’d lagged a mere two seconds, he probably would’ve seen me.

2.1

Mornings in Class D were always lively, because most of the students were far from studious. Today they were being even more raucous than usual. The reason was obvious. We were about to finally get points for the first time since we'd come to this school.

My school, the “Tokyo Metropolitan Advanced Nurturing High School,” has adopted an unprecedented system known as the S-Point System. I'll explain that in a bit.

I took out my school-provided cell phone, launched the pre-installed school app, and logged in using my student ID and password. I then selected the option “Balance Inquiry” from the menu. From here, you could do many things. You could check your current personal balance, or you could see how many collective points the class had. There was also a function that enabled you to send points to another student.

There were two types of points listed. One of them was marked with a “cl” at the end, which was short for “class.” These were also referred to as “class points”—not points that an individual student possessed, but rather, points that the class had accumulated together. Class D had had zero class points since June. No points at all. The other points were marked with a “pr” at the end, which stood for “private.” These were our individual points.

On the first day of every month, they multiplied the cl points, or class points, by 100, then deposited that amount into our private point accounts. We used these private points to purchase daily necessities, meals, even electrical appliances. At this school, points are currency. They are very important.

If you didn't have any private points, you were forced to live day-to-day without spending money. You couldn't use real currency anywhere on campus. Because Class D was sitting at zero points, we hadn't received any private points for the month, and thus had to get by without cash.

When we first started here, we had 1000 class points.

If we had kept those points, we would have received 100,000-yen worth of points each month. Unfortunately, our class points fluctuated every

day. Many things caused a reduction in points, like talking in class or getting a low score on a test. As a result, Class D had zero points when May came around. Things had continued in that vein until now, July 1.

In addition to determining our monthly allowance, the class points were used to measure our class's merit. The classes were ordered by class points, in descending order from A through D. So in the event that Class D managed to get enough points to surpass Class C, our class would probably be promoted from D to C for the next month. Moreover, should we finally manage to get all the way up to Class A, then we'd have the chance to attend the college of our choice, or to get the job we wanted.

When I first heard about this system, I thought it'd be important to accumulate as many class points as possible. Private points would grant us only personal satisfaction. However, my perspective changed when I bought a point for the midterm test.

I'd been able to purchase a point for Sudou on that recent test. If I hadn't, he'd have just barely failed. When I realized that the school would allow me to purchase exam points, I understood that our homeroom teacher, Chabashira-sensei, hadn't been kidding when she told us, "At this school, you can buy anything with your points."

Ergo, holding onto private points meant that it was possible to favorably change your situation. Upon further consideration, you could likely purchase more than just test points.

"Good morning, everyone. You all seem more restless than usual today."

Chabashira-sensei strode into the classroom as the homeroom bell rang.

"Sae-chan-sensei! Do we have zero points again this month?! When I checked this morning, I didn't see a single point deposited into my account!"

"Oh, so that's why you're all so restless?"

"We worked ourselves half to death this past month! We passed the midterm, so why are we still at zero points?! No one's been late or absent, and no one's talked during class, either!"

"Don't jump to conclusions. Listen to what I have to say first. You're correct, Ike. You have all worked harder than ever before. I recognize that.

Naturally, the school understands full well how you all feel.”

After being admonished by the teacher, Ike shut his mouth and sat back down.

“Well then. Without further ado, here are this month’s point totals.”

She put a paper up on the board that listed the point values, starting with Class A at the top. Excluding Class D, all of the other classes had nearly 100 more points than last month. Class A now sat at 1004 points, slightly above where everyone had started when we were admitted.

“This isn’t good. Could they have figured out a way to increase their point total?!”

My neighbor, Horikita Suzune, appeared solely focused on the other classes. However, Ike and most of the other Class D students didn’t care much about the other classes’ points. The important question for them was whether we had received more class points. That was it.

Written next to Class D was our point total: 87 points.

“Huh? Wait, 87? Does that mean we actually went up? Yahoo!”

Ike excitedly jumped up and down the instant he saw our score.

“It’s too early to celebrate. All the other classes saw a similar increase in their points. We didn’t close the distance at all. This might just be a reward first-year students receive for getting through the midterm. Every class seems to have gotten at least 100 points.”

“So that’s what happened. I thought it odd that we’d been awarded points so quickly.”

Horikita, who hoped to reach Class A, didn’t appear pleased with the result. She wasn’t smiling.

“Are you disappointed because the gap between the classes has widened, Horikita?” I asked.

“No, that’s not it. We managed to get something this time, after all.”

“Get something? Get what?” asked Ike, now standing.

Horikita, after attracting everyone’s attention, fell back into silence. It was as if she didn’t wish to provide an answer. The class leader, Hirata Yousuke, answered for her.

“I believe that Horikita-san is referring to the deductions we incurred throughout April and May. In other words, we didn’t see a reduction in points for talking in class or being late.”

The sharp-witted Hirata hadn’t missed a beat. Splendid.

“Ah, is that so? I suppose that even if we got 100 points, a lot of deductions would’ve brought us down to zero.” Ike, after this simple explanation, raised his arms in victory. “Wait. But then, why didn’t we get any points?”

He lobbed his original question again at Chabashira-sensei. It was indeed strange that we hadn’t received 8700 private points in our accounts.

“Well, this time there was a little trouble. The first-year students’ point distribution has been delayed. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to wait a bit longer,” she said.

“Huh? Seriously? If this is the school’s fault, then shouldn’t we get some kind of bonus as compensation?”

The students grumbled in discontent. Once they found out that they would be getting their points, their attitudes had changed dramatically. There was a significant difference between 87 points and no points.

“Don’t blame me. This was the school’s decision, there’s nothing I can do about it. Once the trouble has been resolved, you’ll receive your points. If there are still points left, that is.”

There was deeper meaning behind Chabashira-sensei’s words.

2.2

Once lunchtime came around, everyone went to eat. Lately, I've come to believe that dining with friends is actually the most difficult aspect of student life. Take Kushida Kikyou, for example. She's extremely popular and has many friends, both girls and boys. She gets in-person invitations, along with constant invites over the phone and through email. Even though she's unable to respond to everyone and sometimes has to turn people down, when she eats with friends she appears to have a real life.

On the other hand, you've got people like Ike and Yamauchi, who aren't very popular with girls. They eat with their group of guy friends, including Sudou and Hondou, almost every day.

Meanwhile, I don't really belong anywhere.

I'd say I'm friends with Kushida. I'm friends with Ike and Yamauchi, too. Though I eat with them on occasion, I wouldn't say it's a frequent occurrence. Generally speaking, it's the kind of relationship where the other party asks, "Want to have lunch?" or "Are you free after class?"

I didn't really mind near the start of the school year. Before I'd made any friends, it was only natural that I would be alone. However, now I was experiencing a strange phenomenon: I had friends, yet I was still on my own. It was an uncomfortable experience.

If I happened to be absent on a day when we formed groups for a school trip, I'd possibly end up left out. Did they all consider me a low-tier friend? Or was our friendship all in my head? Those were my thoughts.

Nervous and anxious, I unintentionally looked at Ike and the others. *I'm over here, guys. It's okay for you to invite me.* My glances were filled with selfishness and anticipation. I was flooded by feelings of self-loathing. Reminding myself that I should know when to give up, I averted my gaze. Pathetic scenes like this played out daily.

"You're still not used to it. You're as pathetic as ever, Ayanokouji-kun."

My neighbor shot me a somewhat cold look.

“You seem completely used to solitude,” I replied.

“I’m quite fine, thank you.”

I meant to sound sarcastic, but Horikita took it as sincere. The majority of our classmates had already formed their own groups, but a few students were still all alone. That offered some relief. Horikita wasn’t the only loner; Kouenji spent most of his time alone, too. On first starting here, he’d enjoyed the company of girls from other classes and grade levels. However, once he ran low on points, he began to spend most of his time in the classroom.

He was the sole heir to the Kouenji conglomerate group, one of the largest corporations in Japan. He didn’t love solitude, but rather, loved himself and cared little for others. I respected that he didn’t seem bothered at all by being alone. He was currently completely lost in examining his face in a hand mirror, his daily routine.

Aside from him, there was a quiet girl with glasses. At one time Ike had made a ruckus about how large her breasts were, but because she was considered plain, everyone quickly lost interest. She was always alone, and I’d never seen her talk to anyone. Just the other day, she’d been eating by herself, hunched over her bento box. She was one of the few students who made her own lunches.

Just then, my neighbor took a bento box from her bag and opened it. Lately, Horikita had been making her own lunches rather than going to the cafeteria, too.

“Doesn’t it cost quite a bit and take a lot of effort to make your own lunch?” I asked.

Although they weren’t exactly high quality, the free meals offered in the school cafeteria were a form of relief for students who’d used up all of their points. There was no merit in a homemade lunch, which consumed time and your own points to make.

“I’m not sure about that. The school supermarket provides free ingredients, you know.”

“Wait, so you made this with free stuff?”

Horikita simply opened her bento in response. It didn’t have much in the way of meat or fried foods, but it looked tasty.

“Don’t tell me. Not only are you a bright scholar, you’re an accomplished cook as well? That doesn’t seem to fit your personality.”

“Anyone can cook by looking up a recipe in a book or on the Internet. Our dorms come equipped with all of the necessary tools, as well.”

Horikita didn’t waste any more words trying to impress upon me how much of a genius she was. She simply took out her chopsticks. I guess it all seemed so obvious to her.

“But why did you decide to go through the trouble of making your own lunch?” I asked.

“The cafeteria is noisy. It’s much more relaxing to eat here, wouldn’t you say?”

Toward the start of the year, many of the students had gone to the cafeteria to buy bread or lunches, but facing a shortage of points an overwhelming number of students got the free meal set. Looking around, I could see that only a few students remained in the classroom.

Was this Horikita’s preferred environment? One where Ike and the others weren’t around?

“Do I already miss riding the big cafeteria-bound wave of students?”

“You’re always staring out at the ocean, but you don’t have a surfboard. You lack even the determination to ride the wave, don’t you? And you talk about missing it? You’re awfully full of yourself.”

I wished I had a comeback for that, but I couldn’t argue. I just wanted her to cut me a break.

2.3

Unlike lunch, my time after class felt surprisingly pleasant, since I didn't have to worry about interacting with anyone. Even if I went straight back to the dorms, I didn't stand out at all since several other students did that, too. There was some value in being able to vanish like a ninja into a crowd. If I hung toward the back of some group of friends, I could pretend I was one of them.

"How pitiful."

I was pretty pleased with myself for being able to so skillfully pretend that I had friends, but there really wasn't anyone at this school who cared about my pretense in the first place.

"Sudou. I have to talk to you about something. Come to the faculty room," Chabashira-sensei called out to Sudou, who was trying to beat a hasty retreat from the classroom.

"Huh? What do you want with me? I've got basketball practice now." Sudou languidly opened up his bag to show off the sports uniform inside.

"I've already spoken with the advisor. You don't have to come with me if you don't want to, but you *will* face the consequences later."

Chabashira-sensei's threatening words set Sudou a little on edge.

"What? Will this be over quickly?"

"That all depends on you. The longer you stand there, the more time you waste."

It seemed as though he had no choice but to go with her. Sudou clicked his tongue, and followed Chabashira-sensei out of the classroom.

"I thought that he might have changed, but I guess Sudou's the same as ever. Wouldn't it have been better if he just got kicked out?"

I didn't know who was talking, but I could hear some people in our class mumbling to themselves. I'd thought the midterm had united our class as a group, but it must have been my imagination. It was a shame.

"Do you think so, too? That it would have been better if Sudou-kun

were expelled?” While she spoke, Horikita started putting her textbooks in her bag. There probably weren’t that many students who took their textbooks with them to class every single day. Sometimes I thought she was too serious.

“I don’t really think so. What about you, Horikita? You were the only person who gave Sudou a helping hand.”

“Hmm. Well, we still don’t know whether our points would go up as a class, really,” she replied, disinterested.

When Sudou had faced expulsion during the midterm, Horikita had helped him by purposefully lowering her own score and spending her own points to buy him a passing grade. I’d never imagined her capable of doing something like that.

We got up from our seats at the same time, and walked out of the classroom together. We occasionally went back to the dorms together, though I couldn’t remember when that ritual had started. Since we didn’t have lunch together or just casually hang out, I found it odd. Then again, we had the same path back to the dormitory. That was probably why we walked together.

“I’m a little worried about what Chabashira-sensei said this morning,” Horikita said.

“About our points being delayed?”

“Yes. She said that there was trouble, but did she mean that it was a problem for the school, or a problem for us, the students? If it’s the latter, then...”

“You’re overthinking things. We haven’t caused any real problems lately. She even said so herself. I doubt Class D would be the only ones not to get any points. It’s simply the school having an issue.”

Even if there was a cause for concern, even if only the first-year students had had their payments delayed, Class D probably wasn’t the issue. Probably.

“I hope that’s the case. Trouble directly affects our points.”

Horikita spent every single day thinking about how to increase our points. She wasn’t concerned with private points, of course, but class points. She wanted to get up to Class A. I wouldn’t say that it was impossible, but right now it was a very long shot.

However, we still had hope. If Horikita did discover a reliable method for increasing our points, that would be a huge boon for Class D. Furthermore, our classmates would come to place more trust in Horikita, and she'd make friends. It was a win-win situation.

"That reminds me. You should join in the chat now and again. You're the only one who hasn't caught up in a long time."

I took out my phone and launched the group chat app. We'd invited Horikita to join after the midterm exam. Kushida had doubted whether Horikita would actually participate, since she hated talking with others. Despite the attempts at friendship, Horikita hadn't participated at all.

"I'm not interested in the slightest. Also, I keep my notifications turned off."

"Is that right?"

Well, apparently she hadn't intended to participate in the first place. She probably didn't delete the app because it would send a notification to Kushida and the rest of the group if she did. Horikita was free to decide for herself whether she would participate, so I didn't press the matter any further. I wasn't really qualified to judge, anyway.

"You've been quite talkative lately, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Really? I thought I've always been like this."

"It's a slight difference, but you've changed."

Although I hadn't intended to change, I probably had undergone a slight transformation since starting here. Especially with how I got along with Horikita... Well, I wouldn't say that we got along, but I didn't really feel uncomfortable around her. If she were another girl, I probably wouldn't have been able to converse normally. I'd have gotten nervous and fidgety.

That was why I only talked with people to whom I was close. More than anything else, though, I was grateful for a relationship where being silent didn't worsen the mood.

"Did something make you change?"

"I wonder. Well, if I had to think of a reason, I guess I got used to attending school, and then I made some friends. Also, Kushida was probably a big influence."

When I was only around the guys, sometimes we barely talked, or didn't talk at all. When Kushida was around, people were always talking, and the collective mood brightened.

"You seem to be getting along quite well with Kushida-san. Aren't you bothered, especially knowing about her other side?"

"I admit I found it shocking when she said that she hated you, Horikita. But I think it's only natural that everyone has people they like and people they hate. There's no point being concerned about it. I mean, you still pretend to get along well with Kushida-san even though she said she hates you, right?"

"Hmm. Well, you may have a point there. It's true that I hate you, too, Ayanokouji-kun, yet I talk to you normally. I don't really mind, then."

"Hey..."

What the heck? It really hurt when she said it straight out like that.

"That's what I'm getting at. If someone says that they hate another person, it's fine. But if someone says that they hate *you*, don't you feel a little bad?" she asked.

"Were you testing me?"

Horikita started combing her hair in a way that looked rather deliberate. "I don't have any intention of getting in her way, but Kushida-san and I are like oil and water. I think it's better not to associate with her."

In other words, she probably wouldn't join a group chat with Kushida in it.

"Why does she even hate you in the first place?" I asked.

They hadn't had much contact since school began. So when had she started hating Horikita? I mean, Kushida said that it was her goal to get along with everyone in class.

"Who knows? She probably doesn't know that much about me."

That might have been the case. But even so, I sensed that there was something between Kushida and Horikita.

"If you're that curious, why don't you ask her yourself? Directly?" Horikita asked.

That was impossible. Kushida Kikyou was normally a sweet, angelic girl, but I had glimpsed a different side to her. It was difficult to even imagine when you saw her gentle smile or heard her pleasant tone, but I recalled the vicious comments she'd spat out. Horikita probably didn't know about that.

"No need. I'm fine with the Kushida we have now," I said.

"What you just said was really disgusting, you know that?"

"Yeah."

Even though I'd spoken the words, I *did* feel disgusted with myself.

2.4

After a nice dinner in the dorm cafeteria, I headed back to my room. There, I took out my phone and checked my remaining balance. My account total was displayed on the screen. I saw that I had 8,320 private points. It hadn't changed since this morning. Considering that we'd started the school year with 100,000 points, this was an incredibly low amount. I had nearly bankrupted myself just to buy the point Sudou needed to pass.

"It would be pretty great if we got those 87 points," I muttered.

Converted, the points came to roughly 8700 yen. Although that wasn't a giant improvement, it was still big bucks.

As I was playing around on my phone, my door suddenly swung open.

"Save me, Ayanokouji!" Sudou stood there, his face beet red.

"Why're you here? Actually, forget that – how did you even get in?"

I'd locked my door when I got back to my room. I hadn't forgotten, because I made it a habit. Had Sudou smashed through the wall or something? Just to be sure, I checked my door to see that it wasn't broken. It looked completely fine.

"This the room where our group meets, isn't it? Ike and the rest of us made duplicate keys. Didn't you know that? Everyone else in the group has a key, too."

He spun the keycard around in his hand.

"I learned this extremely important fact just now," I grumbled. It seemed my room was no longer safe. People could invade whenever they pleased.

"Anyway, forget about that right now. I'm in serious trouble! You have to help me!" he cried.

"No, I can't forget about it. Hand over the key."

"Huh? Why? I bought this with my own points. It's mine."

What an illogical argument. Even if you're ignorant of committing a crime, it's still a crime. Friendship doesn't mean automatically allowing

people to do whatever they want.

“If you need advice or you’re worried about something, why not ask Ike or Yamauchi?”

“I can’t ask them. They’re stupid.”

Sudou slid to the floor with a thud.

“Buy some carpet, will ya? My butt hurts,” he muttered.

I had no points to waste on interior design. Even though my room had seemingly been designated as our group’s meeting spot, we hadn’t gotten together once since the party. Even if I went out and bought a carpet, I’d have been the only one sitting on it. Just imagining that was surreal.

As I stood up to make some tea, the doorbell rang. Kushida, the Madonna of Class D, poked her head through the entrance. She looked as cute as ever. She saw Sudou, who was still sitting on my floor.

“Oh, Sudou-kun’s already here,” she said.

“Hey, Kushida, I want to ask you something. Do you perhaps have a duplicate key to my room, too?”

“Yeah, I do. That’s so we can meet up here... Wait, did you not know about that, Ayanokouji-kun?”

She took a key card from her bag and showed it to me. I didn’t spot any differences between her key and mine. They were exactly the same. Apparently Kushida thought I’d given permission to make these keys.

“Umm, well...should I return it to you?”

She apologetically handed over her key.

“No, it’s okay. There’s no point if you’re the only one who returns a key. Sudou doesn’t seem to want to hand his over.”

Wasn’t it fine for Kushida to have a key, anyway? I suppose that in the delusional part of my brain, giving her a key made it feel like she was my girlfriend. Men certainly are devious creatures.

“Since Kushida came, too, can we move on to the topic at hand?” Sudou asked.

“All right, I guess there’s no getting around it. So, what do you need to

talk about?”

It wasn't like I could bluntly turn the two of them away. Sudou began talking slowly, wearing a meek expression.

“You know how our homeroom teacher called me today? Well, it's... Uh... The truth is...I may be suspended. For a long time, actually.”

“S-suspended?”

That was unexpected. Compared to how he'd acted at the start of the year, Sudou had been rather well behaved lately. He didn't sleep in class or talk during lectures, and he was doing well in his club activities.

“Did you insult Chabashira-sensei, by any chance?” I asked.

Sudou had been upset when Chabashira-sensei stopped him from going to basketball practice. With that in mind, he might've said something reckless.

“That's not it.”

“Then what? Did you grab her by the collar and threaten to kill her or something?”

“That's not it, either.”

Another denial. I hadn't expected that.

“It's probably worse than you're thinking...”

My first two guesses had been pretty serious, so if it was something worse, then...

“Oh, I got it, Ayanokouji-kun. He viciously beat Chabashira-sensei and then he spit on her!” Kushida cried.

“That's horrible. I mean, your wild ideas are way too awful, Kushida!”

“Ha ha, I'm only joking! Sudou-kun wouldn't go that far.”

Even though I expected Sudou to immediately deny what she said, he seemed shocked by Kushida's joke. That was proof that something really was wrong.

“What happened?” I asked.

“To tell you the truth, I beat up some kids from Class C yesterday.

Then, I got suspended. The suspension is probably my punishment.”

Kushida was also shocked by Sudou’s words. She shot me a look. I couldn’t immediately process the fact that Sudou had gotten himself into trouble again.

“You beat them up? So, uh, why did you do that?” I asked.

“Just so you know, it wasn’t my fault, okay? The jerks in Class C started it and tried to pick a fight with me. I just responded to the situation and turned the tables on them. Then they said that I started the fight. They’re a bunch of liars.”

Sudou still hadn’t quite collected his thoughts. While I understood the gist of what he was saying, I still didn’t know the fight’s details or how it started.

“Just wait a minute, Sudou-kun. Can you please start over, and go a bit more slowly?” Kushida encouraged him to calm down and tried to get him to tell us the story.

“Sorry, I guess I just kind of skipped to the end and left a lot out.”

Sudou took a deep breath and started over.

“I was talking with the club advisor about being a regular for the summer tournament.”

I’d heard that Sudou was good at basketball, but I hadn’t expected him to become a regular already.

“A regular player? That’s amazing, Sudou-kun! Congratulations!”

“Well, nothing’s set in stone yet. It’s just a possibility for now.”

“Still, that’s amazing. We’ve only just started school.”

“Yeah, I suppose. Actually, I was the only first-year student nominated to be a regular player. Still, it’s not like it’s definite. Anyway, when I was on my way back to the dorm, Komiya and Kondou, who’re in the basketball club with me, called me over to the special building. They said they wanted to talk to me about something. I could’ve just ignored them, but I mean, I occasionally talk to those two guys during basketball. I thought it’d be better to just hear them out. So of course, I went to meet with them, right? Then, there was this Ishizaki guy there, waiting for me. He’s Komiya and Kondou’s

friend. They said that they couldn't stand that someone like me from Class D had been chosen as a regular. They threatened me, and said to quit basketball or there'd be a lot of pain in my future. I refused to quit, I beat them up, and now I'm here."

It was a rather hurried explanation, but I got the gist. Apparently Sudou was satisfied with his story.

"So then they painted you as the bad guy, Sudou-kun."

Sudou-kun nodded, an exasperated look still on his face. So the students in Class C had started the whole thing, and when their attempt to threaten Sudou had failed, they'd resorted to force. In other words, an act of violence. However, Sudou was an experienced fighter, so he'd managed to completely overwhelm them without breaking a sweat. Of course, they'd been injured. Since there was no evidence of what had happened, they'd lied the next day and told school officials that Sudou had beaten them up for no reason.

"If Class C started this, then Sudou-kun isn't at fault."

"Right? I seriously don't get this. I can't believe that teacher, either!"

"We should tell Chabashira-sensei tomorrow. We should tell her it wasn't Sudou-kun's fault," Kushida said.

Things probably wouldn't be so simple. Sudou must have already told the school what he'd just told us. But because he lacked clear evidence to support his claim, the school might still decide to punish him.

"Sudou, what did the school say when they heard what happened?"

"They said they would give me until next Tuesday to come up with proof. If I can't do that, they'll say I'm at fault and I'll be suspended until summer. On top of that, the whole class will lose points, too."

Apparently the school had decided to wait for evidence. However, Sudou appeared more worried about his basketball dreams than his suspension, or our class's loss of points. I guess he couldn't bear the thought of his youth being squandered.

"What should I do?"

"Sudou-kun, you didn't lie to the teacher, did you? I mean, it seems strange. They didn't believe you even though you said you didn't do anything

wrong. Right?”

I felt bad for Kushida. She looked to me for affirmation, but I couldn't respond the way she wanted.

“Well, I wonder about that. I don't think it's quite that simple.”

“What do you mean, you wonder? You're not doubting me, are you?”

“Well, the school doesn't trust you, right? It wouldn't be that odd for someone in your class, like Kushida, for instance, to support you even if you're lying. After all, they don't want their points to go down.”

“Well...you might be right about that, I suppose.”

Our current troubles wouldn't be resolved merely by discovering who'd started it. Perhaps those three students might face a one-week suspension themselves, as punishment. Those three guys had claimed they were beaten up. Without ironclad proof that Sudou wasn't at fault, he would definitely be punished. That meant only one thing.

“Even if the other party is at fault, it's still highly likely that Sudou will take some of the blame.”

“Huh? Why? It was legitimate self-defense, wasn't it? Huh?!”

Sudou, clearly unable to understand, smacked the table. Kushida's shoulders stiffened in response.

“I'm sorry, I just got a little mad.” After seeing Kushida's frightened expression, Sudou sheepishly apologized.

“But...why would Sudou-kun still take some of the blame?”

“Sudou hit them, but they didn't hit Sudou. I think that's a big part of it. In such a case, claiming it as legitimate self-defense is difficult. Had they come at you with a knife or a metal bat, I think things would have been quite different. Self-defense means that you have the right to defend yourself against sudden, dangerous attacks made against your person. So, I don't think we can really claim that this was self-defense.”

How much consideration would be given in this situation?

“I-I don't understand, though. I was up against three people. Three! That seems plenty dangerous.”

They'd likely take the number of people into account, but this was a

delicate case. If the school were willing to place more weight on the number of people who'd attacked, Sudou could be declared innocent. However, it was dangerous to be optimistic.

"I think the school might have offered an extension because they found it difficult to make a judgment at this time."

As for the current proof, the key was in the injuries Sudou had given those three other students.

"I guess that their plan is to severely punish Sudou for punching them, huh?" Kushida said.

"Whoever reported it first has the advantage. The victim's testimony can work as evidence."

"I still don't get it. I'm the victim here! Being suspended isn't some kind of joke! If I'm punished for this, forget being a regular player. I won't even be able to play in the tournament!"

Those Class C students had purposefully allowed Sudou to beat them up in order to crush him. They wanted to destroy Sudou's chances of becoming a regular, even if that meant they might face some restrictions of their own. That was what I imagined their plan to be, anyway.

"Let's just come out and ask those three Class C students to be honest. If they feel like what they did was wrong, then surely they'd feel guilty about it. Right?"

"Those guys aren't idiots. They won't be honest. Goddamn it, I won't ever forgive them! Those damn nobodies!"

Sudou picked up a ballpoint pen from the table and, with a loud crack, snapped it in two. I understood that his blood was boiling, but that was my pen...

"If trying to explain the situation won't work, then we'll need to find ironclad proof," I said.

"Yeah. It would be nice if there was evidence that proved Sudou-kun wasn't to blame."

That'd be *very* nice, because then our suffering would end. However, Sudou didn't deny anything. He looked like he was deep in thought.

“There might be something, though. This might just be a misunderstanding on my part, but when I was fighting those guys I felt something...odd. Like someone was nearby, watching me.”

He didn't sound entirely confident.

“So there might be an eyewitness?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think so. I don't have proof anyone was there, though.”

An eyewitness. Hmm. If someone had seen everything, then that'd be great news for us. However, depending on how things went, it might drive Sudou further into a corner. For example, if the witness only saw the aftermath of their fight, that might spell Sudou's end.

“What should I do?” he asked.

Sudou buried his head in his hand. Kushida broke the heavy silence.

“There are two ways we can prove your innocence, Sudou-kun. The first way is to simply get those boys in Class C to admit that they lied. Since you weren't at fault, it's probably best to get them to acknowledge that.”

That was absurdly idealistic.

“Like I already said, that's impossible. They won't admit they lied.”

Like Sudou said, if they confessed to lying just to get someone else in trouble, they'd probably end up getting suspended themselves.

“The other idea is to find the eyewitness you talked about, Sudou-kun. If someone happened to see the fight, then we should be able to get to the heart of the matter.”

Well, that was probably our only realistic plan.

“So, how do you intend to look for this eyewitness?”

“Asking people one by one? Or we could simply address each class as a whole,” Kushida said.

“It would be great if someone just stepped forward, but...”

Since we'd been talking for quite some time, I started rummaging through the cupboard. I took out the instant coffee and tea packets that I'd bought at the school convenience store. Sudou wasn't really a fan of coffee, though. After preparing a kettle of hot water, I put everything on the table.

“This might sound kind of shameless, but...can you guys not tell anyone about this?” Sudou asked sheepishly. He took a cup and started blowing on it to cool it off.

“H-huh? You don’t want us to tell anyone?” Kushida asked.

“If word gets out, it’ll definitely get around to the basketball team. I don’t want that to happen. You understand, right?”

“Sudou, even then, I—”

“Please understand, Ayanokouji. If I can’t play basketball, I have nothing,” Sudou pleaded, placing his hands on my shoulders.

Even if word didn’t get out, this wasn’t going to stay contained. If people found out that Sudou had used violence, they most likely wouldn’t accept him on the team.

“But won’t the students in Class C talk about how Sudou-kun was violent? I mean, that would work in their favor, I’d think.”

That’s exactly what I was thinking. It wouldn’t be strange for them to talk about it amongst themselves, since that helped them and would hurt us. Sudou buried his head in his hands once again, as if to say “Seriously?!”

“What if word already got out?”

“No, at this stage it’s probably only being discussed by the school and the people involved.”

“Why do you think that?” Sudou asked.

“If those guys in Class C had intended to spread rumors, we probably would’ve heard about it already.”

Representatives from the school had received a report and called Sudou in after class. There hadn’t been any word about the incident this afternoon. At the very least, word probably hadn’t spread much.

“So you think we’re safe for now?”

How long would that last, though? Even if the school issued a gag order, word would eventually manage to get out. Before long, it’d spread. Right now, the only thing I could say with certainty was—

“Sudou-kun, I think it would be better if you kept your distance,” Kushida said.

She seemed to understand everything.

“Yeah. It wouldn’t be good if the accused tried anything,” I replied, agreeing with Kushida.

“But, if I dump this on you guys—”

“I don’t think it’s being dumped on us. We want you to rely on us, Sudou-kun. I don’t know how much we can do, but we’ll try our best. Okay?” Kushida said.

“All right. I know this is a bother for you guys, but I’ll leave it to you.”

He seemed to understand that he’d only complicate things by getting involved.

“Well, we’ll head back to our rooms. I’m sorry for barging in here.”

“Don’t worry about it. I just think it’s weird that you made duplicate keys.”

Sudou slid the key back into his pocket; he wasn’t going to return it. Maybe I should put a chain lock on my door.

“See you tomorrow, Kushida.”

“Yeah, bye-bye, Sudou-kun.”

Sudou-kun left with a somewhat sad look on his face. His room was only a few doors down.

“Well. Aren’t you heading back, Kushida?” I asked.

“I have a few things I wanted to talk to you about, Ayanokouji-kun. You didn’t seem very enthusiastic about helping Sudou-kun.”

As Kushida looked up at me with uneasy eyes, I had the sudden urge to embrace her. I stretched my back out and tried to shake those thoughts.

“There’s just not much I can do. I mean, I can only really respond to Sudou’s story. If it were Horikita or Hirata here, they’d probably be able to give expert advice.”

“Maybe, but Sudou-kun came to you, Ayanokouji-kun. He came to you before Horikita-san, Hirata-kun, or even Ike-kun.”

“I don’t know if I should be happy about that or not.”

“Hmm.”

For an instant, Kushida’s glare turned icy, which perplexed me. I remembered that Kushida once directly told me that she hated me. She always wore a gentle smile, so I occasionally forgot about that. But I might get burned if I forgot about it entirely.

“I think it might be better if you made more effort to blend in, Ayanokouji-kun,” she said.

“I’m trying, more or less. I just haven’t been able to. Like right now, I didn’t have the guts to promise that I’d help.”

She didn’t share my anxiety about eating alone during lunchtime. Still, Kushida probably understood how I felt.

“Kushida, you’re going to help, aren’t you?”

“Of course. We’re friends. So what will you do, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Remember when I said it’d be better to talk with Horikita or Hirata? Well, Sudou hates Hirata, so that makes Horikita the obvious choice.”

Though I doubted even Horikita could come up with a good enough plan to resolve this issue.

“Do you think Horikita-san will help us?”

“Don’t know. We’ll have to ask and find out. I don’t think she’ll just quietly stand by and watch as Class D collapses. Probably.”

I lacked conviction. After all, this was Horikita we were talking about.

“I know that you’re trying to dodge the question, but you’ll help, too. Won’t you, Ayanokouji-kun?”

I thought I’d managed to steer the conversation in another direction, but Kushida quickly brought it back.

“Is it okay if I’m useless?”

“You won’t be useless. I’m sure you’ll be useful, somehow.”

She didn’t clearly state *how* I’d be useful, though.

“So what should we do? Sudou-kun said that it wouldn’t help, but I think it’d be good to talk with the three students he fought. To tell you the truth, I’m friends with Komiya-kun and the others. Therefore, it might be

possible to persuade them. Hmm, it may be dangerous, though.”

Kushida couldn't dismiss the idea of a conversation.

“It's risky. Aside from the question of who started the fight, those three reported it to the school. That means they have the upper hand. Also, I just don't think it would work, since they started it.”

Getting them to admit they lied to the school wouldn't be easy. If the school found out, Class C would face a severe penalty. They wouldn't do something so foolish.

“Well then, I guess looking for the eyewitness is our best bet.”

That would probably be just as difficult as persuading those three to tell the truth. Without any details to go on, finding the eyewitness would be next to impossible. Going around asking, “Did you see anything?” would be a waste of time and effort.

No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't come up with any solutions.

Chapter 3: Weak Point

The bad news just kept coming. During homeroom the following morning, as Chabashira-sensei was about to leave, she assaulted us with one of her infamously brief and off-hand announcements.

“I have an announcement for you all. There was a bit of trouble the other day, an incident between the student sitting there, Sudou, and some students from Class C. In short, there was a fight.”

The classroom erupted. Depending on the degree of responsibility that Class C saddled him with, Sudou could face suspension, and we might see a reduction in our class points. Chabashira-sensei laid the whole situation bare for the class. Her face was so devoid of emotion or interest when she spoke that there was a certain serene beauty to it. She inserted no personal bias whatsoever when she addressed the class, and explained the situation from a position of neutrality.

“Umm. So why hasn’t this issue been resolved already?” Hirata asked a rather reasonable question.

“The complaint came from Class C. They claim that the fight was one-sided. However, when we spoke to the accused, Sudou said that their claims were false. He insists that the students Class C called him over and started the fight.”

“It wasn’t my fault! It was self-defense! Self-defense, I tell you!” shouted Sudou as he shouldered his classmates’ icy glares.

“But there’s no evidence of that. Am I wrong?”

“What evidence? I don’t have any.”

“So in other words, we don’t yet know the truth. Therefore, we have put our decision on hold for now. Our response, and the punishment, will come when we find out who was at fault.”

“All I know is that I’m innocent. If anything, I ought to receive a settlement for my trouble.”

“So speaks the accused, but I wouldn’t say that you have a high level of credibility right now. If there is an eyewitness, as Sudou seems to believe, then the situation may change. If anyone here witnessed the fight, please raise your hand.”

Chabashira-sensei continued talking in a robotic, flat voice. No students raised their hands in response to her question.

“Too bad, Sudou. It appears there are no witnesses in this class.”

“Looks that way,” he grumbled.

When Chabashira-sensei cast a doubtful look at Sudou, he glanced downward.

“In order to check for witnesses, every teacher will inform their classes of the details of this incident.”

“Huh?! You’re telling everyone?!”

The school probably had no say in the matter. Because Sudou had insisted it was a false charge and brought up a potential witness, the school had to be sure. For Sudou, who had hoped to hide the situation, none of this was good.

“Damn it!”

Sudou’s plan had already fallen apart.

“Anyway, that is all. We’ll make our final judgment next Tuesday, taking into account any eyewitnesses and evidence. With that, let’s end homeroom for the day.”

Chabashira-sensei left, and Sudou followed right after her. He probably realized that if he stayed in the classroom, he’d lose his temper with someone.

“Man, isn’t Sudou just the worst?” Ike was the first to talk.

“If we lose points because of Sudou, will we be at zero again this month?”

As uproar enveloped the classroom, and things started to get out of hand. If we ended up losing points because of this, Sudou would most likely become the sole target of our class’s frustrations. Naturally, Kushida didn’t want this to happen.

“Everyone, can you please listen to what I have to say?” Kushida stood and tried to silence the commotion.

“What our teacher said seems to be true. Sudou-kun may have been in a fight. However, Sudou-kun was dragged into it.”

“Kushida-chan, what do you mean? Do you believe Sudou?”

Kushida conveyed yesterday’s story to the whole class. She told them how Sudou had been chosen as a candidate to play regularly on the basketball team. She also described how some students in the basketball club were envious of Sudou, and how they’d called Sudou out and threatened him in order to make him leave the team. She also explained that Sudou, acting in self-defense, had punched their lights out.

Most of the class listened to Kushida’s heartfelt words in silence. If Sudou or I had tried to explain the situation in the same manner, we probably wouldn’t have been nearly as effective. However, not everyone in class easily believed the story. Sudou’s typically poor behavior made it difficult to swallow, no matter how reasonable it sounded.

“I’d like to ask you all again. If anyone knows someone who saw what happened, whether it’s someone in class, a friend, or an upperclassman, please tell me. You can contact me at any time. I would sincerely appreciate it.”

Even though she’d basically said the same thing as Chabashira-sensei, the class had a very different response. She had an innate ability to connect with people. Her presence glowed so bright that I could almost feel it.

Instantly, silence enveloped the classroom. The first to speak wasn’t the eyewitness, but Yamauchi.

“Hey, Kushida-chan. I just can’t believe what Sudou said. I think he lied so he could justify what he did. He talked about beating up kids all the time in junior high. He even told us how much fun it was to beat people up.”

After Yamauchi voiced his concerns, the rest of the class murmured their dissatisfaction with Sudou in turn.

“I saw him grab some kid by the collar just because they bumped into each other in the hallway.”

“I saw him cut in line in the cafeteria and lash out when someone tried

to tell him that wasn't okay."

Kushida's appeal for Sudou's innocence didn't seem to have reached anyone. They'd already hung Sudou out to dry, because he was probably going to lose them their hard-earned points.

"I want to believe him."

Hirata, the class hero, uttered those words as he stood in support of Kushida. His appearance was dashing, and he clearly wasn't drunk on the same anti-Sudou Kool-Aid as everyone else.

"If a student in another class were casting doubt on him, I could understand it," Hirata said. "But I think it's wrong to doubt a fellow classmate right away. Shouldn't friends do everything within their power to help someone in need?"

"I agree!"

Karuizawa, heroic Hirata's girlfriend, called out in agreement, brushing her bangs aside with her hand as she spoke.

"If it were a false charge, that'd be a problem, wouldn't it? In any case, you'd feel bad for him if he were innocent, right?"

If Kushida lived by the softness of her heart, then Karuizawa lived by the strength of her will. Perhaps it was because of Kushida and Karuizawa's influence that many of the girls started to express their support.

This was typical of Japanese people. They would follow suit when someone took the lead. Though they probably mocked him in their hearts, they would help Sudou a little bit. Sudou's critics stopped, at least for the time being. Hirata, Kushida, and Karuizawa had attracted the rest of our class's admiration.

"I'll try asking my friends!"

"Well then, I'll try asking the upperclassmen I know in the soccer club!"

"I'll ask around, too."

Starting with those three, we launched our investigation to prove Sudou's innocence. Well, I guessed I didn't have to take a turn. I wouldn't be any good at this, anyway. Better to just leave it to them and fade out quietly.

3.1

“I planned to fade out... But...”

Lunch. For some reason, I’d gotten mixed up with our usual group in the cafeteria. Our group consisted of myself, Kushida, Horikita, Ike, Yamauchi, and Sudou. There was no getting around it. When lunchtime came, Kushida had invited me with a smile. She’d said, “Want to get lunch?” I’d said okay, of course. I mean, I didn’t have any choice in the matter.

“You seem to get yourself into trouble time and time again, Sudou-kun.”

Horikita gave an exasperated sigh. Naturally, we were discussing how to prove Sudou’s innocence.

“Well, guess we don’t have much choice. As your friends, we’ll help you out, Sudou.” Although Ike had been against Sudou in the beginning, his attitude had completely changed. That was definitely because Kushida had appealed to him and asked him to help. Ignorant of Ike’s true feelings on the matter, Sudou still apologized.

“I’m sorry, Horikita. I’ve caused trouble for you again. But it really wasn’t my fault this time. All I did was blow up those Class C jerks’ plans.”

Sudou spoke to Horikita with indifference, almost as if he were describing someone else’s problems.

“Sorry, but I don’t feel like helping you this time.” Horikita flatly refused Sudou’s pleas for help. “For Class D to rise through the ranks, it’s important to recover the class points we lost as quickly as possible. However, we probably won’t get any points now, thanks to you. You hindered those plans.”

“Wait. You might be right about that, but I’m not the one at fault here! Those guys picked a fight with me! What part of that is my fault?”

“You keep focusing on who started the fight, but that’s a trivial detail. Did you never consider that?”

“What’s trivial about it? It makes all the difference! I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Is that so? Well, best of luck to you.”

Horikita picked up her untouched tray and stood.

“So you’re not gonna help? I thought we were friends!”

“Don’t make me laugh. I’ve never once considered you a friend. Nothing makes me more uncomfortable than being around someone who doesn’t recognize his own stupidity. Goodbye.”

Horikita appeared more exasperated than angry. She let out a deep sigh, and left.

“What the hell is her deal?! Goddamn it!”

Unable to direct his rage anywhere else, Sudou slammed his fists on the cafeteria table, spilling a nearby student’s miso soup. The student glared, but when he saw how scary Sudou looked, he remained silent. Yep. I could understand that feeling pretty well.

“I guess it’s just up to us.”

“I knew for sure you’d understand, Yamauchi. I’m really counting on you too, Ayanokouji.”

Apparently I was second to Yamauchi, judging by the “too.” Well, I guess I didn’t find that particularly surprising.

“Even if you ask me to help, you do know that there’s not much I can do, right?”

My self-deprecation was apparently ineffective.

“You’ve been like that since yesterday, Ayanokouji-kun. Won’t you say something, Ike-kun?”

“Well, I...I mean, it’s certainly odd that Ayanokouji thinks he’s not going to be useful. At least him being there is better than not, I guess? Probably?”

Just as expected, Ike couldn’t come up with how I’d be useful. I looked over at Kushida smugly. It was like I was showing off a talentless person’s power.

“This is a little disheartening. I thought that preparing for that test together brought us all a bit closer,” said a disappointed Ike.

I watched Horikita sit down further away, looking slightly irritated.

“I don’t understand Horikita at all. What’s her deal, Ayanokouji? Why is she acting like that?”

I had no idea how to answer. Did they think I was her user manual? I took a huge mouthful of rice to avoid the question.

“It’s pretty weird, though. Horikita wants to get to Class A, right? Saving Sudou-kun means we’d get more points, so why wouldn’t she help?”

“Is it because she hates Sudou? I mean, she just said she didn’t consider him a friend.”

Disliking Sudou probably wasn’t the reason. But everyone seemed to have misunderstood the situation. They thought she wouldn’t help because of personal reasons.

“I don’t really want to think about it, but I guess it might be true.”

“Kushida, Horikita is...”

Unthinking, words started spilling out of my mouth. Kushida looked at me, her interest piqued.

“Horikita-san is...?” she asked.

“Ah. Well, this might not be relevant, but I’d like to say something. I think that Horikita usually speaks in a rather brusque manner. But I think... that you guys misunderstand her.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I think that she wouldn’t help without any reason to do so.”

“Wait, what are you talking about? You keep saying *I think* over and over. Are you just guessing?” Sudou abruptly cut into the conversation. Since Horikita was definitely on his mind, he probably wasn’t too pleased about her rejection. It wasn’t difficult to explain, but how to go about it? Horikita probably realized something when the teacher told us about the incident. This incident had happened for a reason. And the ending that Horikita saw...

Well, the possibility of a happy ending was almost nonexistent. After realizing that, she’d probably been cold towards Sudou on purpose. However, if I told them that now, they’d probably become discouraged. It would only lead to bad things. Since I couldn’t figure out how the discussion would go, I

was hesitant to explain.

Horikita probably hadn't wanted to crush their spirits, so she'd left.

"Well... Yeah, I'm just guessing like you said, Sudou."

"So what? You don't have a reason?"

"Horikita is smart, right? So I think she probably had some idea."

"What idea? To toss me out like the trash?"

"Whoa, hold on. Let's not criticize anyone. It's only natural that Ayanokouji-kun would stick up for Horikita-chan, since they're together all the time. She's important to him, right?"

Ike wore a mischievous, spiteful grin. It was like he was mocking me. Sudou grew increasingly irritated, and clicked his tongue before reaching for his food.

"Well, it'd be great if a witness stepped forward. The teachers are going around and talking to each class about the incident. When they do find someone, things should get settled quickly."

I understood the wishful thinking, but would it really be that easy?

To be honest, we faced a mountainous hurdle. It wasn't unreasonable for Horikita to throw in the towel. Besides, even if there had been a witness, it'd be checkmate for us if that witness happened to come from Class C. It would be natural for a Class C student to hide the truth in order to protect his or her fellow classmates. This school was a hierarchy, after all. It was unlikely that an individual's guilty feelings would outweigh the disadvantages of their class.

Even if the witness came from a different class, the problem would be how much he or she saw. If the eyewitness had seen the whole event from a completely neutral perspective, then that would be a different story. But...

"Ah, sorry. I have to go for a bit. I'm going to try asking my upperclassmen friends if they saw anything."

With that, Kushida rose from her seat.

"You're trying your absolute hardest for someone like Sudou, Kushida-chan. That's so cute." Ike, completely enchanted, remained transfixed on Kushida's backside as she walked away.

“I should seriously confess my feelings for Kushida-chan...” he murmured.

“No way. You seriously think she’ll stoop to your level, Ike?” Yamauchi said.

“I have a better chance than *you*.”

There wasn’t much difference between them.

“If I dated Kushida-chan... Ahhhhhh...”

Ike began to lose himself in fantasies, drooling. He was most likely thinking about rather indecent things.

“Hey. Why are you fantasizing about my Kushida-chan like that?”

“N-no, I’m not...” he said, but he looked love-struck.

“H-hey, what are you fantasizing about?! Spill it!” Apparently Yamauchi couldn’t stand the fact that Ike could do as he pleased in his fantasies.

“What do you mean, what am I fantasizing about? Obviously, I’m thinking about cuddling her. Naked.”

Apparently he was able to envision the scene thanks to the power of male delusions, or something.

“Damn it! I won’t be outdone! I’ve also thought of a few things!”

This wasn’t exactly ethical.

“Stop it. Don’t touch my Kushida-chan with your filthy hands!”

In some ways, I felt a little sorry for Kushida. She was most likely the subject of their nightly fantasies.

“I think the best thing about high school is the girls, after all. I seriously want to get a girlfriend sometime soon. If I get myself a girlfriend by this summer, then I can go to the pool with her! That would be the best!”

“It would be best if Kushida-chan were my girlfriend... It would be the best if she were my girlfriend...”

Yamauchi said it twice. It must’ve been important to him.

“But wait. Since Kushida-chan is so cute, don’t you think she’ll get a boyfriend any day now?”

“Don’t say that, Yamauchi! Besides, it doesn’t look like she has one yet, so we don’t have to worry,” replied Ike with confidence, though it seemed more like he was trying to reassure himself.

“Do you want to know? I bet you both want to know.”

“Know what? What do I want to know, Ike? Tell us.”

Ike whipped out his phone with an air of unavoidable weariness.

“You can track your registered friends’ locations on your school phones.”

Ike searched for Kushida’s present location. Shortly afterward, details about her position were displayed on the screen. A marker appeared on the cafeteria.

“I check regularly, even on the weekends. I pretend to run into her by chance. I do that to make sure she doesn’t have a boyfriend yet.”

He crossed his arms and wore a confident smile. What he was doing sounded just like stalking. Another step forward and it would be appropriate to involve the police.

“Realistically, Kushida-chan is just out of our reach. She wouldn’t stoop to our level. But what if I aimed for one rank below her?”

“Yeah. Well, I couldn’t have an ugly girlfriend.”

“Yeah, when I think about us walking together side-by-side... She’s gotta be at least a 7 outta 10.”

I guess Ike and Yamauchi both really wanted girlfriends. Their fantasies might have been delusional, but they couldn’t give up on their high hopes.

“Ayanokouji, do you want a girlfriend?”

“Yeah, I guess. If it were possible.”

If I had a girlfriend, I probably wouldn’t suffer so much.

“Just to be sure, there’s really nothing between you and Horikita?”
Sudou thrust his chopsticks towards me as he asked that question.

“Nope.”

“Really?”

He pressed again, almost like he didn’t believe me. I shook my head emphatically.

“Okay, fine then. I guess I misunderstood. I thought you were clinging to her too much. That’d be a bother for Horikita.”

I didn’t recall clinging. Especially not to Horikita.

“Are you really okay with Horikita, though? I mean, she’s cute and all, but...she seems kind of boring, you know? I can’t stand someone as dull as her. She wouldn’t want to go to the pool or go out on a date or anything,” Ike said.

“You guys don’t know anything. Horikita is hands down better than Kushida, anyway.” Sudou crossed his arms and nodded, boasting about his personal preferences. “I mean, if it was any other guy, she’d probably turn them down. But if you were her boyfriend, then it’d be okay, right? Then she’d show you a secret side that no one else gets to see.”

“I see... I feel like I can imagine that. So cute.”

Yamauchi glanced at Horikita and got lost in his delusional fantasies.

“But the Horikita of your dreams seems to have tossed you aside, Sudou.”

“Well, I guess so. Damn it! Now I feel all depressed.”

“Well, I don’t really have anything to say. The number of rivals for Kushida-chan just decreased by one.”

Ike was multitasking, keeping a lookout for those 7 out of 10 girls while keeping Kushida as his primary target.

“So Ayanokouji, if nothing’s happening with Horikita, is there anyone you like? I mean, Sudou likes Horikita, and Yamauchi likes Kushida-chan. You gotta take stock of your rival’s targets, after all.”

“Anyone...”

Nobody really came to mind. I tried to seriously think about it for just a little bit. If I had to choose someone, I probably would have picked... Kushida? She was the person I talked to the most, so that was only natural. But knowing that she didn’t like me, I couldn’t really imagine things progressing.

“Nope, no one,” I answered.

However, Ike and Yamauchi looked at me doubtfully.

“Do you really think there’s a guy out there who doesn’t have a crush on a girl?”

“No way. That guy doesn’t exist. Don’t hide the truth from us, Ayanokouji.”

“Unlike you guys, I don’t really know any girls apart from Horikita and Kushida.”

“Well, I guess you’re probably right. I haven’t seen you talk to other girls.”

I found it rather depressing that they were so convinced.

“Let’s introduce you to some girls!” Ike put his arm around my shoulder and spoke with confidence.

“Isn’t it kind of pathetic that you’re trying to introduce me to girls when you don’t have a girlfriend yourself?”

“W-well...yeah.”

“Hey, Sae-chan-sensei said that we’d have a vacation this summer,

right? I'll definitely get myself a girlfriend then. Kushida-chan, if possible. Or some other cute girl I haven't seen yet!"

"Me too, me too! Even if she's the lowest of the low, I'll get myself a girl...and then I'll enjoy that lovey-dovey high school life!"

"When should I confess my feelings to Horikita?"

The three of them freely talked about the objects of their affection.

"We should have a contest to see who can get a girlfriend first. The winner will have to treat everyone to a meal! Sound good?"

I wondered if participating in such a shameless competition would actually make me their friend. It sounded difficult.

"What's up, Ayanokouji? You're not really thinking about skipping out on this contest, are you?" Ike said.

"No, I just wondered why the first person to get a girlfriend has to treat everyone else."

"Well, it's like this. Think of it as sort of an Envy Tax on the guy. Get it?"

"A guy is happy when he has a girlfriend. Since he's happy, he happily treats people to stuff."

Although it was fine for them to get all excited, Sudou's problem still hadn't been resolved.

3.2

After school, the class divided into groups to meet up with people and ask around. However, there weren't that many helping to search for an eyewitness. Hirata and Karuizawa led the Hero & Gal Team, while Kushida led the Beautiful Girl & Entourage Team. They intended to search the campus themselves. Even so, it'd be difficult to get results in such a short span of time.

There were around 400 students in this school. Even if you left out everyone from class 1-D, it wouldn't make a big difference. Finding everyone would still be difficult even if you included break times, lunch, after class, and early morning.

"All right, I'm going to the dorms."

"Are you really heading back? Horikita-san?"

Horikita nodded without hesitation, and promptly left the classroom, just as one would expect. She didn't quail under everyone's gazes, which all expressed variations on "You're leaving?" She would probably grow up to be a fierce woman, the type that leaves social outings without reading the room and concludes meetings exactly on time.

"Well then..."

If Horikita's tactic was to stride out of the classroom with confidence, mine was the opposite. I tried to slip into the shadows.

"Ayanokouji-kun."

I had tried to exit stealthily through the classroom. I'd tried to be swift as a ninja, but had been discovered. Kushida stopped me in my tracks, a slight hint of unease in her voice.

"What? Do you need something?" I asked.

I'm sorry, Kushida. I'm going to steel my heart and refuse your invitation. And then I'll go back to the dorms.

"You will...help us out, won't you?" she asked.

"Of course."

I couldn't refuse. Slightly upturned eyes + pleading = lethal. I couldn't help but feel like Kushida was controlling me. Irresistible. No matter how someone might resolve not to fall asleep, for example, they would still drift away after 24 to 48 hours, tops. Sooner or later, no matter the person's willpower, they'd exhaust themselves. In other words, everyone has their breaking point. It's a human mechanism.

After I was done excusing myself, Kushida made a suggestion.

"I want to get Horikita-san to help us out this time. Can you try asking her again?"

"But she already left."

They'd failed to stop her mere moments before. Was it already time for revenge?

"Yeah. I want to chase after her. If Horikita-san helps, I think she'll make a big difference."

"Well, I can't argue with you there."

"If we take the time to convince her, do you think we'll have a chance?"

If she wanted to try again, I didn't really have a right to stop her. I nodded.

"Ike-kun, Yamauchi-kun, could you two please wait here? We'll be back right away," Kushida said.

"Okay!" the boys chorused.

You certainly couldn't claim those two were friendly with Horikita. Kushida seemed to notice that.

"Let's go."

Kushida took my arm, and we left together. What in the world was this unprecedented feeling of elation? For some reason, I thought I heard Ike and Yamauchi angrily yelling at me, but it must've been my imagination. Heh.

By the time we'd made it to the building's entrance, Horikita was nowhere to be found. I thought she'd probably left. She wasn't the type to stop for anything, so she probably headed straight towards the dorms. I made my way past students putting on their shoes, getting ready to go home. Most

people strolled in groups of two or more as they headed back, but I glimpsed a lone figure walking with confidence. It was Horikita.

“Horikita-san.”

I hesitated, but Horikita responded at once.

“What is it?”

Apparently she hadn’t thought we’d chase after her. She turned, looking surprised.

“I really want you to help us with Sudou’s case. Is that possible?”

“I thought I already declined? A few minutes ago, no less.” Horikita shrugged, as if expressing how idiotic she found us.

“I know you did, but...but, I think this is necessary to reach Class A.”

“Necessary to reach Class A, hmm?”

Horikita looked unconvinced. She didn’t seem to be listening to Kushida.

“You’re free to run about for Sudou-kun’s sake. I’ve no right to stop you. However, if you need help, try someone else. I’m busy,” Horikita said.

“Busy? But everyone else is busy with Sudou’s case right now,” I blurted out, earning a glare from Horikita.

Her eyes seemed to say, *Why are you still talking?*

“I have an important daily routine, so I need my alone time. It’s unpleasant to have that time stolen from me.”

Just the answer I would expect from an unabashed misanthrope. If she’d simply said she didn’t like spending time with other people, that would’ve sounded like an excuse.

“Even if I step in and save him now, he’ll land himself in trouble again. It’s a vicious cycle, isn’t it? You seem to think that Sudou-kun is the victim here, but I think differently.”

“Huh? But *isn’t* Sudou-kun the victim? Besides, it would be bad if he were lying.” Kushida didn’t seem to understand Horikita’s meaning.

“Maybe the Class C students really did start this fight, but Sudou-kun was also one of the perpetrators.”

“W-wait. What do you mean? Wasn’t Sudou-kun dragged into the fight?”

Horikita slowly turned her gaze towards me, her expression saying *good grief*.

No, I didn’t say anything. I averted my eyes as if trying to escape. After a silent moment, Horikita spoke in an exasperated voice.

“Why was he dragged into the fight? This problem will persist until we understand that fundamental question. Got it? I do not wish to help until that question is answered. Since you weren’t able to convince me, why don’t you ask the guy standing next to you? Even though he pretends not to understand what I’m thinking, he probably does.”

Please stop saying that I understand you. Kushida looked at me, unable to hide her confusion. Her expression seemed to ask what I knew. *Come on, Horikita, don’t say anything unnecessary...*

Horikita began to walk off, indicating that the rest was up to me. Kushida seemed to have finally listened to Horikita, and stopped chasing after her.

“Sudou-kun is a perpetrator? Is that...true?” she asked.

Kushida turned to me, as if asking me to save him again. Since Horikita had revealed that I was feigning ignorance, things were probably going to be a pain in the butt. Besides, I'd gladly give Kushida my bank PIN if she asked for it with such a cute expression.

"I understand a little of what Horikita meant. At the very least, Sudou does share some fault in this case. He's the type who gets angry easily, right? Whenever he's faced with someone he doesn't like, he lashes out, and speaks and acts in an aggressive, domineering way. When I heard he was being considered for a regular spot on the basketball team, I was both surprised and impressed. No one disagrees that he's an incredible player, but if he acts so arrogant and prideful, some people will come to hate him. Those who work incredibly hard for their spot would probably see Sudou as a rather disagreeable person. Then there are the rumors, right? People say that Sudou's been fighting people since junior high. I haven't met anyone who knew Sudou at his previous school, but considering how many people are talking about it, there might be something to the rumor."

People didn't hold a very good impression of Sudou.

"This was bound to happen eventually. That's why Horikita said Sudou was a perpetrator."

"So...his typical behavior, plus his repeated actions, led to this situation, then?" Kushida asked.

"Yeah. As long as he continues to antagonize those around him, trouble will inevitably follow. Also, if there's no proof, then people will use his image against him. In other words, they'll judge him based on their impressions. For example, let's say there was a murder case. There are two suspects. One of them has committed murder in the past, while the other is a good, upstanding citizen. Based on that information, who would you believe?"

If asked, nearly everyone would give the same response.

"Well...I'd pick the upstanding citizen, of course."

"The truth might be different. However, the less information you have upon which to base your judgment, the more you have to rely on whatever meager information you have at hand. That's what's happening here. Horikita cannot overlook the fact that Sudou doesn't recognize his flaws."

I didn't think this was exactly a "you reap what you sow" situation, though.

"I see. So that's what she meant..."

Kushida gave a small nod.

"So Horikita-san isn't going to save Sudou-kun because she wants to teach him a lesson?"

"I guess so, yeah. By punishing him, she wants him to understand himself better."

Kushida understood, but clearly didn't agree. It seemed like she was a little angry, balling her fists in anger.

"I don't agree with abandoning Sudou-kun just to punish him. If she's dissatisfied with him, I think she should at least talk to him directly. That's what friends would do."

I didn't think that Horikita considered Sudou her friend, though. Besides, Horikita wasn't the type to teach through kindness. She didn't feel an obligation to others.

"You should act according to your own principles, Kushida. I don't think it's wrong to want to help Sudou."

"Yeah."

Kushida nodded without hesitation. She would extend her hand to a friend in need as many times as it took. It sounds simple, but it was actually difficult. Only someone like Kushida could do such a thing.

"However, I think it would be better if we carefully considered whether or not to directly point out Sudou's problems. If he doesn't actually take the time to reflect, there's no point. There are certain realizations you can only come to on your own."

"Okay. I understand. I'll follow your advice, Ayanokouji-kun."

Kushida arched her back and stretched; I'd changed her thinking.

"Okay, let's go hunt for the witness."

We returned to the classroom, and rejoined Ike and Yamauchi.

"Huh? So, you couldn't persuade Horikita?" Ike said.

“No, I’m sorry. I failed,” Kushida replied.

“No, no. You don’t have to apologize, Kushida-chan. We should be fine with who we already have.”

“I’m counting on you, Ike-kun. Yamauchi-kun,” Kushida appealed with sparkling eyes. The two of them gazed back, love-struck.

“Okay, so where should we start?”

Randomly searching for a witness would be ineffective. It would’ve been better to come up with a plan before starting our search.

“If no one has any objections, how about we start by asking around Class B?” I asked.

“Why Class B?”

“Because that’s the class that would most want a witness.”

“Sorry. I don’t quite understand, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Between D and C, which class most threatens Class B? Or to put it another way, which class is more likely to threaten B’s place in the ranking?”

“C, of course. So we should ask C last, I suppose. But why not start with Class A?”

“We know too little about Class A. I don’t think they’d want to get involved in a troublesome affair that might negatively impact their points. It’s also possible that Class A students don’t care, as they feel no connection to what goes on between C and D.”

Of course, I still didn’t know if we could trust Class B. If they had a particularly cunning person, he or she might have devised a plan to defeat not only C, but Class D as well. Even if that plan didn’t exist, I believed we ought to prepare countermeasures based on that idea.

“Well then, let’s go to Class B right away!” Kushida cried.

“Stop.” I reflexively grabbed the back of Kushida’s collar.

“Nyaa!” Surprised, Kushida let out a cat-like yelp.

“So cuuute!” After seeing Kushida’s adorable reaction, Yamauchi had hearts in his eyes. She was probably being adorable on purpose... Despite thinking that, my heart pounded like crazy.

“It is certainly true that your excellent communication skills are indispensable. However, this isn’t the same as casually strolling into another class and trying to make friends.”

“You think so?”

If the witness was willing to help Class D for nothing, or if they were friendly, then there’d be no need to worry. However, if the witness was a calculating person, then he or she might not agree to help. We wouldn’t know whether that person would assist Class D unless we tried asking, though. Even if we went to Class B to talk...how would things turn out?

“Do you know anyone in Class B?”

“I do. I’ve only gotten to know a few people, though,” Kushida said.

“Well then, let’s talk to those people first then.”

We absolutely did not want word to get out that Class D was frantically searching for witnesses.

“Wait, ask them one by one? Wouldn’t it be way easier to ask everyone at the same time?” said Ike. He didn’t seem to like this roundabout way of doing things.

“I also think you’re being too negative. I do think it’s a good idea to ask Class B, but I also think we should ask several people at once. If not, we may not find the witness in time.”

“I see. You might be right about that. We should do what you think is best, Kushida.”

“I’m sorry, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Kushida clasped her hands together apologetically. She hadn’t really done anything wrong, though. It was only natural that we’d have different opinions on the matter. Besides, in times like these the majority should decide what to do. Kushida’s plan had convinced me, so I withdrew my own.

Suddenly, I felt a sensation, like someone was watching me. I turned around.

About one third of our class remained in the room. Nothing here seemed especially odd. Still, I couldn’t quite put my finger on exactly what was bothering me, or who’d given me the feeling of being watched.

3.3

The first classroom we visited had a slightly different atmosphere. Although it looked fundamentally the same as ours, it felt as though we had come to an alien place. It was a bit like soccer; clearly the difference between a home and an away game in soccer was no trivial thing. We also didn't know if the students around us were friend or foe. Even Ike and Yamauchi appeared to be shaking in their boots. They simply stood frozen in the classroom doorway, unable to move.

Kushida was the only one who remained unfazed. In fact, she found her Class B friends and, with a smile on her face, waved to them and headed over. What an incredible attitude. I wanted to learn how to be like that. She chatted with people regardless of gender, exactly how she acted in Class D.

No one was more jealous of this than Ike and Yamauchi. Kushida was happily chatting with people who were clearly more attractive than they.

"D-damn it! There are way too many guys after my Kushida-chan. This sucks!"

What was he talking about? *His* Kushida?

"Don't panic, Ike. It's okay. We're in Kushida-chan's class, so we're one step ahead of them!"

The pair, comrades in vexation, grasped each other's arms.

Although there were only about 10 people left in the classroom, Kushida began explaining Sudou's case. All things considered, the atmosphere in Class B wasn't that different from Class D. Certainly not what I'd expect from a class full of honor students. They didn't seem especially formal. In fact, many of the students seemed to do as they pleased. Although they were free to act however they wanted within school regulations, I'd expected their hair and clothing to be a bit more reserved. Instead, however, some students had dyed hair, and...well...certain girls wore rather short skirts.

As the saying goes, you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. Or perhaps they were superior to Class D in more than simple academics.

This school was far too mysterious. Thinking about these things was a pain in the butt. Anyway, I had only come here to accompany Kushida today, so I thought it best to leave things to her. I moved further away from the doorway to evade Ike and Yamauchi's notice.

"I wanna go home."

I didn't want them to hear me grumbling to myself. From outside the window, I could see the Track and Field Club running and working up a sweat. The air conditioning inside school was especially effective, so I didn't really feel like going out.

"Wow, those guys in the sports club really work hard, huh?"

Ike, having scouted around Class B, joined me in looking out the window. He was an especially capricious person, so waiting probably bored him. "I think people who participate in clubs are stupid," he said.

"Why would you say that? You know such a statement will alienate about half of the students here, right?" I didn't know the precise numbers, but I estimated at least 60 to 70 percent of the students in this school participated in clubs.

"If you like exercising, then what's wrong with just doing it as a hobby? What benefit is there to undergoing such a harsh regimen?"

I thought it odd to view club activities solely in terms of benefits or drawbacks. Besides, there were many benefits to participating in a club. You gained the skills necessary to build relationships with other people, and you also got to experience victory and defeat. These were things you couldn't learn just by studying alone. Besides, someone who never participated in clubs and only went straight home after class could probably stand to learn that lesson.

"You're probably right," I said.

I waited for a few minutes until I received Kushida's report. I certainly didn't expect what she told me.

Chapter 4: An Unexpected Witness

The next morning, students busily exchanged information with each other. Those from Hirata's group and those with Kushida had spent yesterday searching for the witness. Ike and Yamauchi hated ladies' men like Hirata, but seemed excited about all of the girls who hung around him. They happily tried to chat them up. As I listened in, though, I heard that Hirata and his group hadn't obtained any valuable information. They'd recorded the names of the people to whom they'd spoken, and occasionally taken notes on their cell phones.

Meanwhile, I was alone, like always. I could talk to Kushida, but felt disadvantaged when it came to a big group. I couldn't really talk, so I asked Kushida to fill in me later. Meanwhile, my neighbor—who continued to reject Kushida's invitations, no matter what—sat with a nonchalant expression as she prepared for class. Sudou, the person of interest, still hadn't arrived.

"Man, can we even prove that those Class C guys were in the wrong?" Ike asked.

"As long as we can find a witness, it's not impossible. Let's keep trying our best, Ike-kun."

"Before we try our best, though, is there even a witness in the first place? Didn't Sudou only say that he *thought* someone might've been there? Wasn't that just a lie? I mean, he *is* violent, and he does provoke people."

"If we keep doubting him, we won't make any progress. Am I wrong?"

"I guess, you're probably right about that, but...if Sudou is in the wrong, then our hard-earned points are all going be stripped away, right? We'll be at zero. Zero! We'll be back to having no pocket money at all. Our dreams of screwing around to our hearts' content will remain unrealized!"

"Then it would be a good idea for everyone to start saving up again," Hirata said. "It's only been three months since we started here."

Our classroom hero didn't waver as he delivered his magnificent

speech. The girls immediately blushed in response. Karuizawa wore a particularly proud expression, perhaps because *she* was the one he'd chosen to be his girlfriend.

"I do think our points are important. They're tied to our motivation, right? So, I will defend our class points to my last breath. Even if it's only 87 points."

"I understand how you feel. However, it can be dangerous to cling to our points and lose sight of reality. The most important thing is to treasure our friends as much as possible."

Ike, who considered Hirata a goody two shoes, eyed him suspiciously. "Even if Sudou was at fault?"

Being punished when you'd done nothing wrong was horrible. That much was obvious. However, Hirata nodded without a moment's hesitation. It was as though he believed self-sacrifice was unimportant. Ike immediately looked downward, as if pressed under the weight of Hirata's noble intentions.

"I think what you're saying is reasonable, Hirata-kun, but I still want my points. The students in Class A get nearly 100,000 points every month. I'm super envious of them. There are girls in their class who buy lots of stylish clothes and accessories. Aren't we just the bottom of the barrel compared to them?"

Karuizawa's legs dangled over her desk. People looked bitter when she pointed out the stark difference between our classes.

"Why couldn't I have been in Class A from the start? If I were in Class A, I'd probably be loving every second of my student life."

"I wish I was in A, too. I'd be doing so much fun stuff with my friends."

Before I knew it, the meeting to save Sudou had transformed into a grievance session, with students pleading for a way out of the class. Horikita spontaneously broke into derisive laughter in response to Ike and Karuizawa's delusions. As her neighbor, I was the only one who noticed. She seemed to be implying that they couldn't have started in Class A if they'd wanted to. Horikita immediately took out a library book and began reading, almost as if she was trying not to be distracted by the noise. At a glance, I saw she was reading Dostoevsky's *Demons*. A good choice.

“It would be awesome if there was some secret trick we could use to switch Class A in an instant. Saving up class points is way too hard.”

There was a 1000-point difference between Class A and us. An absurdly huge difference.

“Then cheer up, Ike, because there *is* one way to instantly reach Class A.”

Chabashira-sensei spoke from the classroom entranceway. She’d arrived just five minutes before class started.

“Wait. What did you say, sensei?” Ike nearly fell off his chair before recomposing himself.

“I said that there’s a way to reach Class A without class points.”

Horikita looked up from her book, probably trying to gauge whether Chabashira-sensei was lying.

“Come on, now. Don’t tease us, Sae-chan-sensei!” Usually, Ike would’ve sunk his teeth into that information. This time, he laughed it off, as if saying he wouldn’t be fooled.

“It’s true. At this school, there are certain special methods you can use,” answered Chabashira-sensei. Judging from her answer, she didn’t appear to be joking.

“I don’t think she’s saying that just to confuse us.”

Chabashira-sensei sometimes withheld information, but she didn’t lie. Ike’s guffaws gradually stopped.

“Sensei, what *are* these special methods?” Ike inquired politely, as if not to offend her.

All of the students fixed their eyes on Chabashira-sensei. Even those who didn’t see a substantial benefit to reaching Class A appeared curious.

“I told you on the day you arrived. I said there’s nothing you cannot buy with your points at this school. In other words, you can change classes by using your personal points.”

Chabashira-sensei shot a quick glance over at Horikita and me. We had tested out that very method ourselves by buying a test point from the school. That supported the truth of her claim.

Class points and private points were linked. If we didn't have any class points, then we wouldn't get the private points, either. However, it wasn't a perfect one-to-one correlation. Based on what we'd heard, you didn't necessarily have to lose out on points. Because students could transfer points, it was theoretically possible to collect private points even if your class points were at zero.

"S-seriously! How many points do we need to save up to do that?!"

"Twenty million. Do your best to conserve points. Do that, and you can enter whichever class you like."

After hearing that absurdly high number, Ike tumbled out of his chair.

"Did you just say twenty million? That's impossible, though!"

Everyone in the class started booing. Their disappointment was to be expected.

"Normally yes, it would be impossible. However, as it's an avenue to Class A, it's naturally expensive. If I were reduce the number by one digit, there would probably be over 100 people in Class A come graduation. Then there'd be no point to our system."

Even by maintaining our monthly allotment of 100,000 points, that still wouldn't be an easy number to reach.

"Just out of curiosity, has anyone successfully changed their class like this before?"

That was an obvious question. The Advanced Nurturing High School had been in operation for about 10 years. A thousand and some students had struggled to make it through. If anyone had managed to achieve success by that method, there would've been talk about it.

"Unfortunately, no. No one has done it before. The reason why is as clear as day. Even if you perfectly maintain your class points upon starting school here, after three years you'd only have 3.6 million. Class A could raise points enough to reach four million. Normally, you simply wouldn't be able to do it."

"So, doesn't that just mean it's impossible?"

"It's *almost* impossible. However, that does not mean it actually *is* impossible. There's a big difference, Ike."

However, around half the class had already lost interest in what she was saying. For students in Class D, who dreamed of a mere 100 or 200 private points, reaching 20 million was a faraway dream. It was beyond the scope of our imagination.

“May I ask one question, please?”

The watchful Horikita raised her hand. She looked quite determined, considering this was a potential road to Class A.

“What is the highest number of points that a student has saved since the opening of this school? I’m just asking for the sake of reference.”

“A very good question, Horikita. About three years ago, one student from Class B saved nearly 12 million points before graduating.”

“T-twelve million?! A student from Class B?!”

“He was expelled before graduation, however, so he was unable to save those 20 million points in the end. He was engaged in a large-scale fraudulent operation to save up points.”

“Fraudulent?”

“He took advantage of the newly admitted first-year students who didn’t yet understand the system. He went to them one by one and scammed points out of them, so he could reach the 20 million points necessary to move to Class A. There was no way the school could overlook such reckless actions, however. I don’t think that his goal was particularly bad, but people who break the rules must be punished.”

That was more than a mere anecdote. That story made the possibility of success sound truly impossible.

“So, you’re saying that even if we were to use criminal methods, 12 million points is about the limit?” Horikita muttered.

“Give up on that method. Strive to save up your points responsibly.”

Horikita returned to reading, likely feeling idiotic for bothering to raise her hand at all. In this world, stories that seemed too good to be true were just that.

“Oh, that reminds me. None of you have gotten any points yet from club activities, have you?” remarked Chabashira-sensei, with the air of

suddenly remembering.

“What do you mean?”

“There are cases where individuals may win points based on their efforts in club activities, or their degree of participation. For example, if someone in a calligraphy club were to win a contest, they could receive corresponding points for that award.”

This new information took everyone aback.

“Y-you mean we can get points for participating in clubs?!”

“Yes. The other classes should have already been well informed of this.”

“Wh-what the hell? That’s so mean! Why didn’t you tell us earlier?!”

“I simply forgot, sorry. However, extracurricular activities aren’t there just as a way to earn points. So it shouldn’t make any difference when you learned this information,” said Chabashira-sensei without a hint of timidity.

“No, no, no! That’s not true at all! If you’d told me before, I—”

“Are you saying you would have participated in extracurricular activities? Do you really think you would’ve been able to see any results after joining a club, results like winning prizes or being in games, with such shallow feelings?”

“Well...you might be right about that, but... It was possible!”

I understood both Chabashira-sensei and Ike’s viewpoints. If someone were to join a club simply for the sake of earning points, he or she probably wouldn’t see great results. If anything, joining a club for such a lazy, indifferent reason would probably make you a nuisance for the students who *were* serious about it. On the other hand, someone who joined the club for the sake of points might discover that they possessed a talent for it.

At any rate, I deduced that our homeroom teacher was being extremely and deliberately mean.

“You know, if you think back on it now, it was obvious from the start.”

“What do you mean, Hirata-kun?”

“Think back. Remember what our P.E. instructor Higashiyama-sensei said when we went to the pool? He said the student who got the best time

during our first class would get 5000 points. That was a stepping stone to prepare us for other opportunities. It seems plausible, right?”

Ike scratched his head and slumped. “I don’t remember,” he said.

“If I got points for it, I probably would’ve joined calligraphy club, or some other kind of art club.”

It seemed like Ike could only see the positive side of things. I thought there naturally must be a downside.

There might be cases where if someone didn’t participate in their club seriously, he or she would be penalized. The easy route would probably destroy you. However, learning that our points would reflect the efforts we made in club activities was encouraging.

“Horikita. Doesn’t this mean there’s some value in saving Sudou?” I asked.

“We should save him because he’s in a club?”

“Sudou told us that he may be picked as a regular on the team even though he’s a first year, right?”

Horikita gave a small nod.

“If he was telling the truth...”

She sounded somewhat doubtful.

“It’s better to have a lot of private points, right? He can supplement his own grade if he fails, and he can save others.”

“I have a hard time imagining that he’d use his points altruistically, though.”

“I’m saying that it’s better to have points saved up, just in case. Right?”

Whether class points or private points, it was better to have a lot of them. There were absolutely no negatives to that. Also, we knew very little about how else to earn points at this stage. If our chances improved with Sudou in the class, then that was reason enough to make an effort. Horikita fell silent. Even she didn’t have the ability to create any points for us right now.

“I won’t say that I’ll help, but I suppose I ought to acknowledge

Sudou's existence, at least a little."

Horikita's language was harsh, but she acknowledged the connection to her own interests. I considered it unnecessary to say more, so I stopped talking. Horikita pondered the issue in silence.

4.1

Our class became temporarily excited by that fairy tale, but we were soon pulled back to reality. After school we resumed the search for a witness. I hung behind Kushida, Ike, and the others, trailing them like a ghost. I was impressed, surprised, and in awe of their natural conversation skills. It was clear as day that I, someone who couldn't even converse with my fellow classmates, was not well suited to this task. How could they talk with people they'd never met before and behave like old friends? Monsters.

In this investigation, we sought not just names, but also contact information. Perhaps they felt compelled to give Kushida their information because of her personality. What a wonderful talent...

Though Kushida and the others spent a good amount of time going to the second-year classrooms and talking to upperclassmen, they didn't turn up any good leads. As time passed, the number of students who remained after class was dwindling. With a lack of new students to speak with, we decided to stop our investigation for the day.

"Looks like we didn't have any luck today, either."

Everyone went back to my room to reevaluate our strategy. Sudou came by shortly afterward and joined our discussion.

"What happened today? Did you make any progress?" he asked.

"None at all. Sudou, are you sure there was a witness?"

I understood Ike's doubts. Even though the school had said that's what happened, there wasn't any new information.

"Huh? I never said there was someone there. I said that it *felt* like someone was there."

"Huh. Is that so?"

"It's certainly true that Sudou-kun didn't say he saw anyone. He said that he had a feeling that someone was there."

"Maybe Sudou was hallucinating? He must be taking some pretty potent drugs or something."

Man, that was going a bit too far. Sudou put Ike into a headlock.

“Gyhhh! I give, I give!” Ike cried.

While the two of them messed around, Kushida and Yamauchi were wracking their brains. After discussing the matter for about 10 minutes, Kushida spoke up.

“We might want to change our methods a little. For example, let’s look for someone who might have found a witness.”

“Look for someone who *found* a witness? I don’t get what you mean.”

“Are you going to look for the people who went to the special building on the day of the incident?”

“Yeah. What do you think?”

That wasn’t a bad idea. Not many students went to the special building, but the entrance was well within eyeshot. In other words, if someone testified to seeing another person enter the special building, we’d be much closer to finding the witness.

“That sounds great! Let’s start asking right away.”

I noticed then that the person of interest, Sudou, was completely engrossed in some kind of digital basketball game on his phone. It was completely draining his battery. I think the game was called *Generation of Miracles* or something, but I still didn’t quite understand. After he won the match, he struck a victory pose.

Even though Sudou couldn’t really help, Ike and Yamauchi still appeared disgruntled at the sight of him. However, they concealed their dissatisfaction, probably because they were scared of Sudou’s counterattack. They both chose to ignore him instead.

Tomorrow was Friday. Ferreting out information would be no easier when Saturday came around. That meant we actually had less time than we thought. Just then, my doorbell rang and a visitor appeared. The small group of normal visitors was mostly accounted for already. While I considered who this new visitor might be, she peered through the door.

“Have you made any progress finding the witness?” asked Horikita, looking as if she already knew the response.

“No. Not yet.”

“I’m only telling you this because it’s you, but I may have found out something—”

While she was talking, Horikita noticed that there were several pairs of shoes lined up by my door. She stopped and made a hard heel turn, apparently ready to run. Kushida peered over at the entrance, probably concerned that Horikita wouldn’t return.

“Ah, Horikita-san!” Kushida said.

Kushida smiled and waved to Horikita. Horikita, upon noticing Kushida, naturally let out a sigh.

“Looks like your only choice is to come in, huh?”

“Looks that way,” Horikita grumped.

Looking exasperated, she entered my room.

“Oh, Horikita!”

Of course, Sudou was happiest to see her. He paused his game and stood.

“Did you decide to help out? I’m super glad you’re here.”

“I didn’t particularly plan on helping. You don’t appear to have found the witness yet, right?”

Kushida nodded despondently. “If you didn’t come here to help, then why *did* you come?” she asked.

“I was wondering what kind of plan you’d come up with.”

“Well, I’m happy if you just want to listen to us talk. I hoped you could give some advice.”

Kushida then relayed her plan to Horikita, whose expression remained neutral from start to finish.

“I wouldn’t say it’s a bad plan. Provided you have sufficient time, your labors may actually bear fruit.”

Time was indeed the issue here. Considering we had a mere few days left, it was doubtful we’d see any results.

“Well. Now that I’m abreast of the current situation, I’ll be leaving.”

In the end, Horikita was going to leave without ever having sat down. She was no lingerer.

“Did you come up with something? Like information about the witness?” I asked.

When Horikita had shown up at my door, it seemed like she’d wanted to say something. She wasn’t exactly the friendly type, certainly not the sort who’d come to my room for casual conversation.

“I’ll give you just one piece of advice, to help your pathetic odds,” she said. “It’s hard to see what’s right in front of you. If someone actually witnessed Sudou’s incident, then that person is close by.”

Horikita’s information was much more significant than I’d imagined. She spoke as if she had already found the hypothetical witness.

“What do you mean, Horikita? Are you seriously implying that you found this person?”

Sudou appeared more shocked and doubtful than joyous. That was understandable. No one, myself included, really believed her...until we heard her next words.

“Sakura-san.”

Horikita spoke a most unexpected name.

“Sakura-san? From *our* class?”

Yamauchi and Sudou exchanged looks. They didn’t seem to know who Sakura even was. That was probably to be expected, though. To be honest, I had to wrack my own memory for a moment.

“She’s the witness. She saw the incident.”

“Why do you say that?”

“When Kushida-san said that she was looking for a witness in class, Sakura looked down. A lot of students were staring at Kushida-san. Sakura was the only one who didn’t appear interested. She wouldn’t have acted that way without some connection to the incident.”

I hadn’t noticed that at all. I was genuinely impressed by Horikita’s observational prowess. She’d noticed a classmate’s very minor gesture.

“Since you were one of the people who also stares at Kushida-san, it’s not surprising you didn’t notice,” Horikita said to me, her tone heavily sarcastic.

“So you’re saying that there’s a high probability that this Sakura, or Kokura, or whoever is the witness?” inquired Sudou. A sharp observation, something a fool would be unlikely to say.

“No, Sakura-san is undoubtedly the witness. Her actions confirmed it. Although she may not admit to it, she is definitely the one.”

While we’d been paralyzed by uncertainty, Horikita had stepped up and taken control. That Horikita had done so for our class’s sake was particularly moving.

“Did you really do this for me, after all?!” Sudou looked especially moved.

“Don’t misunderstand. I just didn’t want to waste more time looking for the witness, and letting other classes see us in such a shameful light. That’s all.”

“Umm. But still, the point is that you saved us, right?”

“You are free to interpret things however you wish, but I’m telling you that you’re wrong.”

“Come on, don’t lie! You’re a *tsundere*, Horikita!”

Ike went to hit Horikita’s shoulders playfully, as if teasing her. Horikita grabbed his arm and tossed him to the ground.

“Oww!” he cried.

“Don’t touch me. This is your one warning. The next time you try it, I’ll despise you all the way to graduation.”

“I-I won’t touch you. Not even if I wanted to...ow, owwww!”

She put him in a headlock. It was unfortunate for Ike, but you reap what you sow. Anyway, those weren’t the defensive moves of a normal girl. Since I knew that her older brother practiced karate and aikido, she might have learned something, too?

“Ooh. My arm!”

“Ike-kun,” said Horikita as Ike writhed on the floor in agony.

I thought she was taking things too far.

“Should I amend my previous statement, and say ‘I shall continue to despise you long past our graduation’?”

“Ohh! So mean!”

After delivering what seemed to be his last words on the matter, Ike’s energy was exhausted.

Sakura, though. Of all people, the witness was from Class D. It was difficult to know whether this was good news or not.

“Isn’t this great, Sudou? If the student’s from Class D, then we can definitely get her to testify!”

“Yeah. I’m happy there’s a witness, but who’s Sakura? Do you know her?”

Sudou didn’t seem to have any idea. Yamauchi appeared quite surprised.

“Are you serious? She sits behind you, Sudou!”

“No, that’s not it. She sits diagonally ahead of you and to the left, I thought?”

“No, you’re both wrong. She sits diagonally ahead of Sudou-kun to the *right*.” Kushida corrected them, a slightly pouty look on her face.

“Diagonally ahead to the right? I can’t remember at all. I’m sure there’s someone there, though.”

That was obvious. A permanently empty seat would have been bizarre. Sakura certainly didn’t stand out very much. The fact we didn’t really know her was a problem.

“I probably know her. I feel like I’ve heard her name somewhere before,” I offered.

I felt like I almost had something, but not quite.

“Can you tell us about her?”

“Well, I suppose there’s one thing. Would it help if I said she has the biggest boobs in class? Her boobs are insanely huge.” Ike, having returned to the land of the living, discussed one of Sakura’s chief physical

characteristics. Personally, I couldn't identify her based on that information alone.

"Oh, she's that plain girl with glasses, right?"

How did you jump to that? I was a little stunned.

"It's not good to remember people based on something like that, Ike-kun! That's pathetic," Kushida cried.

"N-no, no, it's not like that, Kushida-chan. It's just, you know. I wasn't trying to say anything indecent or anything. You know, it's like how you can remember a tall guy because of his height, right? It's the same kind of thing, but I'm just remembering her based on another physical characteristic!"

Kushida was rapidly losing faith as Ike frantically tried to smooth things over. It seemed like it was too late.

"Damn it! No, it's not like that, it's not! I absolutely do not like plain girls like her! Don't get the wrong idea!"

I doubted anyone had the wrong idea. While Ike broke down in tears, the rest of us started talking about Sakura.

"Then we should see how much Sakura-san knows. Any ideas?"

"None. We just have to confirm with her directly."

"Can't we just go to Sakura's room right now? We don't have much time."

I thought that Yamauchi's proposal seemed innocuous, but it all came down to Sakura's personality and behavior. Sakura was an unusually shy girl. It wasn't difficult to imagine that if unfamiliar people suddenly showed up, she'd be perplexed.

"Okay, so should we try calling her?"

I recalled that Kushida already knew everyone's information, including Horikita's. She listened to her phone ring for about 20 seconds, but then she shook her head and hung up.

"No luck. The call didn't go through. I can try again later, but this may be a delicate matter."

"What do you mean by delicate?"

“She gave me her contact information, but she doesn’t know me very well. She might be confused if I tried to call her. Also, she might not even have been there to answer the phone.”

Sakura might just be pretending to be out, too.

“So she’s kind of like Horikita?” Ike said.

Why would you say something like that when the person you’re talking about was standing right in front of you, Ike? Horikita probably didn’t care, though. Really, she seemed pretty uninterested in what Ike said at all.

“Goodbye.”

“Ah, Horikita-san!”

Horikita stood quickly and headed for the door. By the time I managed to get up, the door had clicked shut.

“What a *tsundere*.”

Sudou wore a happy smile, chuckling and scratching his nose with his finger. She wasn’t *tsun* and she wasn’t *dere*. She wasn’t anything, I thought. She was a non-*tsun*, non-*dere*. Since we couldn’t prevent Horikita from leaving, we resumed our conversation.

“I get the feeling that Sakura-san’s just a shy person. That was my first impression of her.”

It was strange to discuss someone you’d never talked to.

“She’s plain, that’s it. Talk about a waste, man. Like pearls before swine.” While Yamauchi spoke, he gestured with his hands near his chest, to represent Sakura’s breasts.

“Yeah, for sure. Her boobs are huge, though. It’s really cute!”

Ike seemed to have already forgotten the shame of his earlier remarks, and was now excited again. Kushida gave him another bitter smile. After noticing Kushida’s expression, Ike’s regret returned. He was the type of hapless creature that made the same mistake over and over.

Even though I hadn’t said anything, I felt like I was being lumped into the same category as Ike and Yamauchi. Kushida’s bitter smile seemed to say, *You’re also fixated on boobs, aren’t you? You disgusting pervert.* Granted, that was my persecution complex speaking.

“What about Sakura’s face, though? It’s no use, I just can’t remember anything.”

I could barely match Sakura’s name to a face. I recalled seeing her back when we were making bets. The bet had been about boobs, though. I guess we *were* birds of a feather after all.

My image of Sakura was of her quietly sitting by herself, hunched over her desk.

“I don’t know if Sakura talks to anyone. Yamauchi? Wait, hold on... Yamauchi, you said you confessed your feelings to her before, right? If you did, then you can talk to her easily, yeah?”

Oh, Ike was right. Yamauchi had said that. They’d mentioned it before.

“Uh, ahh...well, I may or may not have said something like that.” Yamauchi feigned ignorance.

“So you were lying?”

“N-no, I wasn’t. I wasn’t lying. It was just a misunderstanding. It wasn’t Sakura; it was a girl from the next class over. Not a gloomy and ugly girl like Sakura. Err, hold on. Sorry, I got a message.”

Yamauchi dodged the question by whipping out his phone. It’s certainly true that Sakura was plain, but she wasn’t ugly. I’d never gotten a good look at her face before, but she seemed to have very nice features. Even so, I couldn’t say that with complete confidence, probably because Sakura had so little presence.

“Well, I’ll try to talk to her myself tomorrow. I think she might be on her guard if a lot of people approach her,” Kushida said.

“That sounds good.”

If Kushida couldn’t manage it, then I doubted anyone else would be able to get through to Sakura.

4.2

“It’s hot.”

Our school didn’t change uniforms with the seasons, so we had to wear blazers throughout the year. The reason was simple: every building came equipped with heating and cooling systems. The heat was only an issue going to and from school. The morning commute. Sweat had begun to trickle down my back in the few minutes that it took to get from the dorms to school.

I took refuge from the heat inside, where the nice, cool air greeted me. It must have been hell for the students with morning practice. Those boys and girls all gathered around the classroom’s source of the cool air. From an outsider’s perspective, it was like bugs flitting about a light bulb. Perhaps that was kind of a bad example.

“Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Hirata called to me, his expression as fresh and friendly as usual. The sweet yet subtle fragrance of flowers always emanated from him. If I were a girl, I’d probably unintentionally shriek, “Hold me!”

“Kushida-san told me about it yesterday. She said that you found the witness. Sakura-san.”

Hirata looked over at Sakura’s seat. She hadn’t yet arrived.

“Are you going to talk to Sakura?” I asked.

“Me? No. I’m going to greet her, that’s all. I’ve wanted to talk to her since she’s always by herself, but as a guy I don’t want to come off as forceful or anything. Also, if I asked Karuizawa-san to talk with her, that might cause a few problems.”

A conversation between the super assertive Karuizawa and Sakura-san was difficult to imagine.

“I think that for the time being, we’ll just wait for more information from Kushida-san.”

“That sounds great, but why are you talking to me? Talking to Ike or Yamauchi would be better,” I said.

There was no real reason for him to tell me any of this. I wasn't really part of the team.

"Not for any particular reason. I guess it's because you have a connection to Horikita-san. She doesn't talk to anyone except for you, so I thought you'd pass it along."

"I see."

Was that my only area of expertise? Hirata smiled, agreeably. If I were a girl, I would have gone from zero to 100 right there, and my heart would have been beating out of my chest.

"Oh, that reminds me. If you're up for it, we should hang out sometime soon. What do you think?"

Hey, hey, don't tell me that you're not satisfied with girls anymore and are looking to make *my* heart throb. If I, a known recluse, accepted the hero's invitation without due consideration, that would be a big problem.

"Sure. It should be fine, I guess."

Ahh, I said the exact opposite of what I'd been thinking. Damn, curse my terrible mouth. I definitely hadn't been waiting for Hirata to invite me to hang out or anything. Yeah, that's right. This is what's wrong with the Japanese people: we are incapable of saying 'no,' so we have to respond in a roundabout way when invited out.

"I'm sorry. Do you not really want to?" Hirata sensed my unease.

"No, no, I'll go. I definitely want to," I answered, feeling a little disgusted with myself. I tried to act like a proud guy, but I couldn't help actually wanting to go.

"Are you fine with my girlfriend coming, too?"

"Hmm? Oh, Karuizawa-san? That's okay."

My response was surprisingly quick. Well, there was a wide variety of "types" of couples. Since they still called each other by their surnames, they probably weren't that close yet. I reluctantly parted from Hirata, and fiddled with my cell phone while I waited for homeroom to begin. Then, I noticed that Sakura was in her seat.

She wasn't doing anything. She just seemed to be sitting at her desk,

killing time. I wondered just what kind of student Sakura was. In the three months that I'd been at this school, I knew nothing about her apart from her surname. It probably wasn't just me, either. The rest of the class probably had no clue.

Kushida and Hirata were proactive and able to open up to just about anyone. Horikita didn't feel the agony of solitude. So what about Sakura? Did she like being alone, like Horikita? Or was she suffering because she didn't know how to connect with people, like me? Those were the mysteries that Kushida was supposedly going to unravel for us.

4.3

Class was over. Kushida stood up right as homeroom ended and walked over towards Sakura, who was quietly preparing to leave. Kushida seemed oddly nervous. Ike, Yamauchi, and even Sudou appeared interested in what was going on, and directed their attention over to the girls.

“Sakura-san?”

“Wh-what?”

The bespectacled girl with the hunched back peered up with a timid expression. Apparently she hadn’t expected someone to talk to her, and was flustered.

“I wanted to ask you something, Sakura-san. Do you have a moment? It’s about Sudou’s case.”

“S-sorry. I...I have plans, so...”

Sakura was obviously uncomfortable. She averted her eyes. She probably wasn’t good at talking with others. Or rather, she gave off the impression that she didn’t *like* talking to them.

“Can you please make some time? This is important, so I’d like to talk to you. When Sudou-kun was involved in the incident, were you perhaps somewhere nearby?”

“I-I don’t know. I already told Horikita-san. I really don’t know anything...”

Her words were weak, yet she vehemently denied it. Kushida could clearly see how unpleasant Sakura found this, so she probably didn’t want to press her much more. Although Kushida appeared slightly perplexed at first, her concerned expression quickly melted into a pleasant smile. Even so, she couldn’t withdraw just like that, because Sakura might have tremendous influence over Sudou’s fate.

“So...is it okay? If I go back...” Sakura whispered.

Something seemed strange, however. She wasn’t simply bad at talking with people. It looked as though she was hiding something. You could see that from her behavior. Sakura concealed her dominant hand while also avoiding eye contact. Even if she weren’t comfortable meeting someone’s eyes, people generally looked in the direction of those to whom they were speaking. Sakura didn’t look at Kushida’s face at all.

If Ike or I were talking to her, I could have understood that reaction. Though it was mostly out of formal obligation, Sakura had exchanged numbers with Kushida. Kushida’s behavior in a one on one conversation was different, though. I don’t think Horikita was wrong to feel some discomfort when speaking with Kushida. I’d found something a bit off-putting about it myself.

“Can’t you please spare just a few minutes now?” Kushida asked.

“Wh-why, though? I-I don’t know anything...”

If Kushida failed, we’d gain nothing from their conversation. Of course, the longer this awkwardness dragged on, the more attention they’d attract. This seemed like a complete miscalculation on Kushida’s part. Since they were already acquainted and had exchanged contact information, Kushida probably had expected this conversation to go more smoothly, and had gone into this situation thinking she wasn’t going to be rejected. That explained why this was currently falling apart.

Horikita carefully monitored the situation. She looked over at me with

a somewhat smug expression. It was as though she were saying *I know that your powers of observation are incredible.*

“I’m really bad at being social. I’m sorry...” Sakura muttered.

She spoke in an unnatural, strained way, and didn’t seem to want Kushida to get any closer. When discussing Sakura earlier, Kushida had described her as a shy but ordinary girl. Judging from her current behavior, though, she clearly wasn’t normal. Kushida must have felt the same, because she couldn’t hide her confusion. Kushida was normally very good at getting others to open up to her, but here she was failing. Horikita also understood what was happening. As she watched the conversation, she came to a conclusion.

“My, how unfortunate. Kushida failed to persuade her.”

Horikita was correct. If Kushida couldn’t do it, then I didn’t think that anyone else in our class would be able to. Kushida was good at creating an informal atmosphere, one in which socially awkward people could converse naturally. However, everyone has what they consider their own personal space. An off-limits area, in other words.

Cultural anthropologist Edward Hall further divided the idea of personal space into four parts. One such zone is the so-called “intimate space.” In this particular space, you’d be near enough to hug someone. If an outsider tries to step into this space, people naturally exhibit strong signs of rejection. However, if that person is a lover or a best friend, then he or she won’t find it uncomfortable. Even if someone were only a casual acquaintance, Kushida probably wouldn’t mind letting that person into her “intimate space.” That is, she didn’t seem to put high value on the idea of personal space.

However, Sakura had clearly rejected Kushida. No...rather, it looked like she was running away. When Sakura was first asked, she’d said that she “had plans.” If she really *did* have plans, she’d have repeated that when asked again. Sakura collected her bag and stood, seemingly putting distance between herself and Kushida.

“G-goodbye.”

Sakura had apparently decided to run because she couldn’t find a skillful way to end the conversation. She snatched a digital camera off her

desk, and started to walk away. Just then, she ran into Hondou's shoulder. Focused on texting a friend, he wasn't paying attention to where he was going.

"Ah!"

Sakura's digital camera tumbled to the floor with a loud clack.

Hondou simply kept walking, attention still focused on his phone. He apologized as he left. "My bad," he called.

Sakura, flustered, rushed to pick up her camera.

"No way. There's nothing on the screen..."

Sakura put her hand over her mouth in total shock. The camera seemed to have broken on impact. She pushed the power button over and over, tried taking out the batteries and putting them back in, but the power indicator never came on.

"I-I'm sorry. It's because I came up and talked to you so suddenly, that..." Kushida began.

"No, that's not it. I was just careless, that's all... Anyway, goodbye."

Kushida, unable to stop the despondent Sakura, could only watch her leave with regret.

"Why is a gloomy girl like *her* my witness? This sucks. She doesn't want to help me at all."

Sudou crossed his legs and leaned against the chair, sighing in exasperation.

"I'm sure there's something to learn there. Besides, we didn't ask Sakura-san directly what she saw. Maybe she just can't say it herself?"

"I know. If she were planning to say something, she would have. She restrained herself, because she's an adult."

"It might be better this way, Sudou-kun. Better that she's the witness, that is."

"What do you mean?"

"She won't testify on your behalf. They'll determine you caused the incident. In the end, Class D will be affected by your actions, but we'll be

okay. We have testimony that they lied about the violence. It's hard to imagine that the school would penalize us by more than 100 or 200 points for being involved in this incident. That way we'll only lose 87 points, and you won't face expulsion. However, we'll shoulder more of the blame than Class C will." Horikita relentlessly spoke her thoughts out loud, as if she'd been hiding them deep inside her all this time.

"Don't make jokes. I'm innocent. Innocent! I hit them, but it was out of self-defense."

"I don't think self-defense is all that helpful in this case."

Ah, I'd accidentally said that aloud.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun."

I tried to act aloof as I turned, but found that Kushida's face was super close to mine. Man, Kushida looked super cute up close. Rather than feeling uncomfortable about this invasion of my personal space, I wanted her to come even closer.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you're Sudou-kun's ally, aren't you?" she asked.

"Well... Yeah, I am. Why are you asking me that again, though?"

"Well, it's just that things seem to a bit tense. Everyone's desire to save Sudou is fading."

I looked around the classroom.

"It does seem that way. They probably think that whatever happens, happens. That there's nothing to be done."

If even Sakura, the key witness, denied Sudou her help, then we'd made no progress.

"I can't imagine that we'll find a perfect out for Sudou. Let's just give up on him," muttered Ike, half-heartedly.

"What the hell, you guys? Didn't you say that you'd help me?" Sudou cried.

"Well, it's just...you know?"

Sudou appealed to our remaining classmates, looking for approval.

"Even your friends don't wish to help you. How unfortunate," Horikita

muttered.

The other students didn't try to deny what Ike and Horikita had said.

"Why do I have to suffer like this? You bunch of useless jerks!"

"What an interesting thing to say, Sudou-kun. Haven't you noticed that everyone is turning on you?"

"What do you mean by that?"

Our class often got very tense, but today was worse than usual. However, since Sudou was talking to Horikita, he seemed to be trying his best to restrain himself. However, the attack came at him from an unexpected direction.

"Don't you think it would've been better if you'd been expelled? Your existence is far from beautiful. No, in fact, I could say your life is an ugly one, Red Hair-kun."

The voice came from a boy checking his reflection in a hand mirror to fix his hair. It was Kouenji Rokusuke, an especially odd guy even amongst the remarkably strange people of our class.

"What the hell? Say that one more time, I dare you!"

"It would be inefficient for me to tell you, no matter how many times I did. If I know that you're dim-witted, then it doesn't matter how many times I try to lecture you, does it?"

Kouenji didn't even look at Sudou as he spoke. It was as if this were a soliloquy. Suddenly, there was a huge crashing sound. A desk flew through the air and splintered on the ground after being kicked. Everyone froze. Sudou, silent and intense, walked over to Kouenji.

"All right, that's enough. Calm down, you two," Hirata said. He was the only boy able to move in this awful situation. My heart pounded in my chest. "Sudou-kun. You certainly are part of the problem here. But Kouenji-kun, you're in the wrong, too."

"Puh. I don't think I've experienced being wrong since I was born. You must be mistaken."

"Bring it on. I'll smash your face in and take you down a peg," Sudou snapped.

“Stop it.”

Hirata grabbed Sudou’s arm, sternly attempting to stop him, but Sudou showed no signs of being swayed. He looked like he wanted to vent all of his frustrations—including what Horikita had said—by hitting Kouenji.

“Stop it already. I don’t want to see my friends fight...”

“It’s just like Kushida says. I don’t know about Kouenji-kun, but I’m your ally, Sudou-kun.”

Hirata was way too cool. It would’ve been fitting if he changed his name to “Hero.” That would have been awesome.

“I’m going to stop this. Sudou-kun, you should act more mature. If you cause another huge disturbance, the school’s evaluation of you will only worsen. Right?”

“Tch.”

Sudou glared at Kouenji and left the classroom, slamming the door on his way out. Afterward, a loud voice could be heard in the hall.

“Kouenji-kun. I don’t intend to compel you to help. But you were wrong to blame him.”

“Unfortunately, I’ve never experienced being wrong. Not once in my entire life. Oh, looks like it’s about time for my date. Well, if you’ll excuse me.”

Watching their bizarre interaction unfold, I realized that our class lacked unity.

“Sudou-kun really hasn’t grown up, has he?”

“Couldn’t you have been a little kinder, Horikita-san?”

“I don’t show mercy to people who don’t attempt to better themselves. He’s caused us nothing but harm, and has no redeeming features.”

Well, you don’t exactly show any mercy even to people who do attempt such things.

“What?”

“Ooh!”

While I shrank away, a sharp knife (well, a sharp look) was thrust into

me. I made a small rebuttal.

“There’s a popular expression in this world: Great talents mature late. Sudou could probably become a professional player in the NBA, right? I think there’s a possibility that he’ll make a great contribution to society. The power of youth is infinite.” I uttered a catchphrase that sounded about as original as a television commercial.

“I don’t intend to deny that it could happen in 10 years’ time, but I’m looking for things to help me reach Class A right now. If he can’t help us right now, then he’s worthless to me.”

“I guess so.”

Well, Horikita’s opinion was consistent, which was nice. I was more worried about Ike and the others. Their moods changed frequently, so I wasn’t really able to relax.

“You get along with Sudou, don’t you? You eat together with him.”

“I don’t think we’re on bad terms, but I do kind of feel like he’s a burden. Sudou cuts class more than anyone else. He also fights the most. I have to draw the line there.”

I could see what he meant. Ike appeared to have his own thoughts.

“I’ll try to persuade Sakura-san. Once I do, things should turn around.”

“I just wonder about that. Considering the circumstances, even if we get Sakura-san’s testimony, I believe it’ll have minimal impact. The school will probably have doubts about a witness just suddenly appearing from Class D.”

“Doubts? You mean they’d think we were lying about the witness?”

“Of course. They’ll consider the witness’s testimony along with her possible intentions. They won’t take her word as absolute proof.”

“No way. You mean even *that* evidence wouldn’t be perfectly sound?”

“Well, the best and most miraculous situation would be if there was a trusted witness from another class or grade who saw the entire incident from start to finish. There isn’t anyone who fits that description, though,” said Horikita with confidence.

I thought the same.

“Then no matter how hard we try to prove Sudou’s innocence, we...”

“Had the incident happened in a classroom, however, it would be a different story.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there are cameras that record what goes on in the classrooms, right? Therefore, if anything *did* happen, there’d be evidence of it. Those recordings would blow the Class C guys’ lies away.”

I pointed at the two or so cameras affixed to the ceiling near the corners of the classroom. They were small enough that they wouldn’t be a distraction, and they blended in well with their surroundings, but they were undeniably security cameras.

“The school checks those cameras to see if we talk or fall asleep during class. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to accurately assess our monthly performance.”

“Seriously?! I never knew that!”

Ike looked utterly shocked.

“I just learned about the cameras.”

“They’re not easily spotted. I also didn’t notice until they talked about points for the first time.”

“Well, ordinary people don’t typically concern themselves with hidden cameras. I mean, most wouldn’t be able to directly point out the cameras in a convenience store, even if they went there all the time, right?”

If that person *did* know, they probably had a guilty conscience or were extremely nervous. Or they might have accidentally spotted them. Well, considering we didn’t need to search for a witness anymore, I thought it was time to head home then. Kushida and the others might discuss looking for another witness. It would be a pain in the butt to get sucked into that.

“Ayanokouji-kun, do you want to head back together?” Horikita asked.

“.....”

After hearing that invitation, I reflexively placed my hand against her forehead. It felt nice and cool, but I noticed the softness of her skin.

“You do know I don’t have a fever? I only wanted to talk to you about

something,” she deadpanned.

“Ah, okay. That’s fine.”

It was rare for Horikita to invite me anywhere. With the world going so topsy-turvy, I wondered if it would rain tomorrow.

“You two really have gotten close, huh? I mean, you looked like you were going to murder me after I just touched your shoulder yesterday, and now...”

Ike looked at my hand on Horikita’s forehead with seeming discontent.

Horikita, having noticed this, didn’t change her expression as she spoke to me.

“Do you mind? Your hand.”

“Oh, sorry, sorry.”

While I was relieved that Horikita offered no counterattack, I drew my hand away. I was on autopilot as the two of us stood in the hallway. I could roughly guess what Horikita wanted, but I didn’t know exactly what she was going to say.

“That reminds me. I want to make a stop before we return to the dorms. Is that okay?”

“I don’t mind, as long as it doesn’t take too long.”

“Of course. It should only take about 10 minutes.”

4.4

It was hot and humid after class. I made my way over the special building, where the incident had taken place. It wasn't like a murder case where the area needed to be taped off to prevent people from contaminating the crime scene. It didn't really look any different than usual. I didn't see any indication that this building's facilities were used frequently, like the special classrooms, the home economics room, the AV room, etc. This would have been an ideal place to call Sudou out.

"It's so hot..."

This heat was abnormal. This was probably how summer at school should feel, but I had at least imagined that inside the building would be somewhat comfortable, the cool air balancing out the heat. I guess I'd gotten too used to air-conditioned buildings. I felt even hotter because of that gap in expectation. The air conditioning was probably on during class time in the special building, but it certainly wasn't right now.

"Sorry for bringing you here."

Horikita, who was standing next to me, simply looked around the hallway. She didn't appear to be sweating at all.

"You've really changed, haven't you? It's odd that you stuck your neck out in this case. The witness has already been found, and we've confirmed that there's nothing left to be done. What are you even trying to do?" she asked.

"Sudou was the first friend that I made here. I want to help him."

"Do you think that there's a way to prove his innocence?"

"I'm not so sure. I can't really say yet. I decided to take some initiative by myself, since I'm not very good at interacting with Hirata, Kushida, or large groups of people. Being social's definitely not my forte. I thought everyone would make me run around the school or the classroom today, so I decided to bolt instead. I like to avoid trouble, remember?"

"That's certainly true. But then, you're as contradictory as ever, since you're helping out a friend."

“Well, human beings are, for better or worse, creatures of convenience.”

I’d touched on this subject before with Horikita, but she did seem relatively open to my ideas. She usually acted alone, so as long as something didn’t harm her, she tended not to mind. She wasn’t the type to empathize with someone else’s pain, though.

“Well, your way of thinking isn’t relevant to me, Ayanokouji-kun, so you’re free to think whatever you like. Also, I appreciate that you say those two are hard to deal with.”

“Well, that’s just because you hate them, isn’t it?”

“Having a common enemy tends to lead to cooperation.”

“No. Just because I’m bad at dealing with them doesn’t mean I hate them. Please don’t think I’m like you.”

I really did want to get closer to Kushida and Hirata. But Horikita’s interpretation of my stance was rather broad, and she seemed to think that we had similar thoughts on the matter. Muttering, I walked to the end of the hallway and scanned the corners, making sure not to miss any nooks or crannies. Horikita seemed to notice something, and began looking around. She started to ponder.

“Looks like there aren’t any here. Too bad.”

“Huh? What?” I asked.

“Cameras, like the ones in the classrooms. If there were cameras here, we’d have solid evidence. I can’t find any.”

“Ah, yes. The security cameras. You’re certainly right about it. If they were here, this matter would be settled.”

There were electrical outlets by the ceiling, but no signs they were being used. There was nothing in the hallway to obstruct a camera’s view, so if one were installed the whole incident would have been recorded from start to finish.

“Well, did the school have hallway cameras in the first place?”

It probably wasn’t just the special building. The hallways in the main school buildings probably didn’t have cameras, either.

“If I had to think of places where they wouldn’t be installed, I’d probably say the bathrooms and the locker rooms. Right?”

“Yeah. Most likely.”

“If there *were* security cameras here, the school would have checked them first and we wouldn’t have any problems with this case.”

I shook my head, embarrassed to have gotten my hopes up for even a moment. For a short while, we loitered around, wasting time and not really achieving anything.

“So, have you come up with a plan to save Sudou-kun?” Horikita asked.

“Of course I haven’t. It’s your job to come up with plans, Horikita. I won’t ask you to save Sudou, but it’d be nice for you to point Class D in the right direction.”

Horikita shrugged in exasperation. She was probably thinking up a response. However, she was the one who’d found Sakura, so it wasn’t like she didn’t want to help at all.

“You’re asking for my help? To use me? Me? Here and now?”

“Having Sakura as our witness hurts us more than it helps. I think it’d be better if we looked for something else.”

Horikita likely understood. However, she was acting aloof, cut off from the world, like she was too cool to care about anything.

“Sudou has many qualities I can’t stomach. However, I want to lessen the blame they’re placing upon him. The best possible outcome is we’ll still have some points, even if Class D’s image worsens.”

She sounded honest. Normally, she wasn’t quite so candid. That wasn’t an especially bad thing. However, most people aren’t suited for loneliness. Therefore, they sometimes behave hypocritically, like saving someone out of feigned altruism in order to make other people adore them. That didn’t seem to be Horikita’s style, though. Also, unlike Kushida and the others, she’d completely given up on proving Sudou’s innocence.

“Like I said, unless a perfect witness appears, proving Sudou-kun’s innocence will be impossible. If those Class C students admitted that they lied, I suppose things might turn out fine. Do you think that’s likely?”

“No way. They would never admit it.”

The lie would stand, especially because the other class also lacked any evidence. That was what I thought, anyway. Our only proof was Sudou’s word. We were completely in the dark.

“There’s no one here after class.”

“Well, that’s obvious. They only use the special building for club activities.”

One party, either Sudou or the Class C students, had summoned the other to the special building. After that, as if by destiny, the two enemies started brawling. In the end, Sudou had injured the others, and they’d complained about it. That was the whole case.

I definitely wouldn’t come to a hot place like this unless someone had brought me. The humidity was suffocating. I felt like if I stayed even a few more minutes, my head would to explode.

“Aren’t you hot, Horikita?”

While the severe heat destroyed me, Horikita looked around with a cool expression.

“I’m fairly resilient when it comes to temperature. Ayanokouji-kun, you...don’t seem okay.”

The heat was making me dizzy. I moved towards the window, hoping for some cool air. I opened the window...and then immediately slammed it shut.

“That was dangerous.”

Opening the window had only let more hot air into the room. Leaving it ajar would’ve resulted in tragedy, I was sure of it. When I thought about how it would keep getting hotter all the way through August, I became depressed. However, coming here today had given us results. Things weren’t impossible...

“What are you thinking about right now?” Horikita asked.

“Oh, nothing really. Just that it’s hot. I’ve reached my limit.”

It looked as though we’d done all we could, so we started back.

“Ah.”

“Oops!”

Turning the hallway corner, I bumped into another student.

“Sorry, are you okay?” I asked.

The impact of our collision wasn’t very hard. At the very least, neither of us fell over.

“Yeah. I’m sorry. I was careless,” she said.

“Oh no, I’m sorry. Wait...Sakura?”

Mid apology, I realized just whom I’d run into.

“Ah, um?”

Judging from her troubled response, she didn’t know who I was. After staring for a moment, she seemed to recognize me as one of her classmates. It’s kind of pointless if you can only recognize somebody after a bout of intense staring, though.

“Ah, oh. Well, you see... My hobby is taking pictures, so...”

She showed me her phone’s screen. I hadn’t really planned on asking for details. Besides, it wasn’t particularly unnatural to use your phone. Sakura had probably thought we were returning to the dorms, and now she was undoubtedly wondering why we were here.

“You said it’s your hobby? What kind of pictures?” I asked.

“Things like the hallway...and the view outside the window. Stuff like that, I guess.”

Just as Sakura finished her brief explanation, she noticed Horikita and lowered her gaze.

“Ah, um...”

“I have something I’d like to ask you, Sakura-san,” Horikita said.

Sakura appeared uncomfortable, but Horikita, never one to pass up on opportunity, stepped closer to her. Sakura backed away, seemingly frightened. I tried to gently restrain Horikita, gesturing for her to stop chasing Sakura.

“G-goodbye.”

“Sakura.” I called as she tried to hasten away. “You don’t have to force yourself.”

I’d spoken up without thinking. Sakura stopped, but didn’t turn around.

“You shouldn’t feel obligated to appear as the witness, Sakura. It’d be pointless to force you to testify. But if someone scary is trying to intimidate you or something, please talk to us. I have no idea how much I can help, but I’ll try.”

“Are you talking about me?” Horikita muttered.

Ignoring the existence of such a scary monster, I decided to let Sakura go.

“I didn’t see anything. You’ve got the wrong person...”

She kept insisting she wasn’t the witness. So far, we’d been operating based purely on Horikita’s dogmatism and prejudices. It was quite possible that Sakura wasn’t the witness, like she said.

“Then that’s fine. However, if someone else tries to hound you about it, please tell me.”

Sakura went meekly down the stairs.

“That was probably our one big shot, you know? She probably came here because she was still thinking about the incident.”

“Since she’s denied it, we can’t force her to do anything. Besides, you do understand, Horikita? A Class D witness wouldn’t help our case much.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

She would act according to her logic. However, I didn’t know what in the world she was thinking. That was why our investigation was at a standstill.

“Hey, you two. What are you doing?”

We turned in response to the unexpected voice. A beautiful girl with strawberry-blonde hair stood behind us. I recognized her, though I hadn’t ever spoken to her before. She was a student from Class B, Ichinose. Rumor had it she was a superb student.

“Sorry to interrupt you like that. Do you have a moment? Oh, if you happen to be in the middle of a so-so date, though, I’d like you to break it up

right away.”

“It’s nothing like that.”

Horikita denied it immediately. She was only quick to respond to suggestions like that.

“Ha ha, I see. This place is a little too hot to be a date spot.”

I had no connection with Ichinose. I couldn’t be sure, but she probably didn’t even know my name. I was only one of many students to her. Perhaps she was an acquaintance of Horikita’s? Or a friend? No. There was no way. If they suddenly said something like, “Oh wow, it’s been too long! How are you?” and “I’m good, I’m good!” and embraced each other, I’d probably start foaming at the mouth and then faint.

“Do you have some business with us?” Horikita asked.

Horikita was on guard after Ichinose’s sudden appearance. She probably didn’t think that it was a coincidence Ichinose was trying to talk to us.

“Business, huh? Well, it’s more like ‘What are you doing here?’”

“Nothing. We’re wandering around for no reason.”

I would’ve liked to answer honestly, but the pressure of Horikita’s gaze made me fib.

“For no reason, huh? You’re from Class D, aren’t you?”

“Do you know us?”

“I’ve met you twice before. We didn’t talk directly, though. I remember seeing you in the library once, too.”

It seemed that she somehow remembered me. Perhaps I was kind of cool.

“I have a very good memory, you know.”

Did she mean that if her memory weren’t good, I wouldn’t have much an impression? I’d been a little happy, but my levity died at the backhanded comment.

“I thought that surely there’d be something here related to the brawl. I wasn’t here yesterday when Class B heard about the witness. Later, I heard

that Class D was looking for evidence of Sudou's innocence."

"If we *did* happen to be here because of an investigation, what's your connection?"

"Hmm, a connection? Well, I'm not connected. When I heard about what happened, I had some doubts. So I thought I'd come here myself to take a look. Would you mind filling me in?"

Was she really just simply interested? After a brief period of silence, Ichinose sheepishly spoke.

"Guess not, huh? Well, if the other classes were interested..."

"No, we're not saying no, but..."

"I can't help but think there's an ulterior motive," Horikita snapped.

I'd tried to handle this situation peacefully, but Horikita had promptly obliterated that plan. Ichinose, clearly sensing the hostility behind Horikita's words, tilted her neck and smiled.

"Ulterior motive? You think we're working in the shadows to undermine both C and Class D?"

Ichinose wore a baffled expression. "Do you need to be *that* on guard? I'm really just curious, that's all."

"I don't want to talk with someone who is 'just curious.' Do what you want."

Horikita tried to put some distance between them. She peered out the window.

"Please tell me something. All my teacher and friends say is that there was some kind of fight."

I hesitated briefly, but since there wasn't much information to be gained anyway, it may not have been worth keeping quiet. So I explained the situation. I told her that three people from Class C had called Sudou over, and there was a fistfight. However, Sudou turned the tables on his would-be attackers, and beat them up. I also told her that after the fight, the Class C kids filed a false report with the school. Ichinose listened to the story intently.

"So that's what happened. This story hasn't made its way to Class B yet. Hey, isn't this a pretty big problem, though? It doesn't really matter who

lied since it's an issue about violence, right? Shouldn't you be hurrying to uncover the truth?"

"That's why we came here to look. But we haven't really found much."

This wasn't anything like a murder case, so I'd doubted there'd be many clear hints left for us to find. However, contrary to our expectations, we did get some results.

"So you believe Sudou-kun because he's your classmate. And your friend, of course, that much is obvious. So Class D is in an uproar because Sudou is being falsely charged, right?"

It'd be difficult to convince a third party like Ichinose that we weren't doing this out of friendship or class loyalty. I wasn't going to try explaining it.

"What would you do if Sudou-kun was the liar? Suppose evidence came out that proved his guilt. What then?"

"I'd report on it honestly. After all, covering for a lie would only come back to haunt us later."

"Yeah, okay. I think so, too."

Even so, it wasn't like our struggles were really going to have any impact on Ichinose.

"Are you finished? You heard what you wanted." Horikita spoke sharply and with a sigh, trying to drive Ichinose away.

"Hmm. Yeah, how about I help you out? To look for the witness, or whatever. You're bound to get further with more people, right?"

Obviously more people would have been better. That was true. However, it wasn't as though we'd gone up and said to her, "Please help us, we're in trouble!"

"Why would a student from Class B offer to help?"

"Are Classes D and B completely unrelated to each other? We don't know when these cases will spring up, or whom they'll involve. Since the classes are in constant competition, there's always the chance that this will happen. This was the merely the first case. If the party that lied wins, that'd set a bad precedent. Also, I personally can't turn away now that I know what

happened.”

I couldn't tell whether Ichinose was being serious or joking.

“If Class B works with you, wouldn't that dramatically improve your credibility? Though I suppose the opposite could be true, too. Class D may suffer greater consequences if the truth's uncovered...”

In other words, if Sudou lied, then that'd prove Class C's assertion. In that case, Sudou would unquestionably be suspended, and Class D might suffer fatal damages.

“What do you think? I don't believe it's a bad suggestion.”

I glanced over to see what Horikita thought. However, she still had her back to me. She was still looking out the window, unmoving. I wondered what she thought about Ichinose's offer. Of course, we were worried about what effect this would have. If Class D tried to prove Sudou's innocence by themselves, our credibility would be low unless we managed to find evidence that absolutely, 100 percent confirmed Sudou's innocence.

If a student from Class B got involved, there might be tremendous implications.

I decided to weigh the offer's positives and negatives, even though it was rude. Obviously, I couldn't trust Ichinose yet. She was a student from Class B, and she gained nothing by involving herself. If helping others out of sheer goodwill was reflected in class or private points, then I could understand her motivation. It wouldn't be easy to ask, but she might have important information. The only way to be certain was to ask.

“Let's accept her help, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Horikita had made a decision, probably determining that the benefits outweighed the risks. I was grateful that she'd reached a decision so quickly. I didn't really have the power to decide in the first place; that was Horikita's job. Ichinose smiled, showing off her white teeth.

“Then it's decided! Umm...”

“Horikita.”

Horikita gave her name candidly, as if doing so approved our cooperative relationship.

“It’s nice to meet you, Horikita-san. And you too, Ayanokouji-kun.”

We had unexpectedly made Ichinose of Class B’s acquaintance and accepted her as an ally. There was still the risk that this could lead to bad things. No matter what, things were going to change.

“We already found a witness. Unfortunately, it’s a student from Class D.”

Ichinose let out an exasperated sigh.

“Well, that means there isn’t another witness. I mean, I guess someone from another class might have witnessed it, but it isn’t likely.”

Chances were certainly slim. But there *was* still a chance.

“Anyway, about your friend. He’s a first year, but he might become a regular on the basketball team, right? That’s amazing. Even if he’s holding you guys back right now, he might become a great asset later. I mean, the school evaluates club and philanthropic activities, right? So if he enters a tournament and does well, Sudou-kun could earn points. Those’ll be tied to your class points, too. Wait... Did you guys not know that? Did your teacher not tell you?”

We’d only heard that it would influence our private points.

“This is the first I’m hearing about it affecting our class points. I’ll have to complain to Chabashira-sensei later,” mumbled Horikita, a little disgruntled.

This was yet another oversight, another instance where Chabashira-sensei had failed to disclose something important. I wondered if Class B had heard about this from their teacher...

A usual, our teacher didn’t even pretend to give us equal treatment. I felt discriminated against.

“Your homeroom teacher is kind of weird,” said Ichinose.

“She doesn’t seem motivated to tell us anything. She’s completely apathetic. Some teachers are like that.”

I didn’t think that it was particularly concerning, but Ichinose recoiled.

“Did you know that the school evaluates homeroom teachers when their class graduates?”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it. Are you sure?”

I wasn’t interested so much as I had no choice but to be interested. That was a crucial distinction.

“Our homeroom teacher, Hoshinomiya-sensei, says it like it’s her motto. She says she wants to do her best because the homeroom teacher for Class A gets a special bonus. Looks like it’s pretty different for you guys.”

“I’m envious of your relationship with your homeroom teacher. And your class environment.”

Our teacher appeared to lack ambition, or even an interest in money. It felt like even if we collapsed into failure, she’d just say it was great.

“I think it would probably be good for us to meet up and discuss things.”

“I never thought I’d receive aid from the enemy.”

“This seems like a problem we need to address before we can fight. We’re not really on equal footing, are we?”

Other classes pitied us. If anything, this showed how little interest Chabashira-sensei felt for her own students.

“I want to switch homeroom teachers with Class B.”

“Well, I think that’d be difficult to manage.”

I thought back to my first meeting with Hoshinomiya-sensei. She seemed to come with her own inherent difficulties as a teacher.

“Ah, it’s so hot in here!” Ichinose took out a cute handkerchief covered in panda illustrations, and used it to gently wipe sweat from her forehead. Our thick uniforms really trapped the heat.

“A school that constantly runs air conditioning in empty buildings and is unkind to the environment is the worst,” Horikita said.

“Ha ha ha, that’s probably true. You’re pretty interesting.” Ichinose laughed, even though that wasn’t really a joke.

“I don’t think there was anything funny in what I just said...”

“How about we exchange contact information, so things can progress smoothly?”

Horikita shot me a look that seemed to say, *I don't want to do it. Give her yours.*

"If you're okay with having my info, here you go," I said.

"Sure, got it."

After we'd exchanged information, I suddenly realized I had an unexpected number of girls' contacts. Though it was only the beginning of July, I already had seven names and phone numbers in my address book, three of them girls. Perhaps...I had plunged deeply into the joys of youth without even realizing it. Also, I learned that Ichinose's first name was Honami—an unnecessary bit of information.

4.5

Ichinose appeared serious about coming up with strategies and being a trusted ally. Every time she wanted permission to try something she'd contact us, even though she'd already said to leave things to her. I didn't think she needed to limit herself so severely. Upon returning to the dorms, I'd thought that we'd go our separate ways, but Horikita followed me all the way to my room. She seemed to still want to talk.

"Sorry for the intrusion," said Horikita as she entered the room, even though no one else was there.

I wondered why I felt a little nervous being alone with Horikita behind closed doors.

"Oh, just to check, do you have one too? A spare key?" I asked.

"For your room? Ike-kun asked earlier if I wanted one. I refused."

Just as I'd expect from her. It seemed she was the only one with any common sense.

"After all, it's rare for me to visit your room, Ayanokouji-kun. Besides, coming here is a shameful act in itself. A disgrace. Understand?"

I'd assumed she'd respond like that. I wasn't hurt at all. I definitely wasn't thinking anything like, *Wow, that was unexpectedly harsh.*

"Why are you tracing letters on the wall with your finger?"

"To hide my pounding heart. Or something."

The scariest part was that she didn't really have any bad intentions. I'm sure that if asked, she'd probably say something like, "But I only spoke the truth."

"Ayanokouji-kun, I want to hear your thoughts on Sudou-kun's case once again. Also, I find Kushida-san's actions a bit concerning."

"If you're concerned now, wouldn't it have been better to participate earlier in the process?"

"Impossible. The very person in question didn't recognize what was happening. I'm only now reluctantly offering to help for the sake of our class.

Frankly, I still think it would have been better to abandon him.”

“Even though you pitched in to help Sudou during the midterm?”

“That was different. Even if we managed to miraculously prove his innocence, do you think he’ll mature? Saving him might have the opposite effect.”

Her defiant glare seemed to say, *Do you understand my point?*

“So you’re giving up on proving Sudou’s innocence and letting him face punishment for his own sake?”

Horikita wore a slightly disgruntled expression, but then it looked like realization struck. “Knowing Sudou’s flawed personality, you realized from the very beginning how difficult it would be to prove his innocence, didn’t you? That way, it’s easier to think he’d be better off accepting his punishment. Especially better for those who hate him.”

Horikita seemed to want to add, “You thought the same thing, right?” I felt like I’d been backed against a wall, unable to run. If I tried to forcefully deny, she would just dig deeper.

“Well, wouldn’t it be clear to anyone who took just a moment to think?”

“Probably. Kushida-san and Ike-kun and the others haven’t noticed at all, it seems. They simply believe in Sudou-kun, and want to save him from the lie for his sake and our class’s sake. They don’t understand the urgency of the situation.”

Her remarks towards her classmates, those who’d already shared joy and sorrow together, seemed completely merciless.

“Kushida seems to understand at least a little bit, and despite that is working to save Sudou,” I said.

“A little bit? So she realized it by herself, then?”

“Huh? Well, no, it...”

“You told her, didn’t you?”

She cornered me with her words. It was like being interrogated. A little scary.

“You came up with the idea of getting the old test questions, and

purchasing exam points. I can't say I'm surprised. You do seem quite cunning at times, but...I'm dissatisfied."

Those who want to someday live honestly, must sometimes be cunning, too.

"Don't keep overestimating me," I replied.

Although it wasn't my intent, Horikita laughed. However, her smile immediately faded.

"Honestly, there's so much about you that I don't understand. You're a mystery. You're the most difficult person to predict in our class. You're versatile, yet you often idle your time away. You never seem to stay still. It's as though you cannot be categorized."

"All of those are really questionable ways to describe someone. They aren't the sorts of things you'd say as praise..."

There were nicer ways to phrase all of that. Horikita stared at me with suspicion.

"I guess what I *should* say is that you're just blending in and hiding your true talents. You're hiding in plain sight. You disgust me more than anyone else."

I see. I wondered if being called out like that was normal. It seemed I'd taken the bait and gotten caught in Horikita's trap. A small failure on my part.

"Come on, saying that I disgust you more than anyone else is going too far. Kouenji has his fair share of mysteries, too."

That was undoubtedly my trump card. If I disgusted Horikita more than he did, that would *really* hurt.

"He's surprisingly easy to understand. He studies well, is athletic, and gets excellent grades. His personality is the problem. In the end, I can easily categorize and summarize his behavioral problems in only a few words: he's self-centered."

Honestly, that explanation *was* easy to understand. Kouenji was simple, after all.

"You'd probably make a good teacher," I said.

At this rate, when she reached adulthood, she'd probably become a teacher like Chabashira-sensei.

4.6

There were four dorm buildings on campus. Three were for students, who stayed in the various dorms to which they were assigned from first through third year. In other words, our dorm building this year was the same one where last year's third-year students had lived. The fourth building housed the instructors and school employees.

What I'm saying is that since all of the first year students lived in the same building, inevitably we would meet students from the other classes. Someone entered my field of vision. Our eyes naturally met.

"Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure." The girl spoke these grateful words to the dormitory manager, then called out to me.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun! Good morning. You're early."

She had beautiful long, wavy hair and big eyes. The second button of her blazer strained over her large chest. Her upright posture matched her dignified personality. I found myself more attracted to her cool temperament than how cute she was. Ichinose Honami, that first-year Class B student, had found me again.

"I woke up a little earlier today. What were you talking about with the manager?" I asked.

"Some people from my class wanted to make requests about their dorms. I gathered everyone's thoughts on the matter and told the dorm manager. Stuff like water usage, noise, and so on."

"You did all that, Ichinose?"

Usually, individuals handled their own room issues. I wondered why Ichinose had gone to the trouble of gathering everyone's complaints.

"Good morning, Class Rep Ichinose!"

Two girls who were getting off the elevator called out to Ichinose. She said hello back.

"Class Rep? Why Class Rep?" I asked.

I hadn't heard of any "class rep" position before. Perhaps they called

her that because she seemed to study too much.

“I’m my class’s representative. It seems like that, anyway.”

“Your class’s representative? Do all classes except for D have someone like that, too?”

That was the first I’d heard about this. Normally I would’ve been surprised, but considering who our homeroom teacher was, she’d probably decided to leave that part out.

“No, that’s just something Class B set up on its own. I think it’s good to have some assigned roles, right?”

I understood her point, but we certainly weren’t going to assign our own class representative.

“Are there other positions besides class representative?”

“Yeah. Whether or not they serve a function is a different question, but we do have other roles for formality’s sake. Stuff like vice class representative, and secretary. They could be more useful when we have a cultural fair, or sports festival, or something. We could try deciding things on the spot, but that might lead to trouble.”

I recalled seeing Ichinose in the library before, studying with a small group of boys and girls. Even back then, she’d probably already been fulfilling her class representative duties. Most people wouldn’t want to be class representative. They’d be forced to do annoying stuff, and it’d be necessary to participate in face-to-face discussions about school matters. However, with Ichinose taking the initiative for Class B, she probably didn’t foist things on others. I’d bet she handled her duties smoothly.

“Seems like you’ve taken the lead. Of Class B, I mean.”

Without meaning to, it appeared I’d expressed my honest feelings.

“Do you think it’s weird? It’s all purely informal. Besides, there are quite a few troublemakers. We have to deal with a lot of stuff.”

As she said, “We have to deal with a lot of stuff,” Ichinose laughed. The two of us began walking to school together.

“Aren’t you usually a little late? This reminds me that I’ve never seen you around this time.”

Ichinose's question sounded harmless, as if she were following some kind of template. After hearing those words, I felt a little relieved and accomplished. It seemed I could have normal, relationship-building conversations after all.

"I don't have to leave so early. I usually hang around my room for about 20 minutes."

"So I guess you make it just in the nick of time, then."

As Ichinose and I got closer to the school, the number of students around us multiplied. Strangely enough, some of the girls turned one after the other and looked at us with envy. Was this the so-called popularity phase I was told would occur three times in my life? I hadn't experienced it yet; it was about time that I entered my first phase.

"Good morning, Ichinose!"

"Good morning, Ichinose-san!"

Ichinose, who was walking next to me, monopolized all of the girls' attention.

"You sure are popular," I said.

"I just stand out because I'm the class rep. That's all."

It didn't seem like she was trying to act modest. Apparently that's what she truly thought. She had this charismatic force about her that pulled everyone's focus.

"Ah, that reminds me. Did you hear about summer break, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Summer break? No. I mean, isn't it just summer break?"

"I've heard rumors that we might be taking a vacation to a tropical island."

That sparked a memory. I'd forgotten about it, but Chabashira-sensei had mentioned a vacation.

"I can't believe it, though. Could we really go on a vacation?"

It probably wasn't a normal school field trip. I mean, just look around. It was no exaggeration to say that this school was fancy. Going to a tropical island in the summer and visiting a hot spring in the winter...

It was all incredibly suspicious. I really didn't think our school was going to be so good to be true. They had to be keeping something from us. I wondered what Ichinose thought. But I saw from her bitter smile that she also had doubts.

"It's suspicious, after all. I think it's going to be a turning point."

"In other words, you think our class points could fluctuate wildly over summer break?"

"Yeah, yeah. I think there might be a hidden task, one that has a bigger impact on us than the midterms or final exams. Otherwise, the difference between Class A and us wouldn't close much. We could diminish the gap little by little."

That was certainly true. A big, earthshaking event might very well occur soon...

"What's the difference between you and A?" I asked.

"We have about 600 points, so our classes are around 350 points apart."

It was only natural that their points would drop since the start of the year, but it was amazing how many points they'd retained.

"So far, the midterm is all that's given us a chance to raise our class points, so losing at least a few points was unavoidable for us. I mean, even Class A has lost points."

However, as a result of the midterm, we'd managed to gain back points.

"You don't seem to be panicking."

"I'm concerned, but I think that there's a chance for us to make a comeback. I intend to focus all of my emotional energy on making those preparations."

I thought the first part of what she'd said was definitely correct. However, their cohesion as a class made such things possible. Class D had only managed to get 87 points this month. We weren't anywhere close to being able to compete with the others.

"I wonder how much this event will change things?"

It would probably be worth more than 10 or 20 points. However, it was difficult to imagine that it would change things by 500 or even 1,000 points.

“We’re in a tight spot ourselves. If the gap widens any further, we won’t be able to catch up.”

“I guess we both have to do our best, then.”

Actually, the ones who had to work especially hard were Horikita, Hirata, and Kushida.

“At any rate, it doesn’t seem like this will get worse.” I didn’t want to complain, but I felt that something annoying was on the horizon.

“But if we actually *did* vacation on a tropical island, that would be awesome!”

“I wonder about that...” I said.

“Huh? That idea doesn’t make you happy?”

Only people who have meaningful friendships can enjoy a vacation to its fullest. There’s nothing quite as uncomfortable as traveling without close friends, especially when you’re traveling with a group. Just imagining it made me feel like throwing up.

“Do you hate traveling?” Ichinose asked.

“I don’t hate it. I don’t think I do, anyway...”

While we chatted, I tried to imagine what it would be like. I’d never traveled with a friend before. I had gone to New York with my parents a long, long time ago. Not a single millisecond of it had been fun. Just remembering that bitter time wore me out.

“What’s the matter?”

“Just recalled something a little bit traumatic.”

My dry laughter echoed through the hot hallway. No, this wasn’t good. If I let my negative aura spread, Ichinose would grow troubled. However, it seemed like my anxieties were unfounded. Ichinose continued talking, seemingly untroubled by my words.

“Hey, I still have some things on my mind. May I ask you some questions?”

Ichinose had a radiant presence, though it was different from Kushida's. I could say that she acted without an ulterior motive. Even when talking with a person like me, she put her best foot forward.

"We've been separated into four classes from the start, right? Do you really think they separated us by ability?"

"I understand that it wasn't entirely tied to our exam results. There are people in our class that, based on grades, should have gotten into the top ranks."

Horikita, Kouenji, and Yukimura were undoubtedly three people who deserved to be at the top based on their academics alone.

"So, do you think it's something like overall ability?"

I gave a noncommittal answer. I'd thought about it many times, but couldn't find a thorough explanation.

"I've been thinking about it since we started here. Someone might be good at studying, but bad at physical activity. Another might be good at physical activities, but bad at studying. But if students are ranked by overall ability, doesn't that mean that the lower classes are at an overwhelming disadvantage?"

"Isn't that how societal competition works, though? I don't think there's anything particularly strange about that," I said.

Ichinose crossed her arms and hummed to herself, as if she weren't convinced.

"If we were competing as individuals, sure. But this is a competition between classes, right? If you simply put all of the superior students into Class A, then doesn't that mean the rest of us have virtually no chance of succeeding?"

That pretty much explained the current, miserable state of our class points. However, Ichinose seemed to think differently.

"There's definitely a big difference between classes A through D right now. However, I think they're trying to hide something, but going about it in a weird way. Don't you agree?"

"Okay, I have to ask. What's your reasoning?"

“Ha, no reason, really. It’s just something that popped into my head. If it weren’t true, then it’d be fair to say the whole situation is cruel. I think that good students and good athletes were placed into Class D for a reason, as a countermeasure.”

Wasn’t that different from the usual system, though? If the classes were solely divided according to academic ability, there’d be no way to win against the others. In a system like this, it was important to be an expert in many different fields.

“Wouldn’t it be wiser not to talk to someone from another class about this?” I asked Ichinose, feeling slightly worried.

“Hmm? About what?”

“About what you said just now. Horikita already mentioned this, but you’re helping the enemy.”

After all, it was possible she could’ve given me a valuable hint, and I’d do something with it.

“I don’t think so. There’s a lot to be gained from an exchange of ideas. Also, since we’re cooperating now, there shouldn’t be any problems.”

She wasn’t complacent about being in Class B. That was just Ichinose’s natural personality. I could understand her disposition and way of thinking. At any rate, she was a good person with no hidden side to her.

“I’m not smart enough to engage in an exchange of ideas. All I can say is, ‘I’m sorry.’”

“I don’t mind if I’m the one who does the talking and thinking. If you think it’s helpful information, then it’s okay for you to use it.”

Ichinose stopped, almost as if she’d just remembered something. I tried reading her face, noting that she wore a serious expression.

“Hey... There’s something I want to ask you, Ayanokouji-kun. Is that okay?”

It was like that bright, cheery Ichinose of a moment ago had disappeared. My body stiffened slightly.

“If it’s something I can answer, I will.”

Besides, what question couldn’t I answer with my massively

impressive brain, filled with the knowledge of a hundred million books? (A huge lie, of course.)

“Has a girl ever confessed her feelings to you?”

That...wasn't in the any of the hundred million books I'd read.

“Really? Do I look like a guy who's ever had a girl confess her feelings to him?”

Was she going to call me disgusting, or a virgin, or a shitty moron? Would I cry? I was still only a first-year high school student, you know? It was way too early for this. Right? Hey. You think so too, right? Besides, I was certain that, proportionally, the number of people who *had* confessed their feelings was low compared to those who hadn't. It was a baseless theory, though. Who knew the real number of people who had died in solitude, hidden in the shadows of humanity's prosperity?

“Oh no, I'm sorry. It's nothing.”

It didn't look like it was nothing. However, it did look like she didn't plan to make fun of me. Rather, she was actually worried about something.

“Did someone confess to you?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Kind of.”

It seemed like many students were striving every day to couple up like Hirata and Karuizawa.

“Well, if you're okay with it, can you spare a little time after class? I have some questions about confessions. I know all too well how busy you are with the incident right now, but...”

“Sure, that's okay. I don't really have much to do.”

“Don't have much to do?”

“I don't think there's much point in looking for evidence or another witness. Doing that would be a waste of time and a headache.”

“But you went to the scene of the crime the other day to investigate, right?”

“That was for something else. Anyway, it's fine.”

“Thank you.”

I wondered what all this confession stuff had to do with me. Had she made up a lie like “Ayanokouji is my boyfriend” to mislead people? I considered it for a moment, but then thought it’d be smarter for her to use a more reliable, pretty boy.

“I’ll be waiting at the school entrance after class.”

“O-okay. I understand.”

Even though I knew absolutely nothing was going to happen, I was pretty excited. That was what being a man was all about.

4.7

Students overflowed through the school doors as they made their way home. I was a little worried about finding Ichinose, but my anxieties quickly disappeared. She stood out even in this sea of students. Although her cuteness could have been one reason why, she also had the type of presence that dominated wherever she was.

To be honest, I didn't really know how to describe it. I could only describe it as an intoxicating, gentle power. A power that was amplified by how many of the first-year students recognized her. It was similar to Kushida, but even more so. Ichinose was popular with boys and girls alike. They greeted her one after another. Because of that, I wasted about five minutes just trying to find the right time to call to her myself.

"Ah. Ayanokouji-kun. Over here, over here!"

Ichinose eventually noticed me and called me over. Pretending like I'd only just arrived, I casually raised my hand.

"So, what should I do next?" I asked.

"I plan to finish this as soon as possible. Follow me."

I put on my shoes and followed Ichinose to the other side of the building. We arrived at a spot right behind the gymnasium. This did seem like the kind of place where someone would confess their feelings.

"Now then..."

Ichinose took a deep breath, and faced me. No way... Did Ichinose plan to confess to *me*?!

"I think..."

No way, there was no way this could—

"I think someone will confess their feelings to me here," she said.

"Huh?"

With that, Ichinose took out a letter and showed it to me. It was a cute love letter adorned with a heart sticker. Although she wanted me to read it, it felt rude to look. The handwriting was pretty, much like the letter's exterior.

The handwriting was cute, definitely not like a boy's.

I noticed something that concerned me. The meeting time and location were written in the letter. It was set for Friday evening at 4:00 PM, behind the gymnasium. That was about 10 minutes from now.

"Wouldn't it be better if I weren't here?" I asked.

"Love is kind of alien to me. I don't know how to respond without hurting her feelings. I also don't know if we can stay good friends afterwards. I want you to help me."

"I don't really think I'm the person to ask for this. I don't have any experience with romantic confessions. There are probably other people in Class B who could help."

"The person confessing her feelings to me...is from Class B."

Ah, that's what it was. I now understood why she'd asked me to come.

"I'd like for you to keep this secret. If not, things will probably get unpleasant. Knowing you, Ayanokouji-kun, I doubt you'll go around telling people."

"But Ichinose, aren't you used to people confessing their feelings to you?"

"Huh?! N-no way. Not at all! I've never experienced this before."

If she hadn't told me herself, I absolutely would not have believed it.

"I really don't understand why this is happening."

I didn't think this confession was surprising, because Ichinose was so cute. Furthermore, judging how she'd interacted with the other students, she had a great personality.

"So...will you please pretend to be my boyfriend?"

Whoa! Had this situation seriously devolved into such a cliché?

"I did a bit of research, and discovered that the rejected person hurts less if the object of their affection is already in a relationship..."

"I understand that you don't want to hurt anyone, but won't it be worse if they find out you lied?"

"I could say that you and I broke up, or that you left me or something."

I didn't think that was the solution here...

"Honestly, I think it would be much better for you to talk with this person one-on-one. Truthfully."

"But— Ah!"

Ichinose seemed to have noticed something, and awkwardly raised her hand. Apparently the person in question had arrived earlier than expected. What in the world kind of visual kei guy was this person? The new arrival had a boyish, androgynous face. He was even wearing a skirt.

No, no. First impressions aside, she was a girl. I'd suspected as much after seeing her handwriting. Unlike when a boy revealed romantic feelings for another boy, this confession would probably be smooth. I might've thought that because I was a guy myself, though.

"Um, Ichinose-san... Who is this person?"

The new girl seemed a bit unnerved by the unexpected appearance of a male student.

"This is Ayanokouji-kun, from Class D. I'm sorry for bringing someone that you don't know, Chihiro-chan."

"Is he by any chance...your boyfriend, Ichinose-san?"

"Ah... Well..."

Ichinose probably meant to say that yes, yes I was. But guilt over lying seemed to stopper her answer. The words got stuck in her throat.

"So why is this Ayanokouji-kun person here?"

Confused by this unexpected situation, Chihiro began to cry. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Is he her boyfriend? Why would he be here if he wasn't? Chihiro was probably struggling to understand what was going on. Ichinose, seeing Chihiro's tears, grew flustered. Uncertain of what to do, she started panicking. I'd expected Ichinose to be a stalwart, reliable person, but apparently she had an unexpected weak point.

"Um, do you mind going somewhere else, please? I have something important that I need to talk with Ichinose-san about," Chihiro said.

"P-please wait a minute, Chihiro-san. That's, um... Well, to tell you

the truth, Ayanokouji-kun is...”

Ichinose was trying to make the first move and turn her down. She probably thought it would be harder if Chihiro directly said, *I like you*.

“What is it?” Chihiro asked.

“So, Ayanokouji-kun, he’s... Well, he’s my—”

There was nothing I could do in this situation. Well, nothing except...

“I’m just a friend.”

I cut Ichinose off before she could finish.

“Ichinose. I didn’t think this was something I should say, considering no one’s ever confessed to me before. But I think it was a mistake for you to call me here.”

I spoke honestly, for both their sakes.

“It’s true that confessing your feelings isn’t easy to do. You spend every day in complete anguish, as you create the experience in your head over and over. And yet, you still can’t confess your feelings. Even when you think the time has come to actually do it, you can’t say the words ‘I like you’. They get stuck in your throat. That’s what I think. Don’t you think you should answer someone when they desperately long to express their feelings? If you make the situation unclear, both of you may regret it later.”

“Uh...”

Ichinose had probably never experienced seriously falling in love with someone before. Therefore, she didn’t really know what to do, or if she were doing something wrong. Trying to prevent someone’s pain was useless. If you turned someone down, their feelings would inevitably be hurt.

Well, if you managed to come up with a suitable excuse, you probably could make things a little easier. An excuse like “I want to concentrate on my studies” or “There’s someone else that I like.” Or, like what Ichinose had attempted here: “I’m already dating someone.” But no matter what answer you gave, the other person would definitely be hurt.

Even more hurt if the excuse were built on a lie.

I left without waiting for Ichinose’s reply. I headed back, but didn’t return to the dormitory right away. Instead I stopped by the tree-lined

pathway, leaned against the handrail, and sighed as I looked up at green leaves.

About five minutes later, a girl ran past me. There were tears in her eyes. Despite that shocking image, I loitered there a while longer to kill time. Around sundown, Ichinose trudged back from the gym and walked over to me.

“Ah...”

Upon seeing me, she looked a little awkward and hung her head. But then she immediately glanced back up at me.

“I was wrong. I didn’t respect Chihiro-chan’s feelings. I just wanted to avoid hurting her, and to run away. That was my mistake. Love is really tough, huh?” Ichinose muttered as she leaned against the handrail next to me. “I asked her if we could carry on like usual, but... I don’t know if we can go back to how things were.”

“That depends on you both.”

“Yeah... Thanks for today. For coming along with me for such an odd request.”

“It’s okay. Days like this happen, anyway.”

“I guess our positions got reversed, huh? I planned on helping you, but then you ended up helping me.”

“I’m sorry for acting so full of myself back there,” I said.

Ichinose blinked a couple of times, as if I’d said something odd.

“There’s no need for you to apologize, Ayanokouji-kun. None at all.”

She stretched her arms towards the sky, and hopped off the railing.

“Now it’s my turn to help you. If there’s anything I can do, I will.”

I wondered how Class B’s Ichinose Honami planned to resolve this difficult situation. I had to admit, I was looking forward to seeing it.

4.8

That evening, I got a call as I was doing some online shopping. My phone was plugged into the wall next to my bed when suddenly its screen lit up. Caller ID displayed the name: Kushida Kikyou. I did a double take to make sure of what I saw. Knowing I wouldn't have the guts to call her back, I rolled my chair across the room, snatched my phone off the stand, and dove onto the bed.

"I'm sorry for calling you so late. You're still up?" she asked.

"Hmm? Oh. I was thinking of going to bed in a little bit. Did you need something?"

"Sakura-san's digital camera was broken, right? I feel like I'm partially to blame since I made her so flustered. So I wanted to take responsibility for that..."

"I don't think you should feel responsible, Kushida. Not in the least. Besides, she's going to get it fixed, right? Since it's so important to her, wouldn't she get it repaired no matter what?"

However, as I spoke I realized it probably wasn't that simple. Sakura was extremely inept at social interaction, and probably lacked the self-confidence to go to a store by herself. It was probably similar to how someone might feel about dining alone in a restaurant.

It was a little hard to believe she could be that shy, but in this world there were all sorts of different people with different personalities. So it wasn't particularly surprising to find a person who lacked all communication skills, right?

"So, did you offer to help her then, Kushida?" I asked.

She'd probably been proactive about establishing some common ground with Sakura.

"Yeah. She seemed hesitant at first, but then said that she'd be fine with the day after tomorrow. I think that Sakura's digital camera is probably really important to her."

Kushida had done a wonderful job taking the proper first steps to earn

Sakura's trust.

"But why are you telling me this? Won't it go more smoothly if it's just the two of you?"

"If we were just going to get it repaired, I suppose. But, there's another thing. I'd like your help with it, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Do you want me to ask if she knows anything about Sudou's incident?"

"Horikita-san seems convinced that Sakura saw everything. After getting a bit closer to Sakura-san, I also think she knows something. But there has to be some reason why she's keeping quiet, since she keeps denying that she witnessed it."

While taking Horikita along would probably be the best option, it was delusional to think that Horikita and Kushida would spend their day off together. Kushida had probably chosen me through the process of elimination, as I was the least harmful candidate. If she'd invited Ike or Yamauchi along, they would have had eyes only for Kushida.

Moreover, it was convenient. I'd wanted to visit the electronics store for a while now. I sat up and leaned against the wall. For some reason, it felt kind of rude to make plans while lying down.

"Okay, I understand. Let's go."

My voice cracked with a little too much excitement. Fortunately, Kushida didn't seem to notice anything strange, and didn't press me about it. I chatted with Kushida about this and that for a little while. I didn't get too worked up over the conversation; it was casual, so there was nothing to be nervous about. It was proof that she could invade my personal space without causing discomfort. In my mind, I'd firmly recognized her as my friend.

"That reminds me. It was really scary when Kouenji-kun and Sudou-kun looked like they were about to start fighting."

"Yeah. It was a critical situation. It looked like their fists were going to do the talking for them."

Kouenji always seemed laid-back, but if Sudou started taking swings at him, he would fight. If that happened, it'd be a disaster.

"I couldn't even move. Hirata-kun was so amazing, though. He's

definitely an admirable person.”

“Yeah.”

Hearing her praise Hirata like that made me a little jealous. I reminded myself that it was only natural to admire someone with the courage to step up in a situation like that.

“Class D was able to come together, thanks to you and Hirata. The fact that the boys and girls are separated plays a big part, too.”

Sometimes, only a girl could solve another girl’s issues.

“I’m just doing what I normally do. It wasn’t anything special.”

“I think Hirata would definitely say the same thing.”

Oftentimes, special people did not consider themselves special.

“Speaking of special, don’t you think that Horikita-san is way more special than someone like me? She’s great at studying and excels at sports. It makes me wonder why she’s in Class D.”

Horikita wasn’t special. She belonged to a unique class of people. I kept quiet, though, afraid that if I badmouthed her she’d find out about it.

“Wasn’t she assigned to Class D in part because she’s not very sociable?”

“But doesn’t she behave normally with you, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“You think that’s normal?”

Based on the Horikita I knew, I’d have to describe the way she treated others as miserable... I trembled a little to recall Ike fainting in agony.

“When I think of my relationship with Horikita, it’s like there’s a wall between us. Or perhaps I should say that’s the extent of our relationship, if you understand what I’m getting at.”

“Hmm?”

She sounded amused yet slightly doubtful. I didn’t like being misunderstood by Kushida.

“Ah, that reminds me. I wanted to ask you something. Your room is on the ninth floor, right, Kushida?”

“Huh? Ah, yeah, it is. Why? What about it?”

“Oh, no reason. Just curious.”

Suddenly, Kushida fell silent. It was unexpected silence, without warning. Our conversation, which had been smooth up until now, came to a screeching halt. Usually, Kushida would resume the conversation immediately, but now she’d stopped. Perhaps asking her floor number had been in bad taste?

I started fidgeting. Unable to calm down, I began pointlessly looking into every corner of my room. Ah, if only I were a pretty boy with excellent communication skills. I couldn’t help but wish for that. We were so quiet that we could hear each other breathing.

“It’s getting late. Should I hang up now?” I asked, unable to bear the silence.

It was painful to stay on the phone with a girl and not say anything.

“Hey—”

“Hmm?”

Kushida broke the silence, but then stopped talking again. Her hesitation was unusual. This was a far cry from the usual Kushida, who always tried to brighten the conversation.

“I-If... Well... I... I—”

She stopped talking again. Another period of silence followed. Five seconds, then ten seconds passed.

“No, it’s nothing.”

That sure didn’t *seem* like nothing...

However, I lacked the courage to say, “Hey, what is it? Spill!” to her, so I let it go. *Sorry, Kushida. If I were on the battlefield, I’d be the sniper, the chicken who would stay far away from the fighting. Forgive me.*

“Well, I’ll see you the day after tomorrow, Ayanokouji-kun.”

With that, Kushida ended the call. I wondered what she’d been trying to say. I felt like it was going to be a bad, sleepless night.

4.9

On Sunday afternoon, I went to the shopping mall to meet Kushida and fulfill my promise. For someone who generally spent Saturdays lounging in his room, this place made me nervous. One person was sitting on a bench up ahead. I wondered if that person were waiting for someone, like me. After all, most students just went around freely on their days off. While pondering the matter, I sat down on the other available bench.

I'd thought we would go together since we lived in the same dorm, but Kushida was a little fastidious when it came to these things. I decided it'd be better if we met at the agreed location.

"Good morning!"

In the surrounding hustle and bustle, Kushida drew nearer, a wide smile on her face.

"O-oh, hey. Good morning."

My heart started pounding. I fumbled over my words and managed an awkward wave.

"Sorry. Were you waiting long?"

"Oh no, I just got here."

Our back and forth felt like the template for a date. I unintentionally glanced over Kushida's whole body. She was cute. Kushida was really cute. Seeing Kushida in casual attire for the first time was so overwhelming, I couldn't look away.

"This is the first time we've met up on a day off. It's refreshing."

Kushida laughed, maybe because she felt the same way. What the heck was with that cute smile? Something that adorable was against the rules. Perhaps Ike and the others hadn't seen this before. Did that make me happiest of all? I had to contain my excitement in front of her. Kushida spoke up, as if she had just remembered something.

"Weren't you really busy during your downtime last week? I'm glad that you came despite that, Ayanokouji-kun."

Last week? Really glad I came despite that? What the heck was she talking about?

“I’m talking about Ike-kun and the others going to that café, of course.”

This was the first I’d heard about it. I didn’t recall any previous, hidden event.

“By any chance...” Kushida began.

“A-ah. That’s it. Now that you mention it, I didn’t... I didn’t hear about it.”

I looked up to the heavens and lamented my worthlessness. It’s not like Ike and the others were bad for not inviting me. I was the bad guy, the one who hadn’t been invited.

“I didn’t mean anything... I’m sorry, I guess I said something wrong...”

“Don’t worry about it. Really, I don’t care. Was it fun?”

“You *do* seem to care...”

If I handled this poorly, instead of being the happiest I’d ever been with Kushida, it’d be the worst. Even if it was for just a moment, spending time alone with her made me feel like the luckiest guy. The students who passed us would occasionally steal a glance at Kushida in her casual clothes. In the case of passing couples, the girlfriend would appear upset and grab her boyfriend by the cheek. Even though I was the one with Kushida, I couldn’t help but feel bewitched by her cuteness.

What the heck? I was really flattering Kushida a lot. What I'd said had been completely true, but there was also a whiff of bashfulness.

"What's the matter?"

Kushida froze, which I thought was strange. Every movement she made, or didn't make, was cute.

"I think we've had really nice weather lately."

Worried that we were heading into clichéd territory, I steered the conversation in another direction. I needed to calm down. How many times had I used the word "cute" today? At this rate, I'd probably end up using it 100 or 200 times.

"Ah. Sorry. I think I might look a little out of place next to you," I muttered.

I could easily move. I looked simple. I didn't look good next to Kushida by any standard.

"No, no, that's not true at all. I think we're great together," she replied.

"So, you're saying someone simple like me is a good match for you? I should accept an insult like that?"

"Yeah."

I felt the quick thrust of a knife. Maybe I'd dug my own grave by setting myself up like that, but it was still a shock.

"You're that surprisingly delicate, Ayanokouji-kun? I don't really care what others say. I don't think it's an insult at all. I really think we suit each other."

I felt like she was teasing me somehow. Normally, I'd get angry, but since this was Kushida talking it just felt unfair. She'd teased me so casually with only a few words.

"So, what about Sakura-san?"

"I don't see her yet."

It was the exact time we'd agreed to meet, but there still was no sign of her.

"But was she okay with it? Inviting me out, I mean."

“She asked me to invite you, Ayanokouji-kun. Didn’t Sakura-san contact you?”

“Sakura? No. I haven’t really talked to her.”

I recalled meeting up with Sakura at the special building. That had been about the extent of our contact.

“Perhaps it was love at first sight?” I said, laughing and grinning. Such a dramatic scenario would be absolutely ridiculous.

“Right now, how about we sit and wait?”

“Sure. Well... Hey, uh, isn’t that Sakura-san sitting next to us?”

Sakura, clearly flustered and indeed sitting on the bench next to us, stood and gave a sheepish bow. Had Sakura really been sitting there the entire time? Amazing that we hadn’t noticed her at all. Not a sign of her presence or aura.

“I’m sorry, I don’t stand out much, I suppose... Good morning,” Sakura said.

“No, I don’t think you blend in too much. I definitely felt your presence,” I said.

“Oh, you don’t need to say that for my sake, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Sakura bowed her head apologetically, and slowly straightened. I wanted her to forgive me for not noticing her. Sakura was wearing a hat, and even a surgical face mask, which made it difficult to recognize her at a glance. I wondered if she’d caught a cold or something.

“You kind of look suspicious...”

“Rather than saying you look suspicious, I think you actually stand out more.”

“Yeah, I suppose so. I think I do stand out, especially here,” Sakura responded. Sheepishly, she removed her mask.

She didn’t seem to have a cold. Rather, she seemed like the type to wear the mask in order to avoid attention. She must have really hated standing out.

“So anyway, about my digital camera. Is it okay if we go to the electronics store in the mall?” Sakura asked.

“Well, yes. We did certainly come here to get the camera fixed.”

“I’m sorry...for making you come along with me.”

Sakura bowed apologetically, as though begging forgiveness from the bottom of her heart. For some reason, I felt sorry for coming here.

4.10

There were some incredibly famous, nationally known stores that did business with our school. Even though their customers were only students and the stores themselves weren't too very big, they sold items for everyday use and electronic appliances.

"Let's see, I'm sure they have a repair counter somewhere. Let's check it out."

While Kushida headed towards the back of the store, I wondered just how many times she'd come here. Sakura and I followed close behind.

"I wonder if they'll fix it right away..."

Sakura, looked rather anxious as she took out her digital camera and held it tight.

"You really love your camera, don't you?" I asked.

"Yeah. It's weird, isn't it?"

"No, not at all. It's a good hobby to have, isn't it? I get the feeling there's a significant story attached to that camera. It'd be great if they fixed it soon."

"Yeah."

"There it is! The repairs counter."

The store was crowded with a huge number of products and difficult to navigate, but towards the back was the place where they handled repairs.

"Ah..."

For some reason, Sakura suddenly stopped in her tracks. When I glanced over at her, I noticed she was wearing an expression of blatant fear and revulsion. It seemed that something had upset her quite a bit. However, when I followed Sakura's line of sight, I saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"What's the matter, Sakura-san?" Kushida asked.

She also must've thought Sakura's behavior was strange.

"Ah, umm... Well..."

Although it seemed like she was about to say something, all Sakura did was shake her head and take a deep breath.

“It’s nothing.”

She donned an earnest smile, and walked to the repair counter. Kushida and I exchanged looks, but decided to follow her. Maybe it really was nothing, like she said. Kushida talked to the store clerk and asked him to repair the digital camera. Meanwhile, incredibly bored, I checked out the appliances on display.

Kushida’s worldly wisdom was certainly impressive. Even though it was her first time meeting the store clerk, she was soon talking to him as if they were longtime friends. Sakura, the camera’s owner, spoke only when she needed to give her consent or to clarify something. Even so, the store clerk appeared pretty fired up. He aggressively engaged Kushida in conversation, without even pausing for a breath. Although I could just barely hear the conversation, it sounded like he was asking Kushida on a date. He asked if she wanted to see a certain female idol’s concert, which was being screened over in the theater.

He seemed like quite the otaku, judging from how passionate he was about a wide range of subjects, from idol elections to idol magazines. Because Kushida didn’t show any signs of disliking the conversation, he probably thought he could successfully ask her out. However, I believed she would try her hardest to sidestep the invitation.

He seemed to be getting excited over talking to such a cute girl, but their conversation didn’t proceed any further. As I’d expected, Kushida began to feel awkward. In order to conclude their business, she urged Sakura to hand over the camera. When the store clerk opened up the camera to confirm the contents, he saw that part of it had been damaged from the fall. That was why the camera wouldn’t turn on properly. Fortunately, because Sakura still had the warranty card, the item could be repaired free of charge.

Finally, all Sakura had to do was fill out her contact information, and we’d be done. But Sakura’s hand suddenly stopped as she filled out the form.

“Sakura-san?”

Kushida, thinking that something strange was going on, called out to Sakura. She seemed to be hesitating for some reason. I didn’t intend to say

anything at the time, but her attitude seemed to weigh on my mind. And also

The store clerk, who had previously been absorbed in his conversation with Kushida, now stared directly at Sakura. Both Sakura and Kushida were looking down at the form, so they didn't notice. But the clerk had unsettling eyes. Even men would find it a little creepy.

"Can I see that for a second?" I asked.

"Huh?"

Standing next to Sakura, I reached for the pen she was holding. She didn't seem to understand why I wanted it, but she anxiously handed it over.

"When the repairs are finished, please contact me."

"H-hey, wait a minute. Contact you? She's the owner, isn't she? That would be..."

"The manufacturer warranty explicitly shows where the item was sold and the date of purchase. Also, I doubt there'd be any legal problems with me putting my information down. It should be perfectly fine if the user's name is different than the purchaser's."

Before the clerk could say "I understand", I'd entered my name and my dorm room number into the required fields.

"Or, is there a reason why she specifically has to enter her information?" I added, still without looking back up.

"N-no, not at all. I understand. There's nothing to worry about," the clerk said.

Shortly after I'd completed the form, I handed it over with the camera. Sakura gently patted her chest and sighed in apparent relief, but when she learned it'd take two weeks for the camera to be repaired, she grew discouraged. Her shoulders slumped.

"That clerk sure was something else. He talked with such incredible passion, I was just so shocked," Kushida said.

"Didn't you feel kind of disgusted?" Sakura asked.

"N-no, I wasn't disgusted by him. Do you know something? About that clerk?"

Sakura gave a meek nod. I guessed that something had been off even when she first purchased the camera. Turning to me, she asked, “What do you think, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Well, he had this sort of vibe, like he’s kind of hard to approach. Especially for girls.”

“That was kind of what I was trying to get at before... I was scared to go to the repair shop alone because of that...”

Kushida seemed to have an epiphany. She turned to me with wide eyes.

“Did you know about this, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Well, she’s a girl. I thought she might be reluctant to write down her address or cell phone number.”

Being a guy, I wouldn’t be troubled if my information got out there.

“Th-thank you...Ayanokouji-kun. You really...saved me.”

“Nah, I didn’t really do anything. I just wrote down my address. When they contact me about the repairs, I’ll get in touch with you right away, Sakura.”

Sakura nodded, looking glad. *If that’s all it takes to please you, then it actually makes me sorry for you.*

“You really looked out for Sakura-san,” Kushida said.

“Well, you’re making it out to be bigger than it was. Honestly, I was only watching out for that rather weird clerk. I guess he gave the impression that he really, *really* loved girls.”

“Ha ha... That’s certainly true.”

Even Kushida appeared nonplussed. For someone like Sakura, though, who wasn’t accustomed to fawning male attention, I thought it was the right answer.

“Since you were with me today, Kushida-san, we completed our task without me having to talk at all. Thank you.”

If Sakura had faced that store clerk one-on-one, she probably would’ve run away.

“Oh, no need to thank me. If you’re okay with my help, then I’m happy

to lend a hand any time. Sakura-san, you really like your camera. Don't you?"

"Yeah... I've liked cameras ever since I was little. My dad bought me one before I entered junior high, and I absolutely fell in love with it. Or I suppose you could say that I just love taking pictures... I'm not really well-informed when it comes to this stuff, though."

"I think being knowledgeable and liking things are separate matters. It's wonderful to be so passionate about something."

"Sakura, you usually take pictures of landscapes, right? Do you ever take pictures of people?"

"Huh?!"

Sakura stepped backwards, looking quite flustered. Did she find that question unpleasant? It'd seemed like an extremely natural question to ask. Like, did she *just* take pictures of landscapes or were they her specialty? Sakura shut her mouth, and her body stiffened.

"Th-that's a secret."

Well then. It sounded like she didn't want to go into the details with me.

"W-well, it's just... It's embarrassing," replied Sakura, her cheeks reddening. She looked down as she spoke.

Although my imagination ran wild, I couldn't let it show on my face. I had to remain neutral.

"Oh hey, that reminds me. Sorry to ask, but since we're here, is it okay for me to look around the store?"

"Was there something you wanted?"

It wasn't so much that I wanted something, as there was something on my mind.

"The two of you can wander around, if you want."

"I think we'll come in, too. Right?" Kushida said.

"S-sure. After all, I feel bad you both had to come with me... Besides, I do have the time."

I didn't exactly want them there, but apparently they'd decided to come along. Kushida and Sakura. When I watched the two of them walk side by side, I realized that they'd managed to grow closer in just one day. *Kushida, I wish you'd share a little of your people skills with me.*

Since they seemed to be having girl talk, I decided to leave them alone and went to look for what I wanted. I went into my phone's contacts. Back when Ike had involved me in the whole gambling thing, I'd exchanged contact information with some people. Even though I still only had a few names in my address book, it was clear that my number of friends was increasing. I selected the name "Sotomura (Professor)" and called him.

"Hey Professor, do you have a minute?"

"Hmm? It's rare to get a call from you, Ayanokouji. What do you need?"

Sotomura's nickname was Professor, which undoubtedly made it sound like he was rather intelligent. In reality, he was just a huge otaku. He gathered information daily, comprehensively spanning a wide variety of topics, from dating sims to anime and manga.

"Professor, did you buy your laptop computer from the school, with your points?"

"Yes, I most certainly did. It cost 80,000 points. But what of it?"

"I'm looking for something."

I explained the gist of what I wanted. Although many similar products sat on the displays in front of me, I didn't know which one to choose. It probably would've been faster to just ask the store clerk, but I didn't want to for various reasons.

"Ayanokouji. Though I am considerably well-versed in that particular electronic field..."

"It's okay if you don't know."

"Please wait," said the Professor as I was about to end the call. "I *do* know. In fact, I have two of them at my parents' home."

"No way! You've had them since junior high? Isn't that bad?"

"Do not misunderstand me. They were only for experimentation, for

the sake of my language studies.”

“Well, could I trouble you to help me set it up?”

“Puh, leave it to me. I’m sure that someday I will have a favor to ask of you in return.”

Clearly, he was the man for the job. When entering a subject that I didn’t understand, it was important to find an expert.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I said to the girls.

“Have you already finished?”

“Today was just a preliminary inspection. I don’t have enough points to buy anything.”

Suddenly, Kushida froze while glancing over at Sakura’s profile.

“Sakura-san, have we met somewhere before?” Kushida murmured.

“Huh? N-no. I don’t think so, but...”

“Sorry. It’s just that when I look at you, I get this feeling that we’ve met before, Sakura-san. Hey, weird question, but could you try removing your glasses?”

“Huh?! B-but that’s... My eyesight is so bad, I wouldn’t be able to see a thing...”

Sakura put her hand up and waved it, signaling to Kushida that she did not want to.

“We should hang out together again, Sakura-san. Not just with me, but with my other friends, too.”

“That’s...”

Sakura looked like she wanted to say something, but she couldn’t find her way to the end of the thought. She said nothing. Kushida seemed to feel that it would make trouble if she pressed the issue, so she kept quiet. Or rather, she didn’t ask anything else. In the end, we returned to where we’d started.

“Umm... Thank you for everything today. You really helped me out,” Sakura said.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. There’s no need to thank us. Actually, Sakura-san,

you can talk to us normally, you know? If it's okay with you. We're in the same grade. It sounds a little weird when you speak so formally to us."

It was certainly true that Sakura's speech patterns weren't exactly what you would expect from a peer. But changing that might be easier said than done for her; she was visibly perplexed.

"I didn't mean to sound that way. I wasn't aware of it... I sound weird?"

"It's not really a bad thing! I mean, I'd be happy if you didn't speak so formally to me, though."

"Ah... O-okay... I...I got it. I'll do my best."

I thought that Sakura would have rejected the notion, but she managed to squeak out a few words of agreement. It seemed like she wanted to accept Kushida's proposal. Perhaps this was how people became friends, little by little. Even Sakura, who seemed to have hardly interacted with another person ever, was steadily growing closer to Kushida.

"It's okay, though. You don't need to force yourself."

"I-It's okay. I...will."

Sakura kept her eyes down as she spoke. Partway through her sentence she began to sputter, and her words faded so much that we couldn't hear them. However, it didn't seem as though she felt uncomfortable. Kushida smiled in satisfaction, but didn't try to coerce anything more from Sakura. That specific distance felt exactly right for where they were at the moment. If you tried to strong-arm people who weren't good at socializing, it could backfire. Rather than be grateful, they'd probably find it off-putting. Rather than draw them nearer, being overbearing would probably end up pushing them further away.

"Well then, we'll see you at school. Okay?"

With that, Kushida thought the conversation had ended. However, rather unexpectedly, Sakura didn't move.

"Well!"

Sakura spoke in a small voice, but looked straight at us. When our gazes met, however, she immediately averted her eyes.

“About Sudou-kun... As my way of saying thanks for today, I... Well, that might be a little misleading, but if you like...”

She paused, and started again more clearly.

“I-I may be able to help you with Sudou-kun’s case.”

In her own words, Sakura told us that she was the witness. Kushida and I exchanged glances.

“So, does that mean that you saw Sudou-kun fight with those other students?”

“Yes. I saw everything. It was a total coincidence, though... I’m sure you don’t believe me.”

“No, we do. Why did you decide to tell us now, though? I mean, I’m happy you did, but I don’t want you to force yourself. You don’t have to do this just because you’re grateful, you know?”

Sakura couldn’t seem to get her words out. She lightly shook her head. The fact that Sakura had waited until now to talk proved that she was more concerned about Sudou’s case than anything else. I wondered if getting a foothold on friendship made her want to cooperate.

“Is that really true? You’re not forcing yourself?” Kushida asked. She must’ve been thinking the same thing as me.

Sakura nodded sheepishly, as if she could feel that we were worrying about it.

“It’s okay... I think that if I kept quiet, I’d probably come to regret it. I...don’t want to cause trouble for my classmates. But, if I spoke up as a witness, then...I would definitely stand out. I hated the thought of that... I’m sorry.”

While Sakura apologized to us repeatedly, full of remorse, she also promised Kushida that she would testify.

“Thank you, Sakura-san. I’m sure Sudou-kun will be really happy.”

Kushida took Sakura’s hand, and Sakura looked at Kushida’s smiling face. I wondered if a new friendship had been born right here, right now. At any rate, we had Sudou’s witness.

4.11

That night, I clutched my phone tightly. My hand was sweating so much you'd think the air conditioning in my room wasn't working.

"We got closer to Sakura, but... Is it really okay for me to say that?"

"Yesterday I would've said no, but our chances are better today. Ahh... I think we still have a way to go yet, though. You're making yourself all frazzled."

I'd guessed that Sakura would probably grow closer to Kushida, specifically. But I had a feeling that Sakura had erected a rather high wall between herself and other people. Unless we could get her to climb over that wall, calling on Sakura as a witness would be difficult.

"That reminds me, why did you try to get Sakura to take off her glasses?" I asked Kushida.

"Well, I mean... I thought saying so might be kind of cruel, but... I just feel like her glasses don't really suit her, for some reason. It's like she doesn't really need them, or something. I don't understand it myself. I also thought that we'd met somewhere before, but that was probably just a misunderstanding."

"Well, perhaps that was just your imagination, Kushida? I mean, Sakura is pretty far from being stylish, right? I mean, so am I, but she even chooses clothes with plain colors so she stands out as little as possible."

"Yeah, there's that. I don't think that she's concerned with fashion or anything. But I wonder why?"

Back when her camera fell and Sakura had bent down to pick it up, I'd seen her glasses from the side. Something about them had struck me as being out of place.

"I felt like there's something a little off, like she's wearing fake glasses."

"Huh? Sakura-san wears fake glasses? But she said that her eyesight was really bad..."

“Although real glasses and fake ones appear similar at first glance, there is definitely a difference between them. Real glasses show some distortion on the lenses. There wasn’t any distortion on Sakura’s glasses. At first, I thought that there was definitely some link between those fake glasses and Sakura’s fashion sense, but then I found myself puzzled over something she said today.”

“Appearing fashionable with glasses? Hmm, that doesn’t sound normal.”

If she wanted to liven up her appearance with decorative items, she should have bought other clothes or make-up.

“Or maybe it’s to cover up some kind of complex? Like how someone thinks they’ll appear intelligent by putting on glasses?”

“There’s that. Wearing glasses *does* make you look smart.”

“In Sakura’s case, though, she probably wears them because she doesn’t want others to see her true self. She’s always slouching and won’t look people in the eye. I doubt it’s simply because she dislikes other people.”

I felt like there was some hidden way to get over that wall. Something.

“I knew it was right to bring you along, Ayanokouji-kun. I feel like you’re very observant of people.”

I was a little embarrassed. The best part of interacting with Kushida was how we were able to connect and converse naturally. People who didn’t know how to get closer to another person would bungle and compromise until they got to a point where they just gave up.

“So then—”

Just as I was about to continue the conversation with Kushida, my phone buzzed. I checked the caller ID without Kushida knowing. If it were Ike or Yamauchi, I’d call them back later. But if it were Horikita...I’d have to think about it. That’s what I was prepared for, but...

The name on the screen read “Sakura.”

“I’m sorry, Kushida. Can I call you back in a bit?”

“Oh, sure. Sorry for talking so long.”

Though there was a heavy regret in those parting words, I didn’t have

the time to address it. I answered Sakura's call before it cut out. After pressing the call button, I waited several seconds, but the line remained silent.

"Um... Hello. This is Sakura..."

"This is Ayanokouji."

Even though we'd exchanged contact information, I found it a little strange that she'd called me. Even when I formally exchanged contact information with someone, nine times out of ten I wouldn't get a call.

"Thank you for coming out with me today," Sakura said.

"Oh, no problem. It wasn't really a big deal. Don't worry about it. You shouldn't fuss so much and keep thanking me."

"Okay..."

Silence followed, but it wasn't Sakura's fault. I didn't really know how to respond to her. I thought of how Kushida took the lead in our conversation. Still, I had to do my best on this call.

"What's the matter?"

"Umm..."

More silence. What should I do? *Please, Hirata. Teach me.*

"What were you...thinking about?"

Sakura asked me a rather ambiguous question. What was I thinking about? She likely didn't want to know my thoughts on how cute Kushida looked in casual clothing, or how exceptionally interesting I found Sakura herself. I had no idea what Sakura was expecting.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

Something about the emotion behind her words made me uneasy, so I cast a verbal line to see if I could reel in anything else. However, the line tautened and snapped as soon as it touched water.

"I'm sorry, it's nothing. Goodnight."

Sakura ended the call without even giving me a chance to reply. No "please wait" or "hold on." I thought about calling her back, but I couldn't understand why I'd failed in our conversation. I thought about it carefully while washing my face. I'd spent about 10 minutes talking with Kushida, but

during that time, there weren't any signs that Sakura had tried to call or left messages.

Perhaps Sakura had planned on calling Kushida after talking to me? I had a hard time imagining that. Normally when you had to call two people, the first person you'd call would be the one you knew better. In this case, I was the only person she could call and see, so I was the reasonable choice. Just to be sure though, I went ahead and sent a chat message to Kushida and asked her if she had heard from Sakura.

A few minutes later, Kushida confirmed that she hadn't heard back from Sakura. Just as I'd thought.

"I was asked to invite you as well, Ayanokouji-kun. Did you talk to Sakura-san?"

When I'd met Kushida that morning, she'd said something like that. Because Sakura got really nervous when she was alone with Kushida, I had thought she'd just invited someone else who was suitable for the task, but... was it not like that? Aside from a crazy dream like it being love at first sight, was there some reason *I* had been chosen to go? I remembered something I'd felt while talking with Sakura today.

Sakura and Kushida struck up most of the conversations, but I'd broached a topic. Namely, the clerk at the store who'd helped with the repair order. I hadn't brought up anything else. What if that's what she'd meant when she asked, "What were you thinking about?"

All of the puzzle pieces I'd collected were too small, and too few. I was able to conjure up several scenarios and speculations, but they all lacked credibility. I didn't have enough information to come to a definitive decision.

Normally I'd have thought that asking around at school would be fine, but in Sakura's case, things wouldn't be so simple. If I just went up and started talking to Sakura, who normally didn't talk to anyone, it would make her stand out. She wouldn't like that. I prayed that the anxieties I'd developed over the phone call were unfounded, and decided to get ready for bed.

Chapter 5: Each and Every Prediction

It was just one day until the meeting between Sudou and Class C. With Horikita's cooperation and Sakura's testimony, as well as Kushida and Hirata's actions, our entire class felt spirited and courageous. You could say that we were united. However, it was obvious that we lacked firm, irrefutable evidence, and it would still be difficult to prove Sudou's innocence. Our deliberation would decide the outcome.

"Man, it really is hot today..."

I never thought about global warming more than when I exited a building with working air conditioning. Considering I'd likely suffer every day until August, my spirits remained low. The moment I left my dorm's lobby, hot and humid air assaulted me. While I endured the pain of my burning skin, I walked the path to school lined with green, leafy trees.

Something was different today, though. There was something on the bulletin board by the stairway's landing, a little in front of the shoe cubbies. A paper on the board said that they were looking for students with information related to Sudou and Class C.

"This—"

Clearly, somebody was trying to help. It was sincerely appreciated, because we hadn't even considered taking such measures ourselves. This mystery person was action-oriented. Furthermore, while the sign itself might have appeared a weak effort, the author also wrote that they'd be willing to give points to helpful informants. In that case, even apathetic students would pay attention.

As I scanned the message, I was quite impressed...

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun!" Ichinose called out from behind me.

She must have just arrived.

"I saw the paper on the bulletin board. Did you post it, Ichinose?"

Ichinose joined me in looking at the board. She appeared deeply interested.

“Hmm. I see, I see. So there’s this method, too.”

“Huh? This wasn’t you?”

I’d thought that surely this was her strategy.

“This was probably— Ah, he’s here! Good morning, Kanzaki-kun.”

Ichinose raised her hand up and signaled to a lone male student. The boy noticed Ichinose, and approached us with quiet steps.

“Did you put this up, Kanzaki-kun?”

“Yeah. I made and posted it on Friday. Is there something wrong?”

“Oh, no. Not at all. My friend here just wanted to know who did it. Ah, I’ll introduce you two. Kanzaki-kun from Class B, this is Ayanokouji-kun from Class D.”

“Nice to meet you, Kanzaki.”

His demeanor was stiff, but he appeared to be a serious student. He was tall and slender. A pretty boy, but in a different way from Hirata. I took his outstretched hand.

“How’s it going, Kanzaki-kun? Did you get anything reliable?”

“Unfortunately, I haven’t received any useful information.”

“I see. Well, how about we look at the bulletin board.”

“At the bulletin board? Did you put up another poster?”

Ichinose wore a thin smile, indicating it was something else.

“Have you ever checked out the school homepage? There’s a message board. I requested that people come forward with information there. I said that if there anyone witnessed a violent incident at our school, I’d like to hear about it.”

After she said that, Ichinose showed us her phone’s screen. It showed a message seeking out witnesses, as well as a count for the number of people who’d viewed it. The displayed number was still only in the dozens, but it was much more efficient than asking people directly. Also, the message posted to the homepage offered compensation to witnesses and people with

helpful information.

“Ah, regarding the stuff about points, don’t worry. We just decided to do that on our own. Besides, it will probably be difficult for us to get new information now. Ah!”

“What’s the matter?”

“It looks like I just got two messages regarding the post. There might be a little information.”

Ichinose checked her phone for confirmation. After she’d read the messages, a slight smile crept onto her face.

“Just like this.”

She showed me her phone so I could read the message for myself.

“It looks like one of the boys from Class C, Ishizaki-kun, was a bad seed in junior high. He was good at fighting, and terrorized the locals. A kid from his hometown probably leaked this.”

“Interesting,” Kanzaki muttered, also reading the message.

Like Kanzaki, I found the information quite interesting. Everyone had assumed that the three students Sudou fought were normal kids. However, if they were troublemakers too, then that was a different story. As for the other two, being basketball players meant they probably had good motor skills. Yet Sudou had turned the tables, and beat them all without once being hit himself. I couldn’t help but feel there was something unnatural about that.

“Kanzaki-kun, what do you think?”

“Perhaps they let Sudou beat them up on purpose. If the three of them had wanted to set a trap for Sudou, the story would make perfect sense. The connection seems natural.”

“Yeah, I think so too. I knew you’d figure it out, Kanzaki-kun. Great work. If we can verify this information, then we could be one step closer to proving Sudou-kun’s innocence. But what we have is still pretty weak, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Even if we managed to convince people with this new evidence, we’re really only halfway there. The fact that it was such a one-sided fight definitely puts a lot of pressure on us.”

Sudou probably wouldn’t want to shoulder some of the guilt alongside the others. Neither party wanted to be liable for this situation. If we got testimony from Class D, though, our chances would probably be 6 to 4, or maybe 7 to 3.

“No, we can’t say anything yet.” I concealed Sakura’s name since we were still negotiating.

“I see. Is there some reason why?”

Since the whole Sakura situation was rather delicate, I avoided explaining in detail. After all, she might decide to quit after all, even on the day of the decision. I wanted to have an escape route.

“There’ve been no reports of another witness, just as I thought. It would’ve been interesting if one had stepped forward, but I suppose it was tough. We’re out of time. Our only choice now is to wait for more information from either the Internet or the bulletin board, right?”

“Is it okay to wait that long, though? I mean, those Class C guys might zero in on us.”

“It’ll be okay. Besides, both Class C and Class A originally targeted us, anyway.”

“Ichinose is right. Besides, even if you wanted to stick by the rules, everyone is acting out of bounds. I think it’s okay to ask for forgiveness this time.”

Ichinose and Kanzaki made it pretty clear that they wanted to be fair and square when competing against the school and the other students.

“Anyway, we’ll have to transfer points over to anyone who provides us with information. Ah, but what if someone does so anonymously? In that case, how would we transfer over the points?”

“We can tell you, if you’d like. Do you want me to?” I said.

“Do you know something, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“I just remembered something when I was messing around on my phone. Do you know the person’s number?”

“It’s a toll-free number, but I remember it.”

Ichinose drew close and pointed at her phone. Being this near to somebody usually made people feel defenseless. I’d thought that a girl wouldn’t want a man to be in her intimate space...and I didn’t know exactly what it was, but Ichinose had a pleasant scent about her.

“Here, open up the points remittance screen. You should see your ID number in the upper left corner.”

As I instructed her, my heart rate began to skyrocket.

“Umm...”

Ichinose’s fingers were nimble. She pressed the button to open up her own points page. After the page loaded, it was displayed on the screen.

“Yep, yep. There it is. So what should I do now that I can see the ID

number?”

“From your ID number, you can issue a temporary token key. If you open that, and send the key, you should get a request for payment.”

“I see. Thank you!”

“Okay. Let’s go, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Sure.”

Ichinose started walking.

“.....”

Just then, for a split second, I had seen something on Ichinose’s phone. The fragment of screen I’d noticed had burned itself into my mind and wouldn’t go away. What should I do? Was what I’d seen even possible? Ichinose might prove a huge obstacle for Horikita in her quest to reach Class A.

5.1

“Good morning! Ayanokouji-kun!”

“O-oh, hey. Good morning.” Kushida greeted me looking incredibly bright and energetic. I was taken aback by her radiance.

“Thanks for yesterday. You really saved me.”

Well, I suppose her dazzling face made me happy, but something else was bothering me that I couldn't remember. I'd gone on an outing for the first time, and it had been with girls like Kushida and Sakura. Ah, it was almost too much. Well, I guess for the time being, things were great...until Ike and Yamauchi got to school, that was. If they heard about this, they'd definitely hold a serious grudge over it.

“Let's hang out again sometime, okay?” Kushida said.

“S-sure.”

Even if she'd only said it to be polite, my heart thumped a little faster. Well, that wasn't a bad thing.

“Did you spend your day off with Kushida-san?” an icy voice asked.

“Yeah, I did,” I answered quietly. “Kushida wanted Sakura's cooperation, so she asked for my help. I didn't have much of a choice.”

“I see.”

“Was there something wrong with...that?”

I looked over at my neighbor, and saw an expression on Horikita's face that I'd never glimpsed before.

“Wh-what's the matter?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you just had this really weird look on your face.”

“Really? I didn't intend to make any kind of face. I should look the same as I always do. However, I will say that I admire how freely you've been moving. When I ask you for help, you're often reluctant, but when Kushida-san asks you, you accept readily. I was calmly and discretely

analyzing the difference between us.”

She did not remotely look calm and discreet.

Just then, someone lightly tapped my shoulder, and told me to go over and see Kushida. Horikita wore a tremendously puzzled expression as I went over to the hallway, where Kushida briefly peeked into the classroom.

“I have a feeling I just saw something really incredible!” she said.

Did Kushida understand the meaning behind Horikita’s expression? She seemed both delighted and surprised.

“Something incredible? That’s creepy... I think that Horikita was a little angry.”

“That’s not it. I think she feels alienated and lonely over not being invited.”

“Horikita? No way!”

“She probably doesn’t know how she feels... I’m sure she’s probably noticed how much fun it is to spend time with friends and talk to them, though. That’s a good thing, a good thing.”

What a bizarre thought. Horikita didn’t have a good opinion of Kushida. Even so, it was strange for Kushida to say that Horikita felt alienated over not being invited.

“Perhaps you’re realizing something fundamental, Ayanokouji-kun. Horikita-san is upset that you didn’t invite her to come along.”

No, no, that couldn’t be it... I mean, Horikita was a girl who loved solitude, after all. She wasn’t supposed to enjoy going out, certainly not with a guy like me.

In that moment, I had come to a rather baffling realization.

5.2

After homeroom finished for the day, we asked Chabashira-sensei to see us in the faculty room. We did this out of consideration for Sakura. Because I hadn't been able to discuss it with her fully over the phone yesterday, I waited towards the back of the room for an opportune moment. Kushida was probably going to be able to tell Chabashira-sensei everything that had happened.

"A witness? For Sudou's case?"

"Yes. Sakura-san saw everything from start to finish."

Kushida called for Sakura, who stood quietly behind her. She stepped forward, looking slightly nervous.

"So according to Kushida, you saw the fight between Sudou and the others."

"Yes. I saw it."

It's not that our teacher didn't believe us, but I felt ill at ease before her skeptical gaze. Sakura, true to her word, slowly gave us the truth. This was the first time that we had heard the full story. None of us, not even the teacher, spoke a single word or even moved until the very end.

"I understand what you're said. However, I can't simply accept what you're telling me," Chabashira-sensei said.

I would have thought that, as Class D's homeroom teacher, she would've been delighted to discover a witness from Class D. Kushida, betrayed by this turn of events, was flustered.

"Wh-What do you mean, sensei?" she asked.

"Sakura, why are you testifying now? When I reported the issue during homeroom, you didn't step forward. It's not as though you were absent that day, right?"

"Well... That's... I'm just not good at talking with other people..."

"You're not good at talking with other people, and yet you've decided to testify now? Isn't that strange?"

Chabashira-sensei started hounding Sakura, as was typical. If Sakura had stepped forward back when she'd first called for witnesses, though, I wondered if Chabashira-sensei would honestly have welcomed it.

"Sensei, Sakura-san is..."

"I'm speaking to Sakura right now." Chabashira-sensei cut Kushida off sharply.

"Umm... Well, it's because our...class is in trouble now, and...I thought if...if I testify, I can help..."

Sakura hunched and shrank away, much like a frog cornered by a snake. As our teacher, Chabashira-sensei should have understood what kind of girl Sakura was. She should have realized that merely by speaking up, Sakura had made great progress.

"I see. So, then you mustered up the courage to come forward?"

"Yes..."

"I see. Well if you are a witness as you say, naturally I'm obligated to relay that information to the school. However, while the school will listen to the whole story, Sudou may not be declared innocent."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Are you really the witness, Sakura? That's what I'm getting at. I think that it may be a lie made up by Class D because the students are afraid of receiving a negative evaluation."

"Chabashira-sensei, that's a horrible thing to say!"

"Horrible? If you really *had* witnessed an event, you should have come forward on the first day. It's natural to feel suspicious when someone steps up just in the nick of time. Considering that the witness is from Class D, it's doubly suspicious. Any reasonable person would have doubts. Don't you think so? Conveniently, a student from the same class *happened* to be in an infrequently visited building and *happened* to witness the entire event?"

Chabashira-sensei had plenty of good points. The fact that Sakura had witnessed the incident was too convenient. People would obviously have their doubts. If I were a third party, I'd probably think Class D had made this story up. Judged impartially, it was only natural to consider this eyewitness testimony weak.

“However, a witness is a witness. I cannot determine if she’s lying, so for the time being, I will accept her testimony. So, Sakura, I will ask for you to join us on the day of deliberation. I understand that you do not like to associate with others, but can you do this?”

Chabashira-sensei’s words shook Sakura, as if she were testing the girl. Sure enough, Sakura, upon imagining this, turned pale and anguished.

“If you don’t like it, you do have the option to withdraw. Also, we’ll tell Sudou that he will be participating in the deliberation.”

“Are you okay? Sakura-san?”

“Y-yeah...” Sakura’s reply lacked confidence. In addition to having to give her testimony in front of others, she was also going to have to sit alone with Sudou. It seemed a little cruel to force her...

“Do you mind if we participate as well, sensei?”

Of course, it was Kushida who spoke up, most likely to support Sakura.

“If Sudou himself consents, I will approve it. However, we cannot allow that many people. Only a maximum of two may sit in on the deliberation. Please think on that carefully.”

We left the faculty room, though it felt more like we were being kicked out. Afterward, we returned to the classroom and explained everything to Horikita.

“Well, naturally that was the result. It’s to be expected.”

“The situation might be different now, but it’s not that *huge* of a difference, right? I mean, the fact that our witness came from Class D does kind of mean we’re out of luck, though.”

I didn’t know if it would comfort Horikita, but I said it to stick up for Sakura. If we hadn’t convinced our eyewitness to come forward, it probably would’ve been impossible to prove Sudou’s innocence.

“Now then, Kushida-san. It would be best for Ayanokouji-kun and me to sit in on the deliberation. I fully understand you supporting Sakura-san. However, if it comes to a debate, then that’s a different story.”

“That’s... Yes, you’re right. I don’t think I’d be particularly useful in a debate.”

I considered saying something about how it would be perfect if Kushida and Horikita worked together, but thought better of it. It was precisely because they might not make the best team that I'd been appointed as a substitute, I supposed.

“Sakura-san, do you mind?”

“N-no, it's fine.”

She didn't seem to like this at all, but she also didn't have much choice right now.

5.3

With that settled, we reconvened in the classroom during our lunch to discuss strategy. Horikita had been reluctant to participate, but thanks to Kushida's persuasive tears, she'd agreed to join. As for the person of interest himself, even if Sudou said he didn't care and compromised, he could easily become obstinate in critical situations. While I thought about how he might become difficult at any time, I kept silent.

"Can we really prove Sudou's innocence tomorrow?" Kushida asked.

"Of course we will. It's obvious that I was set up. I'm definitely innocent. Right?" Sudou said.

They simultaneously looked to Horikita for her opinion. Horikita simply ate her bread in silence, either because she was unable to answer or because she found discussion to be annoying.

"Hey, Horikita. What do you think?" Sudou, clearly unable to read the room, drew nearer to Horikita.

"Don't bring your dirty face so close to me."

"I-It's not dirty." Sudou was shaking. Maybe he was hurt by that unexpected jab?

"I can't help but be mystified by your belief that your innocence can easily be proven. Although you've gained evidence that works in your favor, you're still in a very disadvantageous situation."

"But we have a witness who knows I'm innocent, and the other guys were real jerks in the past. That should be enough, right? Those guys are bad news." Sudou, completely blind to his own shortcomings, arrogantly crossed his legs and nodded in agreement with himself.

"Ah, hey, wait a second! I'm still reading that! Give it back!"

"It's fine, isn't it? I paid for half of it, anyway. I'll give it back later."

Ike and Yamauchi scrambled over a weekly manga magazine. I guess they'd been quietly reading manga while we had our important meeting. Considering their bitter tears over having absolutely no points at all, I found

it kind of amazing that they still managed to buy a magazine each week.

“Huh?” Kushida, seated beside me as the Ike/Yamauchi spectacle unfolded, appeared deep in thought. “Perhaps...” she murmured.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Ah, nothing. It’s nothing. There was just something on my mind.”

I didn’t understand what she was getting at, but Kushida pulled out her phone and began looking up something.

5.4

After returning to my dorm, I lay in my bed and absentmindedly watched TV. My mind was kind of a blank, as I let myself relax. Then, I got an email from Sakura.

“If I was absent from school tomorrow, what do you think would happen?”

“What do you mean?”

Even though my reply had been short, I waited a while for her response.

“What are you doing right now?”

That was her answer. I replied that I was in my room by myself.

“If it’s okay with you, could we meet right now? I’m in room 1106.”

“If you could keep this a secret from everyone... That would really help me out.”

I received two messages from her in quick succession. It was more like texting than email. What exactly was she getting at, I wondered? I thought about asking her why, but then stopped typing. If I bungled this, she might keep messaging me, but it would probably get more difficult to pay her a visit. I had the gut feeling that it would be better for us to meet directly, so I started rewriting my response.

“I’ll head over there in about five minutes.”

After sending my reply, I reached for my coat, but stopped. Since we were in the same dorm, going out with just a jersey on was probably fine. I headed towards Sakura’s room. The upper level...in other words, where the *girls* lived. This was my first time setting foot there. The school didn’t necessarily prohibit boys from entering. Even if someone saw me going there, it wouldn’t be a problem. In fact, the popular guys often headed up there to hang out and have fun.

Although we were allowed a relative degree of freedom, entry was prohibited after 8:00 PM. Naturally, going to the girls’ floor in the middle of

the night was prohibited.

I pushed the elevator's call button. When the doors slid open, Horikita was standing there. What horrible timing.

"....."

For some reason, I was completely unable to move. I just stood there. Was this good luck or bad? In the case of bumping into an acquaintance, I had to wonder.

"What? You're not getting on?" she asked.

While she stared at me, she tried to close the doors.

"Ah, yeah. I'm getting on..."

While I felt like this was probably a bad idea, I hopped in and pushed the button for the eleventh floor. I saw that the button for the thirteenth floor was also lit. That must've been Horikita's floor. For some reason, I got the strange feeling that she was watching me from behind.

"You're...heading home late tonight, huh?" I asked, without looking at her. The silence was unbearable.

"I was out shopping. Did you not see?"

I heard the rustle of vinyl bags.

"That reminds me. You cook for yourself, don't you?"

It felt like the elevator was going more slowly than usual. We were still only on the sixth floor. Being stealthily invited over by a girl was a stressful situation. My unease meant I had to say something.

"This isn't the tenth floor. Is that okay?"

Why in the world was she asking me about the tenth floor? What was her intention?

"For someone who dislikes trouble, you've been extremely proactive in involving yourself with this case. Or perhaps you have ulterior motives?" Horikita was clearly probing.

"If you have something to say, why not come out and say it?"

"You're going to meet with Sakura-san, aren't you?" she asked.

“No, I’m not.” I immediately denied it, but wondered if Horikita could see the truth.

“Well. I suppose where you go is none of my business.”

In that case, don’t ask me about it! Well, that was what I wanted to say, but I spoke the words only in my head.

After a long time, we finally arrived at the eleventh floor in complete silence. I stepped off the elevator, trying to remain calm. I didn’t look back.

“Pardon me for intruding...” I said at Sakura’s door.

“Come on in.” She greeted me wearing casual clothes.

“So. What did you need from me?”

“Umm... Ayanokouji-kun, do you remember what you said before? You said I wasn’t obligated to step forward, even though I was the witness. You also said it was meaningless to force me to testify.”

That was back when I’d met Sakura by accident. I gave a slight nod.

“I...just don’t have any self-confidence after all.”

“Is this about speaking in front of other people?”

“I’ve been terrible at it for so long... I’m not good at speaking in front of others. If I’m asked to testify in front of the teachers tomorrow, I don’t think I’ll have the confidence to answer properly. So...”

“So you’re considering taking the day off from school?”

Sakura gave a slight nod before collapsing and laying her forehead onto the table.

“Ahhhhh. Jeez, why am I so completely useless?!” She shrank into herself, clearly ashamed. It was the first time I’d seen her like that.

“Sakura, you’re surprisingly high-strung, huh?”

I felt the gap between the person I saw now and her usual behavior, and was a little taken aback. Or rather, I was shocked.

“Huh?!”

Sakura, realizing she’d let me see this side of her, blushed and shook her head. “N-no! I’m not like that at all.”

So she could be animated. I'd had no idea, considering her usually depressed look.

"Hey, can I ask you just one thing? Why did you call me?" Kushida or somebody else would've been friendlier, easier to talk to.

"That's because I'm not afraid of your eyes, Ayanokouji-kun..."

Huh? What did that mean? I certainly didn't have scary eyes or anything, but...

"If you're looking for someone to talk to, Kushida is a much warmer, more outgoing person. She has a lot of friends, too."

"Oh, no. I don't mean the eyes that you've seen me with. I mean the pupils, way back in the eyes... If you look someone deep in their eyes, you'll understand. I'm sorry, I can't really explain it well."

So, was it like insight into a person's true self? When someone looked at me, would they see that I was insubstantial and lack ambition? This was kind of complicated.

"Well, it's just... When I see a man...even if he seems kind...I suddenly get afraid."

Perhaps that came with a woman's point of view. It might have been natural for her to be uncomfortable around men, but Sakura had an abnormally terrified expression. Speaking of which, I recalled the day we'd gone to get her digital camera repaired...

It was certainly true that men and women generally differed in physical strength and stamina. However, some girls were overly mindful of that fact, and lived in abnormal degrees of fear. I wondered if something had happened in Sakura's past to cause her intense fear of men.

Why the heck was I arbitrarily analyzing her? I felt a little disgusted with myself, as usual.

"I know it would be good to simply say what it is I saw. But no matter what I do, I can't seem to imagine it... How can I speak that assertively?"

She was so worried that she'd asked a student like me for help. She'd probably been agonizing over it for the past few days. Even with a helping hand from me, she appeared to be suffering.

“If you want to quit, would you like me to talk?”

“You’re not going to get mad?”

“I told you before, didn’t I? If we forced you to testify, it would be meaningless.”

Sakura was an invaluable witness, but her evidence wasn’t automatically reliable. She might not have any influence on the outcome. However, if she were absent, Sudou might get angry. I should probably try to coax her into participating, but I had no idea how to do it.

“Umm... What do you think would be best to do, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“I think you should do what you want, Sakura.”

She probably wanted more concrete guidance, but unfortunately this was the best I could do. I wasn’t an outstanding person, and certainly not qualified to guide anyone. I wasn’t suited for that job.

“I see. Well, I suppose it’s probably bothersome to ask you for help like that... I’m just no good. It’s probably why I can’t even make a single friend myself.”

Sakura shrugged and smiled bitterly. She seemed disgusted with herself.

“Sakura, I think you’ll be able to make friends with someone in no time.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know how to best say what I feel... You seem to get along really well with a lot of people, Ayanokouji-kun. I’m a bit envious.”

“No, I don’t.”

Apparently Sakura believed that I had many friends and lots of fun.

“It might be presumptuous for me to say this, but I think that we’re like friends. We are,” I said.

Sakura and I stared at each other.

“We’re *friends*? Really?” she whispered.

“If you don’t think so, Sakura, then that’s different.”

“No... It does make me happy...to hear you say that,” replied Sakura, while still looking somewhat perplexed.

I began to realize that if people didn't talk face to face, they wouldn't get a feel for what the other person was really like. I was surprised by the discovery of Sakura's unexpected side. If she let this part of her out more, she'd probably make friends right away. Honestly, even a minor adjustment would do wonders. But for her, I supposed making even a minor adjustment would be difficult. What might seem trivial to one person could be quite difficult for another, depending on their issues.

"Thank you for coming to see me today," Sakura said.

"It's no big deal. You can call me anytime."

If I could ease Sakura's burdens even slightly, then it was worth it. I'd leave it up to Sakura herself to decide whether or not she'd come to school tomorrow. Thinking that our conversation was over, I stood and started to leave, but Sakura looked like she still wasn't feeling well.

"Do you have any plans for tonight? For right now?" I asked.

"Right now? No, I don't have anything planned. Or rather, I didn't make any plans."

Hmm. Even I felt a little sad when I heard someone say that.

"Well, why not go out with me for a while? If it's not a bother, of course."

I decided to be daring and invite Sakura. She stiffened, almost like she had forgotten the time and realized she had to be somewhere important. She looked like she couldn't understand what I'd meant. Then, without any hesitation, she shot up out of her seat.

"Huh?!" As she leapt up, she banged her knees against the table and doubled over in agony. Her glasses flew off her face.

"That looked like it really hurt just now. Are you okay?" I asked.

"I...I'm perfectly fine!"

She wasn't very convincing; the pain was so intense that she was on the verge of tears. I picked up her glasses. Just as I'd thought, there were no lenses. I handed her glasses back. Her hands trembled when she took them, and she thanked me. Sakura wrestled with her pain for about a minute before she finally calmed down and quieted.

“Wh-where do you want to go?” she asked.

She was on her guard, but I didn’t understand why. Maybe she believed I was some kind of pick-up artist trying to smooth talk her. If that were the case, it was bad.

“I haven’t really decided. Just kind of felt like wandering around, you know? Ah, but I hate being in hot places...”

Sakura responded cautiously, as if worried about what to say. “If you don’t mind...there is someplace I’d like to go. Is that all right?”

“Huh? Yeah, sure, I don’t mind. Please lead the way.”

I didn’t really care about the location; I just wanted to get a change of scenery and talk. If Sakura had a place she preferred, then everything would be going according to plan.

5.5

Sakura took me to the place she wanted to visit. I must admit, I hadn't expected the location. We went to a part of the building used specifically for club activities, located away from the school. She guided me around a building that had a pronounced Japanese flair, one that hosted things like the archery club and the tea ceremony club. From a short distance away, we could hear the sound of arrows being fired.

"You're not doing any club activities, right?"

"I'm not, but I've wanted to come here at least once. I'd stand out if I came by myself, so..."

If you hung around here on your own, people would think you were interested in joining their club. However, if a couple came together, then people would just assume they were on a date.

"Why did you ask me to come out, anyway?" she asked.

"Hmm? Why? It's kind of hard to answer when you ask me like that." I was worried about how everything would go tomorrow. But even if I said something, I'd still feel uneasy. "I asked you because I thought it would be good to get a change of scenery, I suppose. I mean, I'm kind of a loner, so I usually just stay in my room. I have a tendency to hang back all the time."

Sakura looked somewhat unconvinced by my roundabout answer. "Ayanokouji-kun, don't you have lots of friends?"

"I do? Like who?"

"Horikita-san, Kushida-san, Ike-kun, Sudou-kun, Yamauchi-kun..." She listed their names while counting them on her fingers.

"Well, they're just for show. No, you're right, a friend is a friend. I guess what I mean is, I feel like that's all we are. I feel like I'm still kind of standing outside the group and looking in. Do you think we get all along, Sakura?"

Sakura nodded without hesitation. If she said so, perhaps it was true. I guess I just didn't understand myself.

“I don’t know how to make friends at all. I’m envious. You were the first person to call me a friend.”

“What about Kushida? Wasn’t she the first person who invited you out?”

Sheepishly, Sakura gave a self-deprecating smile. “Yeah. I should apologize to Kushida-san sometime. She was the first one to call and invite me out, because I didn’t have the courage... I actually wanted to hang out with her. I just couldn’t answer her, no matter what I did. I’m so pathetic.”

If you were good at making conversation with other people, you’d have an easier time of it. I was once again impressed by Horikita’s ability to make fun of Ike and Yamauchi while also dealing naturally with complete strangers. That was a splendid talent.

“Can I give you one bit of advice for tomorrow?”

I didn’t intend to give her empty encouragement like “Do your best.” Sakura should face tomorrow entirely as herself.

“For Sudou. For Kushida. For your classmates. Throw all of those thoughts away.”

“Huh? Throw them...all away?”

“When you testify tomorrow, speak for yourself. As someone who tells the truth of what she saw, as a witness.”

It was good for a self-reliant person to try doing something for other people. However, Sakura still couldn’t properly take care of herself. She had a tendency to wrap herself up and endure pain, sorrow, and suffering alone. If you weren’t happy yourself, then you couldn’t make others happy, either.

“Tell the truth for your own sake. Do that, and Sudou will be saved. That’s enough.”

I didn’t know how effective my advice would be. It probably was meaningless blather, actually. But perhaps it was right to encourage Sakura to speak for herself. Maybe I did it because I understood how it felt to be wanted. Because I needed someone to know I understood the pain and anguish of battling loneliness.

“Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Hopefully, my words had found purchase somewhere in Sakura's heart.

5.6

That night, under Kushida's orders, everyone except for Sudou gathered in my room. Apparently Kushida had even invited Horikita, but it seemed she didn't want to join us.

"So. Has there been any progress, Kushida-chan?"

"There *has* been progress, yes, but I've also noticed something incredible. Ayanokouji-kun, can I borrow your computer for a minute?"

"Sure," I answered with a nod. Kushida went to my desktop computer, booted it up, and opened the Internet browser.

"Okay. Have a look at this!"

Kushida accessed what appeared to be somebody's blog. It was rather elaborate, too. Unlike some normal person's website, it had the sheen and polish of a fully-fledged business.

"Wait, is that a picture of Shizuku?"

"Shizuku?"

"She's a gravure idol. She was just featured in a young men's magazine."

There were many pictures of her. I certainly couldn't complain about her looks or proportions.

"Do you recognize her?" Kushida asked.

"Am I supposed to recognize her?"

"Look closely."

Kushida clicked on a picture of Shizuku's face. Ike took a long hard look at her, and then...

"She's cute."

"No, not that! This is Sakura-san, isn't it?"

"Kushida-chan, who are you talking about?"

"Sakura-san, from our class."

“Huh? No way, no way. Sakura-san? No, no, no, there’s no way that’s true.” Ike laughed, but Yamauchi’s expression stiffened.

“Hey, Ike... You know, when I actually get a good look at her, I... think she probably does look a little like Sakura.”

“But she’s not wearing glasses, right? And her hair is different.”

“Those are simplistic ways to identify somebody...”

Although I hadn’t made the connection at first, I realized that this was definitely Sakura. It seemed like Ike still couldn’t believe it, though. He was still scrambling in confusion while looking at the screen.

“So Sakura is Shizuku? That’s a lie, right? I mean, sure, there’s a slight resemblance, but they’re different people. I mean, look how crazy bright and happy Shizuku is. Right? Come on, Ayanokouji.”

All of the pictures she’d uploaded were cute, so she seemed accustomed to taking selfies. However, I glimpsed one piece of incontrovertible evidence that proved Sakura and the idol Shizuku were one and the same.

“No, Kushida is definitely right. That’s Sakura. Here.”

I pointed to one of the pictures.

“You can barely see it, but the door to her dorm room is in this picture.”

“It looks like the same as the doors in our dorm.”

In other words, it was likely she’d taken that picture at school.

“Okay, so Sakura is Shizuku after all... I still don’t understand the point.”

“Good job noticing this, Kushida.” I meant it. Even though there was a clear resemblance, I wouldn’t have noticed without Kushida drawing our attention to it.”

“When I saw Ike-kun reading that weekly magazine, I remembered something. I had the feeling I’d seen Sakura somewhere before,” Kushida said.

“Oh my god, there’s a gravure idol in our class! I’m so turned on!” Ike exclaimed enthusiastically, unable to hide his excitement. After such an

undignified reaction, I imagined Kushida would want to pull away from him. Although she was kind to an almost reckless degree, I couldn't sense that kind of acceptance from her now.

“But just when Shizuku started to become really popular, she suddenly disappeared.”

She lived a double life as an idol and a quiet, inconspicuous student at our school. Why had she wanted to create another life? It was like a coin with two very different sides.

As 9:00 PM approached, it was just about time for our group to split up for the night. I saw them all off at my door.

“Kushida, I still have something I want to talk to you about. Can you stick around for a little bit?”

“Hmm? Something to talk about? Sure.”

“Hey, Ayanokouji! What do you need to talk to her about, huh?! Don’t tell me it’s...”

I dismissed Ike’s fears with a wave of my hand. But even after I said we were just going to talk about Sakura, Ike got really close and whispered into my ear that he didn’t believe me. “If you *do* confess your feelings to her, I won’t forgive you. You know that, right?”

You don’t need to be so paranoid...

Like heck I was going to do that. Besides, even if I did, I’d get destroyed in one second.

“Seriously. If you’re that worried about it, then wait in the hallway. We’ll be done in a minute.”

Ike immediately agreed to wait. He struck a pose and stretched himself to his full height, parking himself in the hallway right outside my door. After the guys had left, I started to tell Kushida about the conversation I’d had with Sakura that day.

“Oh yeah. So, about Sakura-san?”

“I was surprised when I found out that she was an idol, but I also kind of understood it. I wonder if that’s her real personality?”

Though I’d avoided just stating this idea outright, I also thought that Sakura had a hidden side, just like Kushida. However, Kushida, who had a different understanding of the facts, had come to an entirely different conclusion.

“I think that...most likely, Sakura-san would say that her idol self is actually her false face. Well, I guess saying that it’s false isn’t right, either. I think that she’s creating another personality with makeup.”

“Makeup... So in other words, it’s a persona?”

“Yeah. I think with the right pretenses in place, Sakura-san could even

make herself smile in front of people.”

Kushida sounded rather persuasive. There was something true about her words. But at that moment, I began to think about what Kushida had been trying to tell me during our last phone call.

“Hey. Back when we were talking on the phone, what was it you wanted to tell me?”

Kushida’s shoulders twitched slightly in response. It was like she hadn’t remembered it until just now.

“I’ll tell you later. Right now, our priority is to resolve this case. Besides, it’s a personal request.”

“A personal request?”

I found her wording enticing, but it seemed like Kushida needed help with something. I didn’t really stand out in any way. I couldn’t provide something that Kushida lacked. She could study, and she had ambition.

“I’m sorry. If I told you now, it’d just be a bother.” She smiled bitterly and clasped her hands together in apology.

“Well, if things with Sudou turn out okay, could you tell me then?”

“Yes, that would be fine.”

She turned and grabbed the door handle. However, she suddenly stopped, and remained perfectly still for a short while. Looking at her back, I had no idea what kind of expression she wore.

“Kushida?”

Something seemed a little off. After I said her name, Kushida turned and closed the distance between us. She stood on tiptoe, her heels lifting off the ground as she put her hand on my chest and brought her mouth close to my ear.

“If you listen to my request, Ayanokouji-kun...I’ll give you my most precious possession.”

It was like the whisperings of a witch. As if a sweet, yet potentially deadly fragrance had taken hold of my heart. I couldn’t tell whether Kushida’s smile was genuine or bitter as she whispered in my ear. The only thing that I knew for certain was that Kushida was no angel. As far as she

was concerned, I didn't know how to feel. Most people had different sides to them, but in her case it was more pronounced, as if another person lived inside of her. This Kushida was just kind of creepy.

I couldn't tell at all what her game was, what she was thinking or what she wanted to do. I couldn't even tell where the girl called Kushida Kikyou had gone. The change was so stark that I even found myself wondering if she had a split personality. The gap was that huge.

When she drew away again, I saw that Kushida had returned to being the girl with the gentle smile. When she opened the door, she called to Ike, who had been waiting impatiently outside. Not even the faintest trace of that frightening Kushida remained.

5.7

After everyone left, I sat in front of my computer and looked at Sakura Airi's – I mean, the gravure idol Shizuku's – blog. As I read through the past entries, I saw that she had started blogging about two years ago. Precisely around the time that Sakura started working as a gravure idol. Her hopes and aspirations for the future were spelled out in writing. I didn't see anything that especially stuck out, no red flags. I checked out other idol blogs just for reference, but they seemed similar.

I had to wonder, how would it have felt for a second-year junior high student to debut in the entertainment world? During one year, she'd updated the blog almost every single day. She wrote about what happened that day and her thoughts. She also responded to almost every single comment from her fans. But, just as I'd expected, she stopped replying after being accepted to this school.

She had strictly adhered to the rule about contacting anyone outside the school. Although she wasn't really the direct center of attention, Sakura seemed more popular than I had imagined. She had over 5000 followers on Twitter. Many of them were fans that wanted her to return to doing gravure magazines really soon, or asked if she had any plans to appear on television. Among those many comments, a post from three months ago snagged my attention.

"Do you believe in fate? I do. I believe we will be together forever."

It that had been the only message, it would've been the delusional fantasy of a fan. But there was more every day, and it escalated quickly.

"I can always feel you close to me."

"You were even cuter today, huh?"

"Did you notice when our eyes met? I noticed."

If Sakura saw this, those words would probably frighten her. It was almost as if the poster wanted to be physically close to Shizuku so he could whisper these words into her ear. Were they just delusions? Within this heavily restricted school, only a very limited number of people could encounter Sakura.

Students, teachers...or anyone who did business with the school. I flashed on a memory of the man who worked at the campus electronic store. Then, a post from last Sunday caused my hair to stand on end. I had a crushing realization.

“Look, God is real after all.”

Sakura had bought a digital camera after she enrolled in school. Of course, she'd probably disguised herself that day, just like any celebrity would. But while a disguise like that would make sense for her to use with fans, that clerk had recognized who Sakura was. Of course, there were only a few ways that they could have contact at that point.

However, after Sakura's camera broke, he saw her. Since she loved it so, she had to fix it. Given our circumstances it was nearly impossible for someone in Class D to buy a new one. However, because she took it in for repair, there was the possibility that she'd encounter the store clerk.

She'd been hesitant to go get her camera repaired because of the clerk. The clerk, on the other hand, had been in incredibly high spirits. After all, here was his chance to get his favorite idol's real name and phone number on the form she had to fill out. It also might explain why she'd called me that evening and asked some rather significant questions.

When I thought about it, the answer seemed obvious. I combed through the comments, searching for more he might have written.

“It's so mean for you to ignore me! Or perhaps you just didn't notice me?”

“What are you doing now? I want to meet you, I want to meet you, I want to meet you!”

Frightening comments were posted one after another. Of course, other fans had simply been disgusted by these comments, but it was different for Sakura. I wondered if knowing that he was so close pushed her to the point of almost unimaginable terror? But Sakura had concealed that from us, and now she was desperately trying to fight Class C for us as a witness. She was probably hesitant to leave her dorm, considering how much this man's existence terrified her.

If they were on the same campus, her fear wasn't surprising. However, there was hardly anything we could do, no plan we could implement to solve

the issue of this stalker by tomorrow. In the end, the only option was to wait on an SOS from the girl in question.

Chapter 6: Truth and Lies

The day our fate would be decided was here. Before anything else, I wanted to confirm that Sakura was coming to school. When I entered the classroom, I saw the same thing as always. Sakura sat quietly alone, so as not to get roped into other students' conversations. Her expression seemed even gloomier than usual. But in any case, she'd still come to school.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Ah, yeah. I'm fine."

I wondered if she was nervous. She seemed composed, if not completely calm.

"I thought that things would be tough if I were absent today, so..."

She understood that the entire class would be upset if she were absent, so she'd made the painful decision to come to school. I imagined it would be impossible to tell her not to think about Sudou and the others.

"Don't forget what I said yesterday. Testify for your own sake, more than anyone else's."

"Yeah. I'll be okay."

Ike and Yamauchi looked over at Sakura with great curiosity. Of course, that was because they now knew of her idol identity. Sakura was probably sensitive enough to notice this. She looked like she'd guessed that Ike and Yamauchi had discovered her identity. Oh no...

But Sakura just wore a thin smile and quietly mouthed the words, "It's all right." She was aware that we knew of her double life. Maybe working as an idol had made her sensitive to subtle changes in a room.

6.1

As the bell rang for the end of class, Horikita and I stood up.

“Have you prepared for this, Sudou-kun?”

“Yeah... I’m good. I was born ready.”

As if mentally preparing himself for what lay ahead, Sudou closed his eyes and folded his arms. But then he slowly opened his eyes again.

“You might call me a complete idiot and make fun of me, but I’m me. If you have something you want to say, say it now.”

“Don’t do anything selfish. Actually listening right now would be the clever thing to do, yes?”

“Ugh, you always act so high and mighty, lady.”

When you saw them like this, it did seem as though they fought like cats and dogs. But at the very least, Sudou didn’t hate Horikita. If he did he would’ve absolutely refused her help, no matter how advantageous her offer.

“Do your best, Horikita-san. Sudou-kun.”

Horikita didn’t respond at all, but Sudou pumped his fist to show resolve. I turned to check on Sakura who was still sitting down, her body rigid. She stood, her lips trembling slightly.

“Yeah... I’m okay. Thank you...”

Sakura was far tenser than I’d expected. If she was in this psychological state before the meeting had even begun, she might not be able to speak satisfactorily.

“Let’s go. We’ll make a bad impression if we’re late.”

The discussion was scheduled to begin at 4:00 PM. It was already 3:50 PM. We couldn’t afford to take it slow. When the four of us got to the faculty room, a teacher waved at us to come on inside.

“Yahoo! Hello, Class D students!”

The homeroom teacher for Class B, Hoshinomiya-sensei, gave us this happy-go-lucky greeting. “It seems like something rather incredible has

happened, hmm?”

Her eyes sparkled, as if she enjoyed sticking her nose into other people’s business. (Well, she did).

“What are you doing this time?” Chabashira-sensei muttered.

“Oh no. I’ve been found out already, huh?”

Chabashira-sensei glared over at Hoshinomiya-sensei as she exited the faculty room. “Whenever you sneak out, that’s around the time I start to feel suspicious.”

Hoshinomiya gave a cute wink, as if saying, *Teehee, you got me!* “So I guess I can’t join in, huh?”

“Of course you can’t. You know that outsiders cannot participate.”

“Aw, that’s too bad. Well, that’s all right. The results should be out within the hour, I guess.”

Chabashira-sensei forcefully pushed Hoshinomiya-sensei back into the faculty room.

“Well then, shall we be going?” she asked us.

“We’re not going to do this in the faculty room, are we?”

“Of course not. This school does have rather complicated rules, but in cases such as these a settlement is reached between the homeroom teacher of the class in question, the concerned parties, and the student council.”

Horikita froze the very moment she heard the words “student council.” Chabashira-sensei turned and glanced sharply at Horikita’s face.

“If you want to stop, now’s the time, Horikita.”

Sudou, who didn’t understand why Horikita would react that way, looked confused. It was almost as if a giant question mark was floating above his head. Our teacher, as usual, had revealed an important detail right at the last minute.

“I’ll go. I’m fine.”

Horikita quickly glanced at me. Her look probably meant something like, *Don’t worry on my account.* We left the first-floor faculty room and walked up three floors to the fourth. A placard that read “Student Council

Room” was affixed to the wall near the doorway. Chabashira-sensei knocked, and we went inside.

Even though Horikita had winced, she immediately followed us. Inside, long tables had been arranged in rectangular formation. The three students from Class C had already arrived and were seated. Beside them sat a bespectacled male teacher in his 30s.

“Sorry we’re late,” our sensei said.

“It’s before the scheduled start time. There’s no need for apologies.”

“Have you already met?”

Sudou, Horikita, and I did not know the teacher.

“This is Sakagami-sensei, the homeroom teacher for Class C. Now then.”

One lone male student seated in the back of the room attracted everyone’s attention.

“This is the student council president.”

Horikita’s older brother, without so much as even a glance at his sister, pored over the documents on his desk. Horikita directed her gaze at her brother for a short time, but when she realized that she wasn’t his focus, she lowered her eyes and sat down in front of the Class C students.

“Well then, I would now like to discuss the violent incident that occurred last Tuesday with the members of the student council, the involved parties, and their homeroom teachers. You may begin the proceedings, student council secretary Tachibana.”

Secretary Tachibana, a woman with short hair, gave a slight bow.

“Of course, considering the magnitude of this dispute, there are times when the student council president will take over. There are several unusual things about this incident. Other than that, the bulk of the proceedings will be handled solely by Tachibana, as usual.”

“Because I am quite busy, there are certain agenda topics upon which I will defer. As a general rule, though, I would prefer to attend to these issues, as I’m entrusted to lead this student council.”

“So, this is all by chance?” Chabashira-sensei smiled as she said that,

but Horikita's older brother never wavered. On the contrary though, Horikita—Horikita the younger sister, I mean—couldn't hide her trembling. Considering they were brother and sister, the odds were not in our favor. In fact, I couldn't help but think that this situation was extremely disadvantageous, as Horikita couldn't demonstrate her usual prowess here. Our expectations had been thoroughly shattered.

If the student council president acted, there'd be nothing we could do, even if we didn't like it. He'd enrolled in Class A and immediately taken office as secretary for the student council. In December of his first year, he became the student council president after receiving an overwhelming amount of support in the election. Although some senior students had naturally voiced their displeasure, our current, hopeless situation spoke to his incredible abilities.

Secretary Tachibana summarized the situation from both sides in an easy-to-understand manner. There wasn't any need for further explanation.

"Based on the aforementioned facts, we would like for you to identify which version of events is true." After completing her explanation and the preface to the proceedings, Secretary Tachibana turned her eyes toward us in Class D. "Komiya-kun and two other members of the basketball club went to the special building after Sudou-kun called them there. There, they claim to have been beaten up in a one-sided brawl. Is this true?"

"What those guys said was a lie. I was the one that got called over to the special building," Sudou said. "That day, after practice, Komiya and Kondou asked me to go to the special building. Honestly, I thought it was kind of annoying, but I also thought it might've been because they were always hostile towards me. So, I went to meet them."

Sudou wasn't one to mince words. Normally, Horikita would have been disgusted by his casual way of speaking, but judging from her trembling she didn't hear him at all. Sakagami-sensei, Class C's homeroom teacher, stared in wide-eyed amazement.

"That's a lie. Sudou-kun called *us* over to the special building."

"Don't screw with me, Komiya! You were the one who called me, you jerk!"

"You don't seem to remember your position here."

Sudou, irritated, impulsively struck his desk. Immediate silence followed.

“Please calm down, Sudou-kun. Right now, we’re merely listening to what both parties have to say. Komiya-kun, we ask that you too please show some restraint, and not interrupt.”

“Puh, fine...”

“Both parties insist that the other called them over, so the accounts conflict. However, the stories share some commonality. There *was* a dispute between Sudou-kun, Komiya-kun, and Kondou-kun, correct?”

“I wouldn’t call it a dispute. Sudou-kun’s always picking fights with us.”

““Picking fights’?”

“Sudou’s better at basketball than we are, so he’s always bragging about it. We practice with everything we’ve got, but it doesn’t exactly feel good when he makes fools out of us. So we often butt heads.”

I didn’t really know the details of Sudou’s club activities, but when I saw the veins popping on his forehead, it was rather obvious that they were lying. Next, Secretary Tachibana spoke to Sudou.

“Not one bit of what Komiya said was true. Those guys are just jealous of my talent. When I practice, they constantly get in my way. That’s the truth.”

Naturally, both sides claimed that the other party was at fault.

“Both sides have given their grievances, but now we have to come to a judgment with the collected evidence.”

“Sudou-kun beat us senseless. It was a one-sided fight.”

Class C seemed intent on focusing the discussion on their injuries. The three students *did* seem to have black-and-blue faces. That was undeniable.

“That’s a lie. *They* attacked first. It was self-defense.”

“Hey, Horikita,” I whispered to Horikita, who remained mute and kept her head down. Clearly, this situation was really bad. If we wanted to stop Sudou from getting carried away, we had to take action sooner rather than later. However, she showed no reaction. It was as if her mind was gone. Did

her brother's mere presence truly have this much of an effect?

I flashed back to those two talking behind the dormitory. I didn't really understand the depth of the situation, but I suspected that Horikita had chased after her extremely talented brother, enrolling in the same school to make him recognize her abilities. But regardless of her hopes and talents, the younger sister in Class D was still very far away from her brother, the Class A student council president. To prove herself, she'd have to rise up to the same arena as him.

"If Class D has no further proof to offer, would you mind if we continued the proceedings?"

If the student council and the teachers continued to sit in complete silence, their judgment would almost certainly be merciless. To prevent that, we needed Horikita to rouse herself into action. However, our team's most crucial member withered and shrank before her older brother.

"It would seem there's no objection, given the arguments we've heard thus far." The student council president finally spoke. Horikita's older brother seemed as though he wanted to draw a conclusion as soon as possible.

"Regardless which party called the other over, the fact remains that it was a one-sided fight between Sudou and the other students. We can clearly see that from the injuries they sustained. We have no choice but to come up with a conclusion based on that."

"W-wait! I can't accept that! It's just because those guys were a bunch of wimps!"

The moment that Sudou uttered those words, I saw Sakagami-sensei smile.

"Then can it really be considered self-defense when fighting against opponents of such unequal strength?"

"B-but, hey. I was fighting against three people! Three people!"

"But only the Class C students were hurt."

This was getting worse. I resigned myself to the fact that I might be killed later for doing this, but I got up slowly from my folding chair and stood behind Horikita. I stretched my arms out and grasped her sides as hard

as I could.

“Hyah?!” Horikita cried out in an abnormally girlish voice. However, this was not the time or place for me to focus on that. Since she hadn’t yet regained her sanity, I grabbed her more forcefully and tickled her.

“W-wait. S-stop, stop!”

No matter how upset or dazed a person was, if you stimulated the body enough, they’d come back to her senses. Even if they didn’t like it. The teachers seemed somewhat taken aback by my actions, but right then I didn’t care. When I believed I’d roused her enough, I let go. Horikita, looking like she was about to cry, glared at me with startling intensity. I’d had to force her, but I knew it was essential to return Horikita to her usual self.

“Get a grip on yourself, Horikita. We’re going to lose at this rate. You have to fight!”

“Tch...”

Horikita, looked at Class C, then the teacher, and then her brother as if finally understanding our situation. It seemed to dawn on her just how desperate our situation was.

“Excuse me. May I ask a question?” she said.

“Do you mind, president?”

“I’ll allow it. However, please answer more quickly next time.”

Horikita slowly rose out of her chair.

“Earlier, you said that Sudou-kun called you over to the special building. But who exactly did Sudou call, and why?”

Komiya and the other Class C students looked at one another, as if saying, *Why is she asking that question now?*

“Please answer.” Horikita added those last two words to reinforce her aggressive style of questioning. Secretary Tachibana allowed it.

“Kondou and I don’t know why he called us over. When we’d just finished up for the day and were changing, he said he wanted to talk to us for a minute. Wasn’t the reason just that he didn’t like us?”

“So then, why exactly were *you* in the special building, Ishizaki-kun? You’re not on the basketball team, so you have no connection to this case. I’d

think your presence there would be rather odd.”

“That’s... I came as a precaution. There were rumors that Sudou was violent. He’s also in better shape than we are, physically. I had to go, didn’t I?”

“So in other words, you felt the situation might turn violent?”

“Yeah.” They answered in unison, almost as if they’d expected these questions. It appeared that the Class C students had thoroughly rehearsed for this conference.

“I see. So you brought along Ishizaki-kun as your bodyguard, since he was reputed to be rather good at fighting. Just in case there was an emergency.”

“It was to protect ourselves. That was it. Besides, we didn’t know that Ishizaki-kun was known for being good in a fight. We just considered him a reliable friend.”

Horikita quietly listened to their responses, as if running various simulations in her head. Then she immediately made her next move.

“I do have some knowledge of martial arts, if only to a certain extent. I understand that when you’re fighting against multiple enemies, victory becomes exponentially more difficult. So I don’t understand how you were defeated so handily, how the fight could be so one-sided, when you had a skilled fighter like Ishizaki-kun with you.”

“Because we didn’t intend to fight.”

“The primary factor in triggering a fight is the collision of the ‘energy’ between opponents. In the event that you don’t have any intention of fighting, or that you’re nonviolent, the probability that you’ll be hurt should be very low. Especially when there are three of you.”

Horikita’s opinion was very objective, grounded in evidence, rules, and her own logic. On the other end, Komiya fought back with his own weapon, real evidence.

“That way of thinking doesn’t apply to Sudou-kun. He’s exceptionally violent. Even if *we* were nonviolent, he’d still be mercilessly violent. That’s what happened.”

He peeled off the gauze that covered his cheek, exposing the scrapes

underneath. No matter how many reasonable arguments Horikita made, his injury gave powerful evidence.

“Are you finished with your claims now, Class D?” said Horikita’s older brother coolly. After staying silent while Horikita gave her argument, his words were few and icy. His look seemed to suggest that if *that* was all we had to say, it would’ve been better not to say anything at all.

“It’s true that Sudou injured the other students. However, Class C started the fight. There is one student witness who saw the entire incident and can attest to this.”

“Well then, Class D—if Class D’s witness would please enter?”

Sakura, looking worried and restless, walked into the student council room. She looked down at her feet, as if scared of danger.

“1-D, Sakura Airi-san.”

“I thought I’d heard something or other about a witness, but you’re a Class D student?” Sakagami, the Class C’s homeroom instructor, snickered while wiping his glasses.

“Is there a problem, Sakagami-sensei?”

“No, no, please. Go ahead.”

Sakagami-sensei and Chabashira-sensei exchanged looks.

“You may begin your testimony, if you wouldn’t mind, Sakura-san.”

“Y-yes, okay... Well... I...”

She stopped speaking. A period of silence followed. Ten seconds. Twenty seconds. Sakura steadily looked further downward, and her face became increasingly pale.

“Sakura-san...” Horikita, unable to take any more, addressed Sakura. Unlike before, the words didn’t seem to reach her.

“Apparently she didn’t witness anything. More of this would just be a waste of our time.”

“Why are you in such a hurry, Sakagami-sensei?”

“I want to speed this along. If we waste time, my students will suffer. These students are the joyful heart of their class, so I’ve no doubt that their

many friends are worried about them. Also, they're striving to improve their basketball skills, and we're depriving them of valuable practice time. As a teacher, I can't overlook this."

"I see. You're probably right about that."

You'd think that Chabashira-sensei would ally herself with Class D, but that didn't seem to be the case. Instead, she nodded in apparent agreement with Sakagami-sensei.

"You're certainly right that this is a waste of time, so I suppose we have no choice. You can come down now, Sakura."

Chabashira-sensei ordered Sakura to leave, almost as if she'd lost interest. The student council members didn't ask for a delay or anything. The writing was clearly on the student council room wall, and it spelled Class D's defeat. Sakura closed her eyes tightly, as if she couldn't bear it anymore, as if she regretted her own weakness. Even Sudou, Horikita, and I felt like this was impossible for Sakura, and mentally resigned herself.

Then, it happened. An unexpected voice reverberated throughout the room.

"I definitely saw what happened!"

It was certainly Sakura's voice, though it took me several seconds to recognize it. What most struck me was the volume of her voice.

"The students in Class C threw the first punch. There's no mistake about that!"

Sakura's words had a force that belied the image she'd presented at first. She spoke so desperately that you wanted to believe she was telling the truth. She certainly made me believe it. However, much like a magical spell, the effect lasted for only a few minutes. If the audience remained calm, it wouldn't be difficult for them to see through it.

"Excuse me, but may I say something?" asked Sakagami-sensei, raising his hand.

"Normally, teachers are asked to speak as little as possible, but this situation is just too pitiful. Student council president, do you mind?"

"I'll allow it."

"In regards to what you've said, Sakura-kun, I do not necessarily doubt you. However, I have one thing to ask. You've stepped forward to testify as a witness, but you were rather late in doing so. May I ask why? I would think if you really *did* see something, you would have come forward much earlier."

Sakagami-sensei harped on the same point that Chabashira-sensei had.

"That's... Well, that's... I didn't want to get involved..."

"Why didn't you want to get involved?"

"Because I'm not very good at talking with other people..."

"I see. I understand that. However, I'd like to say something else. You're not good at talking with others, and yet when the week was nearly out you stepped forward as a witness. Doesn't that seem rather odd? To my mind, it seems Class D secretly put a story together and are having you act as a false witness to give phony testimony."

After conferring together, the Class C students answered that they'd thought so, too.

"That's... I'm just...telling the truth..."

"No matter how poor your communication skills might be, I can see you haven't testified with much confidence. Is that because you're tormented with guilt, because you know what you're saying is actually a lie?"

"N-no, that's not it..."

"I'm not blaming you. You were probably forced to lie for your class's sake, to save Sudou-kun. Weren't you? If you come forward and confess

honestly to us now, you won't be punished."

The teacher's relentless psychological attacks just kept coming. Of course Horikita raised her hand.

"That is not the case. It is certainly true that Sakura-san is not good at speaking before others. However, it is precisely because she witnessed the incident that she is standing here today. Otherwise, she most likely would not, even if we'd asked her. Don't you think that if we needed someone who could speak boldly, we would have found a replacement?"

"I don't think so. There are excellent students in Class D, students such as yourself, Horikita-san. By setting up a person like Sakura-san as your witness, it would establish a sense of realism that you yourself could not."

Sakagami-sensei probably didn't actually believe this. However, no matter what response we volleyed back, I was convinced that he'd do anything to block us. Just as I'd felt from the start, a Class D witness did not carry enough weight. No matter how many times we stressed the truth, they would say that we were lying. If the testimony came from someone on your side, they wouldn't accept it.

Had we run out of options? Sakagami-sensei gave a hostile grin as he began to sit back down.

"If you want proof... I'll give it to you!"

Sakagami-sensei froze in response to Sakura's words.

"Please, let's not force this situation to continue. If there really *was* evidence, you would have presented it at an earlier stage—"

Sakura loudly slammed her hand on the desk, and threw down what looked to be a few small, rectangular pieces of paper.

"What are those?"

Because she'd produced something other than words, Sakagami-sensei's expression stiffened for the first time.

"This is proof that I was in the special building that day!"

Secretary Tachibana walked over to Sakura. Though she hesitated at first, she then reached for the paper. No, those weren't pieces of paper like I'd thought. They were photos.

“President.”

After looking at the photographs, Secretary Tachibana handed them over to the student council president. Horikita’s older brother, after looking at the pictures for some time, laid them out on the desk so that we could see. We saw Sakura in those pictures, but this Sakura wore a lovely expression that looked both similar and dissimilar to the Sakura with us now. It was the idol, Shizuku.

“I’m...I was looking for places where no one was around so I could take pictures of myself. The pictures also show the date and time, which proves that I was there when I said.”

The date on the pictures definitely showed that they’d been taken in the evening one week ago. That would’ve been around the time that Sudou and the others finished their club activities for the day. Horikita and I unintentionally gasped in response to this new evidence. We began to see changes in the three Class C students, who up until now had been playing the part of victims. They were visibly shaking.

“What did you use to take these photos?” asked Sakagami-sensei.

“A digital...camera.”

“You can alter the date rather easily with a digital camera, though. If you manipulated these photos on a computer, you could effectively set them at the time and date of the incident. This are inadequate evidence.”

“But Sakagami-sensei, don’t you think this photo is different?” Horikita’s older brother slid out one of the photos we hadn’t yet seen, and handed it to the teacher.

“Th-this?!”

The photo showed the fight itself; clearly there was no need to nitpick the time. The setting sun bathed the hallway in dusky light. The picture seemed to show what had happened immediately after Sudou hit Ishizaki.

“I think that you’ll believe I was there after seeing...this.”

“Thank you, Sakura-san.”

This picture had absolutely saved Horikita as well. To rescue such an overwhelmingly disadvantageous situation...

“I see. Well, you do seem to be telling the truth about witnessing the incident. That much I simply must accept. However, I can’t ascertain how the situation started from this picture. This doesn’t prove that you saw the entire incident.”

It was certainly true that this picture made it look like the fight had already ended. We couldn’t call this definitive evidence.

“So, what do you think, Chabashira-sensei? Why not look for a compromise here?” Sakagami-sensei asked.

“Compromise?”

“I’m convinced that Sudou-kun lied in his testimony.”

“You jerk!” Sudou stood up, looking ready to fly out of his chair, but finally grabbed hold of his own arms and pinned himself down.

“No matter how long we go back and forth, we’ll never reach an agreement. We won’t change our testimony, and your side won’t give up or admit that you conspired with the witness. In other words, you won’t stop. It’ll be an endless cycle of saying that the other side is lying. In addition, the picture is too inconclusive to be considered definitive proof. Therefore, I suggest we compromise. I do think that the students from Class C are responsible for some of the blame here. There were three students up against Sudou, and one of them has a history of fighting, which is a problem. So how about two weeks of suspension for Sudou-kun, and one week of suspension for my students? What do you think of that? The weight of the punishment is different, of course, but I think that matches the difference in sustained injuries.”

Horikita’s older brother stayed silent as he listened to Sakagami-sensei. It seemed that Class C was willing to compromise only halfway. If we hadn’t had Sakura’s testimony or evidence, Sudou-kun probably would have been suspended for over a month. Asking for less than half of that made this a considerable concession.

“Don’t screw around! This isn’t a joke!” Sudou raged.

“Chabashira-sensei. What do you think?” Sakagami-sensei didn’t even glance at Sudou.

“We seem to have already reached a logical conclusion. There’s no

reason to refuse Sakagami-sensei's proposal," Chabashira-sensei said.

His proposal was certainly a reasonable compromise. Horikita looked up at the ceiling, as if quietly mulling over everything that had gone on so far. No matter how much we resisted, Sudou wouldn't be acquitted entirely without conclusive evidence. Horikita had known this from the very beginning.

She had concluded that we needed to reach a compromise. For a Class D student, Horikita was quite impressive.

However, if she was aiming to make it to Class A, she couldn't give up here. I hadn't intended to speak out until the very end, but I decided to lend a helping hand, perhaps out of respect for Sakura's earlier courage.

"Horikita, are we really out of options?" I asked.

"....."

Horikita did not respond. Well, did she even have any words left?

"I'm not very smart, so I can't really come up with a solution. I do, however, think that we probably should accept the compromise that you have offered us, Sakagami-sensei," I said.

"Right," Sakagami-sensei replied with a smile, pushing his glasses back up his nose.

"We have no definitive proof of Sudou's innocence. I suppose I should say such evidence just doesn't exist. If this event had occurred in a classroom or the convenience store, a greater number of students would have been around to see it, and there probably would have been sound evidence. There's no record of anyone watching this scene unfold. Since this event took place in the special building, where there weren't any people around, there's nothing we can do."

I sighed deeply and shook my head. I looked straight into Horikita's eyes, and she gazed back at me. I spoke as if we were accepting defeat.

"I understand why we're having this discussion. No matter how much we appeal to the contrary, Class C won't admit that they lied. Sudou won't admit that he lied, either. We really would just keep going back and forth. Honestly, it's getting to the point where I would've been happier never having had this discussion in the first place. Don't you agree?"

Horikita cast her eyes down. I wondered what she was thinking. If she took my words only at surface value, then things would end here.

“So, that’s it, yes? Well, Class D representative Horikita-san. Please give your opinion on the matter.” Sakagami-sensei had taken what I’d said literally. In other words, as a declaration of defeat. For Class C, victory meant not allowing Sudou to be acquitted. The teacher’s expression indicated that he had won this match.

“I understand...” Horikita answered, slowly looking back up.

“Horikita!” Sudou cried. It was the roar of a man who, more than anyone else, did not want to admit defeat. He couldn’t. However, Horikita did not stop there. She continued with her closing remarks.

“I think that Sudou, who caused the incident, has a problem. He doesn’t ever stop to consider his actions, which inconveniences everyone around him. He has a history of getting in fights. He’s the type to raise his voice and fists right away whenever something displeases him. In the event of an uproar such as this, well, it should be obvious who caused it.”

“H-hey!”

“You need to understand, Sudou. Your attitude caused all of this.” Horikita glared intensely over at Sudou, almost as if to outdo Sudou’s own ferocity. “This is why I wasn’t motivated at all to help Sudou-kun in the beginning. I knew that even if I forced myself to lend a hand, he would just repeat the same mistakes again and again.”

“A very honest answer. The matter seems settled now, wouldn’t you say?”

“Thank you very much. Please take your seat now,” Secretary Tachibana said to Horikita.

A period of silence followed. After that came Sudou’s clearly irritated bellow. And then, even after five, then ten seconds of waiting, Horikita did not sit back down.

“Will you take your seat now?” Secretary Tachibana asked Horikita to sit once again, as if she suspected that Horikita couldn’t hear her. Yet Horikita still did not sit. She fixated on the teachers, continuing to stare right at them.

“He should reflect on his actions. However, not in this particular case. When I say he should reflect, I mean that he should look back on his past actions. In regards to this particular incident, however, I don’t think Sudou-kun did anything wrong. This was not an unfortunate event that occurred merely by chance. I’m convinced that this was a deliberate move made by Class C. I have absolutely no intention of meekly accepting defeat.”

Horikita broke the long silence with these haughty words.

“So then...what do you mean?” Horikita’s older brother looked at his younger sister for the first time. Horikita did not shrink under his gaze. She probably felt that this wasn’t the time to be frightened, that she had to be brave in front of Sakura. Or perhaps she could see the path to a final resolution?

“If you did not understand, I will say it once again. We claim that Sudou-kun is completely innocent. Therefore, we cannot accept his suspension from school, even for just one day.”

“Ha ha... What can I even say? We did this intentionally? What a bizarre claim. Apparently, the student council president’s younger sister can’t help but spew nonsense.”

“Sudou-kun is the victim, just as the witness testified. Please do not make any errors in your judgment.”

The Class C students began to shout insistently.

“Don’t screw around! *I’m* the victim here!”

Sudou, compelled by the shouting, raised his own voice again. The objections came fast and furious. Everyone understood that we would not find a solution this way.

“That’s enough. Continuing this discussion would just be a waste of time.” Horikita Manabu looked at us as if we were just swapping lies in a giant mudslinging match.

“What I’ve learned today is that each side has an exact opposite claim. In that case, one side is propagating an extremely malicious falsehood.”

D or C? Which class was lying to the school? If this fact became known, the consequences would be greater than suspension.

“I’ll ask you, Class C. Have you lied to us today?”

“Of...of course not!”

“Well, what about you, Class D?”

“I haven’t lied. Everything we’ve said has been the truth.”

“Then we will regroup here for a retrial tomorrow at 4:00 PM. If by then it hasn’t been clearly established which party has lied, or in the event no one admits that they were at fault, we will pass judgment based on the evidence we’ve collected thus far. Of course, in that case we may have to consider the possibility of expulsion from this school. That is all.”

After offering that statement, Horikita’s older brother ended the proceedings. If the trial was set to reopen at 4:00 tomorrow, that was a very small window of time in which to uncover new evidence.

“Would be possible to have a little more time before we reconvene?” Horikita asked, raising her hand. She hadn’t protested, but she had made an offer.

“If this matter required some extra time before retrial, then the student council president would have offered a sufficient grace period. In other words, the amount of time granted should be enough for this case. Extensions are only offered under special circumstances,” answered Chabashira-sensei, folding her arms. It appeared she’d taken the student council’s intentions into consideration.

We were told to leave. Everyone looked dissatisfied as they exited the student council office. Sakagami-sensei approached Sakura, who seemed to be on the verge of tears. He said something very cold to her.

“I want you to reflect on the fact that many students will be involved in this due to your lies. Also, if you think that we’ll go easy on you if you start crying, then I am afraid you are being foolish. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Sakagami-sensei and his students left, leaving those words hanging in the air. The Class C students repeatedly complained that the witness’s lies were far too much on their way out, almost as if they wanted Sakura to hear them. Silence enveloped the student council room immediately afterward. Sakura, trying to stifle her voice as best she could, burst into tears.

“I tried my absolute hardest to speak up during the discussion, but do

we even have a chance? Horikita?”

“I won’t give up. I will keep fighting to support your testimony until the end,” Horikita said.

“You understand that we won’t solve this problem just by being stubborn. Won’t that just hurt more people in the process?”

“I have no intention of losing. Well then, I must excuse myself.”

With that, Horikita turned and left. Sudou followed. I left the student council room alongside Sakura.

“I’m sorry, Ayanokouji-kun... If I’d only stepped forward in the very beginning, everything would have been fine, but... Everything turned out this way because I didn’t have the courage.”

“It would’ve ended the same even if you had stepped forward at the beginning. They would’ve fought to discredit your testimony simply because the witness came from Class D. The result would be the same.”

“But!”

If they suspected Sakura to be a liar, she probably wouldn’t be able to save Sudou by herself. Overcome with emotion, Sakura started crying, large tears rolling down her cheeks. If Hirata were here, he probably would’ve kindly offered her a handkerchief. Strangely enough, this scene seemed to mimic the time Horikita had collapsed briefly when reunited with her brother. It was a moment of deep *déjà vu*.

Why was this world divided into winners and losers? I’d already witnessed many victories and defeats, and had seen how closely joy and sorrow seemed to be linked to those outcomes. I couldn’t just abandon Sakura, so I decided to wait until she could move.

“You’re still here?”

Horikita’s older brother and Secretary Tachibana came out of the student council room. Secretary Tachibana began locking the door with a key.

“What are you planning to do?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I thought that when you came here with Suzune, you’d unveil some

kind of master plan.”

“I’m not exactly Zhuge Liang or Kuroda Kanbei. I don’t have any plans.”

“So does that mean when Suzune claimed Sudou was completely innocent, she was merely getting carried away?”

“Hyperbole, you mean? I don’t think so.”

“I see.”

Strangely enough, though my exchanges with Horikita’s brother up to now had been short, our conversation continued. Though he’d left a bad impression on me during our first meeting, I found him easy to talk to now. Perhaps this was to be expected of someone who had climbed the ranks to become student council president. He had a superior understanding of human nature.

“Then there’s what you said, Sakura.” Horikita’s brother turned to Sakura, who’d stifled her crying. “Eyewitness testimony and pictorial evidence certainly carry weight during deliberation. However, please keep in mind that how much we value the evidence is determined by how much we trust in its believability. No matter what you do, the evidence’s legitimacy is reduced because you are a student from Class D. No matter how detailed your account, we cannot accept it as one hundred percent true.”

Basically, he was calling Sakura a liar.

“I-I...I just...told the truth...”

“If you can’t prove it, then it’s little more than nonsense.”

Sakura hung her head low in frustration, crying once again.

“I believe her. I believe Sakura’s testimony,” I said.

“Since she’s a Class D student, it’s only natural that you would want to believe her.”

“I didn’t say that I *want* to believe her. I said I believe her. Those mean different things.”

“So can you prove it? Can you prove she’s not lying?”

“That’s not up to me. Your sister will prove it. If Sakura isn’t lying, then she will find a way to convince everyone.”

Horikita's brother chuckled softly, then smiled, as if to suggest such a thing couldn't be done.

After Horikita's brother and Tachibana left, I approached Sakura, who still was not able to move.

"Come on. Chin up, Sakura. There's no use in crying forever."

"But...it's all my fault... *Hic*."

"You didn't do anything wrong. You just told the truth. Right?"

"But... I..."

"I'll say it one more time. You didn't do anything wrong."

I crouched slightly so I could meet Sakura's eyes. She lowered her head once more, like she didn't want anyone to see her tears.

"I believe in you. I'm grateful that you came here today. Thanks to you, we now have a chance to save Sudou and our classmates."

"But... I... Wasn't I completely useless?"

Just how little confidence did this girl have in herself?

"I believe you because you're my friend."

I put my hand on her shoulder. Turning her around somewhat forcibly, I tried to make her look me in the eye.

I repeated it with conviction. I told her, "Do it for yourself."

6.2

“I let you see something so embarrassing...”

Sakura, walking next to me, had stopped crying. She now wore a sheepish smile.

“It’s been such a long time since I cried in front of someone. I feel a little relieved, actually.”

“I’m glad. When I was a kid, I used to cry in front of people all the time.”

“I had no idea that you were like that, Ayanokouji-kun. That’s completely unlike the image I have of you.”

“Yeah, I cried a lot. Maybe 10 or 20 times in front of other people.”

I’d been frustrated and embarrassed, but I’d been unable to stop crying. However, people who cried could grow stronger and move forward. Sakura seemed to be the type who bottled up her feelings. This incident might have been an important step forward for her.

“I was really happy...when you said that you believed me.”

“It’s not just me. Horikita, Kushida, and Sudou do, too. All of our classmates believe you.”

“Yeah... But you came out and told me directly, Ayanokouji-kun. You said it.”

Sakura wiped her eyes once again, probably because the tears blurred her vision.

“You gave me courage. I was happy,” she said, with a small smile.

When I heard that, I felt relieved. Even if we could’ve saved Sudou just by forcing Sakura to come forward and pushing her into an uncomfortable situation, it wouldn’t have been a perfect solution. The two of us lapsed into silence. Neither of us was very good at making conversation. However, it didn’t feel strange or unpleasant.

“U-um, well... I don’t think I should be saying this now, but...”

Just as we neared the entranceway, Sakura opened her mouth.

“Actually... I... Right now...”

“Yahoo! You’re really late, huh?”

Ichinose and Kanzaki were waiting for us by the entranceway. They must’ve been on tenterhooks about the trial’s results.

“Were you waiting for us?” I asked.

“We were wondering what happened.”

I stopped and turned to Sakura. “Sorry, Sakura. Can we continue this later?”

Sakura opened up her shoe locker and looked inside. She turned her face to me. “Oh, no, it’s nothing. I just...wanted to say that I would try my best. I’ll be brave.”

With this quick answer, she lowered her head and left.

“Sakura?” I tried to stop her, but she hurried out the door.

“I’m sorry. Was this a bad time?” Ichinose asked.

“No, it’s fine.”

I described the events that had transpired in the student council room.

“I see. So, you rejected the compromise, huh? Class D is insisting on Sudou’s innocence until the very end?”

“Well, if Sudou even got as little as one day’s suspension, Class C would win.”

In other words, the compromise had been a trap. A sweet trap set to lure us to our defeat. The two of them didn’t seem convinced, though. Kanzaki in particular insisted that we’d made the wrong choice.

“The fact remains that he hit the other students. Your opponents made a concession because of corroboration from the witness and her evidence. You should’ve accepted the compromise.”

“But like Ayanokouji-kun says, Sudou’s suspension would be a loss for Class D. If Sudou were suspended due to his bad behavior, then his chances of being a team regular would probably vanish. He’d be back to square one.”

“He might not just be sent back to square one. It might be worse, actually. If the school knew both sides shared the responsibility, they’d take that into account when assigning punishments. However, if Sudou’s share of the blame increases tomorrow, it’ll be bad news.”

Neither of them were wrong. Either we appealed for his innocence, or we accepted the deal. One of those was the correct answer.

“I see. I think so, too.”

“If you think so, shouldn’t you have stopped it?”

“If you’re brought back into a retrial, you’ll inevitably lose. Just like Kanzaki says, obtaining a not-guilty verdict is virtually impossible.”

No matter our testimony, no matter how passionately we made our claims, we couldn’t win on that point. It wasn’t about just winning or losing anymore. We’d come to an impasse on the battlefield.

“Are you still going to fight? Even without new evidence or testimony?”

“Our leader gave us her decision. We’ll fight to the bitter end.”

Horikita wasn’t stupid. She already knew well enough that this extension wasn’t a victory. Yet she’d still made the choice to press forward, intending to fight on. That Class D was prepared to face the difficulties ahead was proof of our readiness.

“Hmm. Well, I don’t think we’ll be able to obtain any more leads, but I’ll go check what information I can gather from the Internet.” Though it wouldn’t have been odd for her to wash her hands off us at this point, Ichinose laughed and still offered her cooperation.

“I’ll do my absolute best to look for more evidence or another witness.” Even though Kanzaki would have opted for compromise, his cooperation also remained unwavering.

“You’re still willing to help us?” I asked.

“We’re in too deep now. Besides, it’s like we said before. We can’t forgive liars.”

Kanzaki nodded. These were really good people.

“I sincerely appreciate the offer, but it’s not necessary.”

Horikita, who I thought had returned to the dorms, suddenly stood alongside us. Had she been waiting for me?

“Not necessary? What do you mean, Horikita-san?”

“We cannot get Sudou acquitted. Even if a new witness were to come from Class A or B, it would be impossible. However...there is something I would like you to prepare for us. It is the only possible solution.”

“Preparing something?”

“That’s—”

Horikita proceeded to explain to us what she wanted. The previously calm Ichinose’s expression now stiffened.

“Oh... That’s going to be a *really* hard request.”

If Ichinose was this hesitant, perhaps it truly was unreasonable. Kanzaki fell silent and appeared deep in thought.

“I understand that I’m in no position to ask this,” Horikita said. “The burden I’d be placing upon you is exceptionally great. But—”

“Ah, no. Well, this should be within the range of what we can do, I think. That’s because I plan to figure out what’s happening to Class D. I’ve got tons and tons of things I want to know, but... Well, maybe it would be better for you not to tell us why?”

“You’re certainly right about that. Well then, if I can convince you, will you cooperate with us?”

Horikita continued to explain the details of her solution to Ichinose, Kanzaki, and me. Why was it necessary? What would we use it for? What was its purpose? After Horikita had finished, Kanzaki and Ichinose stood lost in silent thought.

“You should understand the risks as well as the usefulness of this strategy,” Horikita said.

“When did you come up with this?” Ichinose asked.

“Just before the deliberation ended. Only by chance, though.”

“That...an incredible move. I went to the scene of the crime and even I didn’t think of that. Or, I guess I should say, I was completely in the dark about it. It wasn’t even close to what I could imagine.” Ichinose appeared to

understand the plan and its intended effect. However, her expression was still distant, and she still seemed to be thinking.

“An unusual idea. You can probably anticipate the results, too. But does such a thing even exist?” she asked Kanzaki, who seemed a little shocked.

“It might be contrary to your ethics and morals, Ichinose.”

“Ha ha, yeah. You might be right. It’s a change for me. But...it’s certainly one way of doing things.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought as well. It’s something that never should have been done.”

Were they going to lend us a hand? There were lies baked into this strategy. For someone like Ichinose, who hated lying, it was a harsh request.

“Well, since a lie started all this trouble, maybe it’ll take another lie to close the books on this incident. That’s what I think, anyway.”

“Mmmhmm, I see. An eye for an eye, a lie for a lie, yeah? But is that even possible, I wonder? I can’t imagine such a thing would be easy to obtain.”

“Don’t worry about that part. I’ve confirmed it,” Horikita said.

Had she left the student council room immediately to ascertain whether or not it was possible to collect the proof she needed?

“If you ask the Professor to assist us, it should be good. I’ll talk to him.”

Horikita gave a slight nod. She apparently didn’t have any objections.

“Hey, Kanzaki-kun. Did you help us so that we would outpace Class C?”

“Yeah. That’s right.”

“But I was just thinking, perhaps what we’re doing right now might end up coming back to bite you in the ass later?”

“That could happen.”

“Man. I completely neglected to calculate the fact that Class D has a girl like you.” Ichinose, after complimenting Horikita, took out her cell phone

with a look of slight amazement. “I’ll lend this to you. Please return it later.”

With that, she affirmed her willingness to help.

“Sure. I promise.” Horikita, grateful for the assistance, accepted it without any hesitation. “Well then, Ayanokouji-kun. There’s something I’d like you to help me with.”

“If it’s not something really bothersome, sure. I’ll help.”

“Helping others is fundamentally bothersome and time-consuming.”

In other words, I needed to prepare myself. I didn’t see a way out of this, so I hesitantly decided to yield to Horikita.

“Okay, let’s g—?!”

I received a shocking blow to my side. The pain was sudden and intense. I tumbled into the corner as if blown by a stiff breeze.

“I’ll forgive you for touching me this time. However, next time I’ll pay you back double.”

“Wha— Ah, ah!”

The pain stole my voice, as if I weren’t allowed to argue. Wait, when she said she’d pay me back “double,” she meant her blows would be twice as hard as now? That was unimaginable!

Dumbfounded, Ichinose watched the whole spectacle. She looked at Horikita as if the girl were something terrifying. *Remember that well, Ichinose.* Horikita was a woman without mercy... *Gulp.*

Chapter 7: Only One Solution

The summer sun hanging in the sky was dazzlingly hot. As I took each step along the tree-lined path to school, my body screamed in agony. Sweat poured down my face. A cheerful student ran alongside and overtook me. She certainly looked lively. Alternatively, perhaps she was crazy? I probably wouldn't run even if I were being chased by the apocalypse.

Just beyond the trees, light filtering down through their leaves, a lone female student was sitting against the handrail. She looked over at me. How could this beautiful girl be so good at positioning herself against the scenery? The thought occurred to me to capture this idyllic scene in a photograph. However, I didn't have the guts to take her picture.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Were you waiting for someone, Horikita?"

"Yes. I was waiting for you."

"I guess if you wanted to confess your feelings, it'd be best just to get the words out."

"Are you an idiot?" she spat. I felt hotter than ever.

"Everything will be decided today," I said.

"Yeah."

"I was thinking...maybe I made a mistake. The wrong choice..."

"Would you be happy if we'd compromised?"

I didn't want to think about it, but Horikita continued. "If Sudou-kun is penalized for this, it'll be my responsibility."

"So you *do* worry about things like this, huh?"

"The truth is that we're gambling. I'm a little anxious of the outcome. Are you okay?"

"We have the strategy you proposed yesterday. Ichinose will be there, too. We'll manage."

I lightly patted Horikita's shoulder and continued walking.

“Hey—”

“Hmm?”

“Nothing. After we settle this case,” replied Horikita, as if she'd been about to say something. She shut her mouth.

7.1

I noticed a change as soon as I set foot inside the classroom. Sakura, who usually made it to school just in the nick of time, was already sitting at her desk. Had she come here early for any specific reason?

Horikita also looked shocked to see Sakura. Moreover, Sakura's body language itself... Well, she looked the same as usual, but I felt like she was sitting up straight, as if ready for something. It was such a subtle difference that you couldn't really call it a change. It was so miniscule that if you told me I was imagining it, I would say you were right and drop it.

Just as we were about to pass Sakura's seat, she looked up. Instead of a proper greeting, she meekly raised her hand. For someone like Sakura, that seemed an appropriate response.

That's what I thought, until—

“Um... Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun. Horikita-san.”

“G-good morning...”

That was the first time Sakura had given a morning greeting. I was so shocked that my response stuck in my throat. Our eyes didn't meet, but she still desperately tried to squeeze out the words.

“What's with her?” Horikita muttered.

“Maybe because of what happened yesterday, she took a step forward on the path to adulthood?”

Sakura, who rarely spoke in front of others, had boldly given testimony in a tense environment. She'd likely taken the opportunity for some self-reflection.

“People don't change so easily. Trying to change yourself is virtually impossible.” Horikita's brief but realistic statement shattered the lovely image I'd created. As I was no idealist myself, I thought Horikita was mostly correct. There was no truly major difference between the today's Sakura and yesterday's.

However, it certainly wouldn't be true to say she was exactly the same.

In order to change, first she had to think about changing herself. She had to want to change. There was no mistaking that.

“As long as she doesn’t overdo it, I think it’ll be fine,” Horikita said.

“Overdo it?”

“If she tries to do what isn’t possible for someone like her yet, she’ll just set herself up to fail.”

There was a mysterious yet convincing power to Horikita’s words, almost as if she were speaking from experience.

“Well, as a loner who loves her solitude, you’re very persuasive on this topic.”

“Do you want to die for good?”

Perhaps she didn’t come from solitude, but rather from hell...

I observed Sakura from a distance. She wasn’t yet in a state where she could easily greet other students. Just as I’d expected, she didn’t spontaneously become sociable. Would it be better if she didn’t force herself? Certainly. She didn’t usually talk to anyone, but she gave us a greeting. What another would consider a trivial action was a tremendous mental and physical strain on Sakura.

It was hard to think that this wouldn’t have an effect on her. Then again, she might split at the seams if she tried to force herself to change too much. We should take care with how we executed our strategy.

7.2

It took approximately 30 minutes for the discussion to start. I stood and began to leave the classroom, heading to meet someone at a certain rendezvous spot. Before I left, I decided to have a word with Sakura.

“Sakura. Are you heading back now?” I asked as she prepared to leave.

“Ayanokouji-kun... We’re having the trial today.”

“I’m not participating.” I told her that I had to do some trivial work behind the scenes.

“I see...” she murmured.

Sakura cast her eyes down, as if she had something on her mind. She looked a little odd, like she was nervous. It was as if she couldn’t settle down.

“What’s wrong?”

“Huh?”

“Sakura, you don’t really need to testify today. There’s no need for you to be so worked up, right?”

Sakura looked like she was sweating.

“It’s because everyone’s doing their best. I thought I’d do my best, too.” It felt like that she was saying that to herself, rather than to me.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked.

“Well, if there’s something I need to move forward... I’ll do it.”

Even though I’d asked what she was thinking, Sakura wouldn’t give a clear answer. I wanted to ask why she looked uneasy, but the cell phone in my pocket vibrated. My alarm told me the time. I couldn’t stay any longer.

“See you later, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Sakura’s words and bright smile seemed so unlike her. They left me with an unpleasant feeling.

“Hey, Sakura. Do you have any time later? I wanted to talk to you about something.”

The words felt like they were being squeezed out of me. Sakura gently shook her head.

“I have plans today. Maybe tomorrow?”

If she assured me that she was fine, I couldn't exactly keep contradicting her. I really had to be going. I turned my back on Sakura and headed off.

It was past 3:40. With classes over for the day, I went to the special building. This place had become increasingly hot and humid as the summer wore on. If things proceeded as planned, then the person I was expecting should arrive soon. Shortly thereafter, three guys showed up, all grumbling about how unbearably hot it was. They appeared happy, though, wearing optimistic expressions.

That was because the three of them had received emails from the class sweetheart, Kushida. Had the message contained an invitation to go on a date? Or perhaps, even more insane, a romantic confession? They were probably dreaming of such things. When they saw me, their fantasies were crushed.

“What's going on? Why are *you* here?”

Apparently they remembered me from the student council room. Ishizaki, the group's leader, stepped forward as if to intimidate me. He was rather forceful when no one was around to see.

“Kushida won't be here. I asked her to send an email to compel you all to come.”

Ishizaki looked incredibly ill-tempered as he closed the distance between us. “This isn't funny. What did you do this for, huh?”

“If I hadn't used an underhanded method, you would've just ignored me, right? I wanted to talk to you.”

“Talk to us? Why would we want to do that? Has the heat scrambled your brain or something?”

Ishizaki, who clearly *was* affected by the heat, grabbed his shirt and flapped it.

“No matter what you do, you can't hide the truth. Sudou called us over here and beat us up. That's our answer. Now he needs to quietly accept his

punishment.”

“I have no intension of arguing. That would be a waste of time. I fully understand that neither Class C nor Class D will retract what they claimed yesterday.”

“So why do this? Are you going to abduct us so we miss the trial? Or are you going to have a bunch of people surround us and threaten us with violence? It’ll be just like that time with Sudou.”

Oh. That *was* a rather interesting idea, but it would only work as a stopgap measure. Such threats wouldn’t work against these people. Quite the contrary; they looked like they’d welcome it. If they were the victims of another attack, they’d probably find a way to make their situation even more favorable.

“Just give up. See ya later.”

Understanding that Kushida would not be coming, the three turned and tried to leave, but one other person stood in their way.

“I think you guys might want to consider that idea, actually.”

Ichinose, who’d been waiting for all of the players in this drama to appear, quietly stepped forward.

“I-Ichinose?! What are *you* doing here?!”

The Class C boys were shocked. Given the unexpected appearance of someone from Class B, their shock was reasonable.

“What do you mean? What if I said that I’m here because I’m involved in this case?”

“Ichinose, you’re a celebrity.”

“Ha ha. Well, I guess I’m well known among the members of Class C.”

Since the Class C students hadn’t expected her to be involved, it looked like tension was rising between them. They were clearly starting to lose their composure.

“This incident had nothing to do with Class B, right? So butt out...”

But unlike when they’d spoken to me, their threats sounded weak. They sounded desperate to get away.

“You’re certainly right that Class B has nothing to do with this. But how do you feel about involving so many people in your lies?”

“We didn’t lie. We’re the victims. *We* are. Sudou called us out here and beat us up. That’s the truth.”

“So evildoers remain obstinate until the very end. It’s about time for you to pay the piper!” Ichinose declared, making a wide-sweeping gesture with her right arm as she did so. “You lied. We can all see through you. *You* got violent in the end. If you don’t want that fact to become public knowledge, withdraw your claim right away.”

Even though I hadn’t explained every detail, I felt that things would be fine in Ichinose’s capable hands.

“Huh? Withdraw? Don’t make me laugh. What, were you half asleep when you came up with that argument? You can’t just claim something and make it true. Sudou started the fight. Right?”

Ishizaki looked to his two accomplices, who immediately answered, “That’s right! That’s right!”

“Did you know that this school is one of the leading government-sanctioned institutions in Japan?”

“Of course we do. That’s why we tried to enroll here.”

“In that case, you should try using your heads a bit more. Your aims were obvious right from the start, wouldn’t you say?” Ichinose grinned and talked with greater animation, as if relishing this. She walked slowly towards the three as she spoke, like she was a famous detective revealing the true culprit in an investigation.

“Didn’t you think that the school’s response to this incident was rather strange?”

“Huh?”

“When you raised the issue with the school, why wasn’t Sudou punished immediately? Why give an opportunity to escape by granting a grace period of several days? What do you think was the reason?”

“Because he lied to the school and cried for mercy. If they hadn’t given him the time as a formality, we, the victims, would have won.”

“Is that really true? I wonder if you had a different aim, a different purpose.”

The windows in the hallway were all closed. The sun, still high in the sky, glared down upon us, increasing the heat and humidity.

“I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about. Ah, damn it. It’s so hot!”

One’s ability to think, that is to say, to concentrate, decreases as heat increases. One cannot exhibit sufficient logical, creative thinking outside of a comfortable environment. The more content you cram into your head, the more your brain will overload.

“Whatever, I’m out of here. I’m going to boil alive if I stay.”

“Is that really okay, though? If you leave this place, you might regret it for the rest of your life.”

“What do you want, Ichinose?”

They didn’t seem to understand what she was getting at.

“Don’t you understand? The school knows that you’re lying, Class C. They’ve known from the beginning.”

This statement probably came as a surprise to them. None of them had imagined such an outcome. Ishizaki and the others looked at each other for a few seconds, then snorted with laughter.

“Don’t make me laugh. We lied? And the school knows it?”

“Ha ha ha ha. You guys are so funny,” Ichinose said. “You’ve been dancing to my tune all this time.”

“That’s a nice try, Ichinose. But we’re calling your bluff!”

“I have actual evidence,” Ichinose continued, unfazed by Ishizaki’s threats.

“Oh? Well, let’s see it. Show me what evidence you—”

They thought there was no way we had any evidence, of course. Even after what Ichinose had said, they weren’t shaking. However, when she began to speak, their defeat was decided.

“Did you know that there are security cameras installed everywhere around the school? It’s a measure they’ve taken in order to monitor what we

do every day.”

“Yeah. So what?”

They seemed to have already known about the security cameras. Ishizaki and the others appeared unconcerned.

“Well, then. Did you not see that?”

Ichinose looked to a spot near the ceiling a little further down the hall. Ishizaki and the others tracked her gaze.

“Huh?”

They voiced complete disbelief. A security camera hung in the hallway and occasionally swung from left to right, capturing everything.

“That’s too bad, isn’t it? If you want to set a trap for someone, you’d need to do it in a place without any cameras.”

“Buh, wh-what camera?! You’re lying! But, there weren’t any cameras in the other hallways, were there?! It’s weird that there’s only one installed here! Right?!”

Ishizaki looked back at his two accomplices, seeking their opinion. They nodded, confirming that yes, Ishizaki was right. They wiped sweat off their faces as they answered.

“You can’t trick us like that. You guys installed that camera yourselves!”

“You’re right that, by and large, cameras aren’t installed in most of this building’s hallways. However, there are exceptions, and several places in which security cameras *have* been installed, like in front of the faculty room and the science lab. Obviously, there are many valuables stored in the faculty room, you know? Additionally, the science lab has many chemical products. Since the science lab is on this level, it’s only natural that a camera would be installed here.”

For the first time, Ishizaki and the other seemed to be at a loss for words. Ichinose did not fail to notice how they faltered.

“Have you looked back there, behind you? There’s one there too, right?”

Ishizaki and the others looked down the hall as instructed, and saw a

camera. Of course, that camera was monitoring the hall's opposite end.

"So if we'd installed a camera, like you said, would we have prepared one on that side, too? Besides, how exactly *would* we have prepared surveillance cameras when we can't even leave campus in the first place?"

We were cutting off their escape routes one by one.

"Th-that's impossible... That... I mean, we...checked back then... We should have..."

"This is the third floor, but did you really *check*? Maybe you only looked at the second or the fourth? Perhaps the cameras were truly set up here as a trap?"

The three were holding their heads and sweating far more than normal.

"Also, you realize that you just destroyed yourselves, right? Normal people wouldn't think to check whether there *were* security cameras, right? That's basically admitting your guilt." Ichinose delivered the finishing blow.

"So, so... That time... No way..."

"The security cameras couldn't record the sounds of your voices, but they definitely captured the decisive moment you threw the first punch."

The cuffs of their uniforms were completely drenched with sweat. Ichinose passed the baton to me. My my, they probably would've been better off just talking to me, huh?

"The school's waiting, right? Go ahead and tell us the truth. After giving you a grace period, the student council president himself asked if you had lied. If you think back, don't you realize that the student council saw through everything?"

The three of them were probably frantically wracking their brains to recall what happened at the meeting. Of course, the student council had not seen through their lies at all. However, the student council had their doubts about who was telling the truth. If the Class C students interpreted that question to be focused squarely at them, it lent itself a certain credence.

"That's... I didn't hear about anything like that! It's all over!"

Komiya buckled. Leaning against the wall, he slid down to his knees. Kondou held his head in his hands. They all seemed to recognize what was

happening. Or so I thought, but Ishizaki wasn't buying it.

"W-wait a minute. I'm still not convinced. Okay, let's say the security cameras *did* capture some footage. You should've been able to prove Sudou's innocence without having to really do anything, right? You didn't need to call us out here to tell us this. You could have just presented it at the trial. But you guys called us here, right?"

"Innocence? That depends on what you're innocent of. We know that both parties took damage during the incident. No matter the circumstances, Sudou hit the three of you. That's undeniable. Of course, if the security footage can prove that Sudou wasn't the one who called you three over here, he'd probably receive the lightest possible punishment. However, his position as a regular would still be threatened. He might not be allowed to participate in tournaments."

Sweat poured down Ishizaki's forehead like a waterfall. We were hot as well, but comparatively much better off than these three. Their temperatures kept rising as we cornered them.

"What the hell? Well then, if it's like you people say, the security footage shouldn't be any trouble at all, right? We'll be fine as long as we can get Sudou suspended for even one day."

"If that happens, you might be expelled. Are you fine with that?"

Clearly they hadn't thought that part through, and didn't notice the dilemma they faced.

"If someone checked the security camera footage, it would expose your lies. If that were to happen, chances are good you'd be expelled. Anyone could see that."

"Wha—!"

"W-wait, why expelled? You didn't say that we lied!" Kondou was trying to save himself, his voice weak and strained.

"The school is testing us. They're testing to see if we can solve problems, and what kind of conclusions we draw. Don't you think that's consistent with everything else in this case?"

"Why would... I-I definitely don't want to get expelled!"

"H-hey, Ishizaki. It's not too late to tell them we lied! If we do, the

school might forgive us!”

“Damn it. This is ridiculous. Admit that we lied? Well, fine. As long as Sudou’s punished, I’ll prepare myself for the worst punishment possible, an honorable sacrifice! It’ll all be over for Sudou!”

In other words, Ishizaki wouldn’t withdraw. Instead, he’d press forward.

“It’s rather early to draw a conclusion. We’ll give you one last chance. There’s only one way to save both Class C and Class D.”

“Like hell we’d do that!”

If the incident existed, it would be impossible to save everyone. In that case, it would be better if the incident didn’t exist at all.

“There’s only one way to resolve this issue. Tell the school that you wish to withdraw your complaint. If you do that, the school will not bring forward the security camera footage. If there’s no complaint, no one can be punished. Additionally, if the security footage is never brought up, Class D benefits, too. As we already know, if the security footage were brought produced, Sudou would still face some degree of punishment. In other words, Class C and Class D can come to a compromise together. The school can’t investigate if they can’t watch the video and see that you lied, right?”

“Ahh, ahh... Just...let me call...”

A shattered-looking Ishizaki took out his cell phone. However, Ichinose sternly told him no. She wouldn’t give him time to think. We had to finish this now.

“Well, you’re not being very cooperative. Therefore, we have no choice but to prepare. We’ll have the school confirm the security footage right away, and you’ll be expelled.”

I nodded in agreement. Kondou and Komiya grabbed Ishizaki’s arms.

“Come on. Let’s just accept Ichinose’s idea, Ishizaki!”

“W-wait. If I don’t check with *that person*, it’ll be bad,” he murmured.

“We’ve already lost! I don’t wanna get expelled! Please, Ishizaki!”

“Damn! Fine... We’ll withdraw. It’ll be fine if we withdraw!”

Ishizaki fell to his knees.

“Well, let’s head to the student council room right away. We’ll go together.”

We went to the student council room, the three C students sandwiched between us. If we took our eyes off them for even one second, they might contact someone for advice. When we finally reached the student council room, we pushed the three inside. Horikita had put everything together really well.

7.3

“**W**hew! I feel so much better! Thanks so much! Thanks for giving me such a huge role! I was so happy!” Ichinose cried.

“Well, it was more like you just did as you pleased, Ichinose.”

“Ha ha ha, yeah. I guess so. But the case is closed, eh?”

Yeah, it really was.

“I was wondering what you were up to when you asked me to lend you some points yesterday.”

We returned to the hot and humid special building and set up a stepladder.

“I couldn’t believe you wanted to install security cameras.”

Yes, that’s right. The school hadn’t actually installed those security cameras. Ichinose and Kanzaki bought them, and together with the Professor, installed them during our lunch break. Ishizaki and the other two students were terrified of leaked footage from the cameras, but those cameras were fakes.

I was surprised at first that the school sold such equipment. Then again, while you wouldn’t think of using them for crime prevention, they could be useful in measurement and recording. In other words, study tools. Perhaps calling them network rather than security cameras would make it easier to comprehend.

The heat had compromised the Class C students’ ability to think. They’d been in crisis mode, without a chance to relax. In addition, they’d felt psychologically threatened during that standoff. There was no way that they would have figured out we were bluffing. Even if they’d doubted it, they had no time to investigate.

“When the day comes, you guys will probably become formidable rivals for Class C, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“If such a day ever comes, I guess.”

However, Ichinose might well be in Class A by then.

“If Horikita-san were in Class B, we might have gotten to Class A right away.”

“Probably.”

I removed the camera and handed it down to Ichinose, who steadied the stepladder.

“I’ll definitely return the points I borrowed. Just tell me when you want them.”

“Sure. As long as you pay me back by graduation, it’s fine. So what are you going to do now? Wait in front of the student council room?”

“Probably...”

I suddenly remembered seeing Sakura. She’d said that she had plans today, but what in the world was she doing? Earlier, when she’d been waiting for me after class, what had she wanted to tell me? She seemed like she’d resolved to do something, judging by her expression. Right? She’d said she had courage. But what for?

The feeling plagued me, as if the back of my head were going numb while my thoughts swirled.

“Oh, yeah, that reminds me. There was one thing I wanted to tell you, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Before Ichinose could say anything, though, I was already running away. Whatever she wanted to tell me, it was going to have to wait.

“Huh?! W-wait a minute!”

Even though she couldn’t understand what was happening, for some reason Ichinose followed me.

7.4

My phone's tracking data displayed the entrance of the electronics store. Not to be put off, Ichinose came running after me and stuck close. As we approached our destination, I was incredibly winded. I had to stop and catch my breath. Just as a precaution, I signaled Ichinose to be quiet.

"Please don't contact me anymore!"

"Why would you say something like that? You're my treasure... Ever since I first saw you in a magazine, I've loved you. Meeting you again here, I felt like it was destiny. I love you... I can't stop feeling this way about you!"

"Stop... Please, stop it!" Sakura shouted. She took something out of her bag. Letters. It looked like dozens...no, *hundreds* of letters. I wondered how many this man had sent.

"How do you know my room number? Why do you keep sending these?"

"Why? Of course I would know your room number and send you letters. It's because our hearts are connected."

Sakura had probably been suffering ever since she started school here. Her fan knew her identity, and she had to deal with his attention every day. However, Sakura had had enough and, thanks to her newfound courage, was going to break away. She'd decided to free herself from him here and now. Her resolve made sense now.

"Please stop it. It's bothering me!"

She tossed the bundle of letters to the floors, rejecting the man's unrequited love.

"Why... Why would you do something like that? Even after I wrote out my feelings to you!"

"D-don't come any closer!"

The man closed the distance between him and Sakura. He walked with an intensity that made it look as though he were about to attack. Latching onto Sakura's arm, he shoved her up against the store's shuttered door.

“I’ll show you just how much I love you now... If I do that, then you’ll understand, Sakura.”

“No, let me go!”

Ichinose tugged on my sleeve. Apparently, we couldn’t leave things alone any longer. I’d wanted to wait until we could catch him in the act with something definitive, but it looks like I had no choice. Taking Ichinose’s arm, we strutted out like a delinquent couple. While walking by, we took pictures with our phones, our cameras clicking repeatedly.

“Ah, looks like we caught them! That old guy’s doing something naughty!”

“Huh?!”

Sakura was completely dumbfounded after hearing me speak in the unfamiliar tone of a delinquent. It was incredibly embarrassing, but I dealt with it.

“Ooh, ‘Adult harasses high school girl.’ I can just see the headlines tomorrow; it’ll be a huge scandal!”

“N-no! That’s wrong. You’re wrong!”

“Hmm, it certainly doesn’t sound wrong. Does it? It kind of looks that way, don’t you think?”

Ichinose tried to match my performance, but her tone was cruel. The man, now flustered, hurriedly pulled away from Sakura. But we were prepared with our cameras.

“Wrong? I don’t think so. Whoa, look at all those letters! Gross. Are you a *stalker*?”

She pinched her nose as she picked up the letters, as if grabbing someone else’s socks. She picked them up by their corners, using only her index finger and thumb.

“You’re wrong. It’s just...yeah, that. She said she wanted someone to teach her how to use a digital camera, so I said I’d teach her one-on-one. That’s all.”

“Hmmm.”

I drew closer to the man, pressing him up against the shutter.

“Me and my girlfriend saw everything. So we took pictures. If you show your face to that girl again, or send her any more disgusting letters, we’ll expose you. Got it?”

“Ha ha ha ha! What are you talking about? I really don’t...know what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t know what I’m talking about? You’re not weaseling out of this, old man. If you so much as raise a hand at or even just ogle this idol, that’ll be the end for you. I’ll beat the shit out of you. Got it?”

“Eek!”

After he completely lost his will to fight, I deliberately gave him some time to escape.

“G-goodbye! I won’t do that ever again!”

The store clerk raced back inside the store to get away from us. With the source of her terror gone, Sakura suddenly looked exhausted. She looked like she was going to topple over and collapse, so I hurriedly grabbed her arms and held her up.

“You did really well.”

I’d preached at her a lot, but that was probably unnecessary now. She’d been trying to vanquish the suffering she’d faced on her own. I had to consider her feelings.

“Ayanokouji... kun. Why are you here?”

“I’m really glad that I exchanged contact information with you.” I took out my phone, which showed Sakura’s location.

“I guess I’m no good after all... I couldn’t do anything by myself in the end.”

“That’s not true. It was really cool when you threw those letters to the ground.” I pointed to the mess of multicolored paper scattered everywhere.

“Hey, hey. Who’s this mystery person you mentioned? Some idol?” Ichinose tossed one of the disgusting letters to the ground, tilting her head in confusion.

“That’s...”

Although I didn’t want to hide anything from Ichinose, I hesitated to

speak without Sakura's permission. However, Sakura met my eyes and gave me a slight nod.

"Sakura over here was an idol when she was in junior high. Her name was Shizuku."

"Huh?! Idol?! That's amazing! She's an entertainer! Ooh, shake my hand, shake my hand!" Ichinose was filled with childlike excitement.

"But I never appeared on TV or anything..."

"Even so, that's so amazing! I've never thought about becoming an idol or anything."

I didn't know about that. I thought that Ichinose had the face and figure for it... No, rather, I thought she had the necessary qualities.

"When did you realize, Ayanokouji-kun?" Sakura asked.

"A little while ago. Sorry. Several other people in class realized, too." Since she was going to find out eventually, I decided to just tell her.

"I think I'm actually glad about this, though... It's been hard to lie."

If this situation had given Sakura the ability to finally remove her mask, then it was a good thing.

"At any rate, you were way too brave. I was going to have to step in if something happened."

"Ha ha... Yeah, you're probably right. I was so scared."

The girl who had openly cried in front of me yesterday was now laughing in a rather peculiar way. She laughed while seemingly on the verge of tears.

"Ayanokouji-kun... Don't look at me with such strange eyes."

"Strange eyes?"

"Never mind, it's nothing." Sakura didn't clarify, but she wore a slightly happy smile on her face. "Do you think everyone would notice if I came to class without my glasses, and changed my hairstyle?"

"I think there's a possibility that people at school might panic when they notice...but I think it'll be fine."

I suddenly pictured a beautiful girl, with tons of spectators rushing

forward to catch a glimpse of her. She had a gentle disposition, and qualities that would make boys naturally crowd around her.

“Whoa... You’re so amazingly cute! You make a completely different impression without your glasses!”

It seemed as though Ichinose had looked up Shizuku on her phone. She seemed excited by what she found. Even though the incident with Sudou might have endangered our class and highlighted our lack of unity, at least it had given Sakura a chance to grow. Maybe it was all worth it, in the end.

Wait. I really wasn’t the type of person to think like that. Or, perhaps, I should say that I didn’t know what kind of person I was in the first place. Was this the real me? I felt a bit confused.

“Sorry. For being quiet for so long.”

“It’s nothing you have to apologize for. We don’t have to talk about it. However, I think that now we have the type of relationship where we can talk about things. If you’re suffering or if you feel lost, you can talk to me. You should consult Horikita and Kushida, too.”

Behind me, Ichinose purposefully flopped over in an exaggerated manner.

“So, you’re telling her ‘You can talk to me.’ I wonder what you mean?”

I had no answer for that.

“Okay. I understand,” Sakura murmured.

“Ah, I’ll help out too.” Though Ichinose didn’t know her too well, she still smiled at Sakura.

“I’m Ichinose, from Class B. It’s nice to meet you, Sakura-san.”

Sakura looked a little hesitant, but shook Ichinose’s outstretched hand.

“By the way, didn’t you want to tell me something in the special building a little while ago?” I asked, thinking back to my conversation with Ichinose.

“Ah yeah, that’s right. There was something important I wanted to talk to you about.”

Ichinose took a moment to catch her breath, and then adopted a serious

look.

“I probably shouldn’t be saying this right now, but...there was someone pulling the strings behind this whole Sudou incident.”

“Pulling the strings?”

Because Ichinose looked so deadly serious, I didn’t think this was just a hunch of hers.

“To tell the truth, there was a dispute between Class B and Class C students before. That time, though, the school didn’t get involved. Someone named Ryuuken-kun masterminded that one.”

“Ryuuken? I don’t recognize the name.”

“That’s because he hasn’t seen any reason to reveal himself just yet. There’s no reason that you’d know him.”

Ichinose, who always looked so bright, now appeared somber and grim.

“I’m the most vigilant of all the first-years here. I think he set up Sudou-kun to look like a liar, and instigated the dispute with Class B. This was all his handiwork. He doesn’t hesitate to hurt other people for the sake of his own interests. He’s a formidable opponent.”

“When Class B had trouble, did you manage a peaceful resolution?”

“Somehow, yeah. However, if you looked at it like a game, I can’t say whether I won or lost... Anyway, I think because what he devised was easier to see through this time, I’ve started to understand how this school is structured. You should be careful.”

I didn’t know who this Ryuuken was, but he was undoubtedly a very dangerous opponent. Someone who developed merciless strategies that could lead to our expulsion if we missed a single step.

“So if anything ever happens, you can come to me for help. Talk to me whenever you need it.”

“Yeah. I’ll keep that in mind.”

7.5

Sudou-kun and I arrived at the student council room 10 minutes before deliberation began. Tachibana-san was the only other person there. I saw no sign of other students, or my older brother.

“Oh jeez, I’m so nervous. How about you, Horikita?” Sudou asked.

“I feel the same as ever.”

This case would be settled today. I knew that it was not going to be easy, especially for me. I’d declared that Sudou was completely innocent, after all. If my strategy failed, it would be for nothing. I thought that there was some value in sticking it out, so I’d come up with this plan during this extension period.

If this strategy failed, though, it would likely devolve into a verbal battle where we hurled abuse at each other. In the end, the result would certainly be worse than the compromise that had been proposed at the previous hearing. Sudou-kun would hate me then. Well, he’d be barking up the wrong tree. Still, I would have to acknowledge his complaints, because the appeal to the council *was* my responsibility.

Alternatively, I supposed that if Sudou-kun himself wished it, there was the possibility of meeting them halfway. They’d probably want to shorten his suspension as much as possible. If we made that the focal point of our discussion, we might be able to arrange for Sudou-kun’s sentence to be lightened as well.

Reconciliation was another name for defeat. Still, if the person in question wished for it, we would have no choice.

A short time later, the student council room doors opened. My heart started pounding at double the speed. My older brother... My words stuck in my chest and would not come out.

Even though I should have understood it, I felt attacked. I was wracked with various symptoms such as trembling, nervousness, and dizziness. But I couldn’t repeat yesterday’s mistakes.

I turned my eyes from my brother. There were other opponents I

should have been facing.

“Oh, my. I see that the boy from yesterday isn’t here.”

Next came the Class C teacher, Sakagami-sensei. Chabashira-sensei was with him. “What happened to Ayanokouji, Horikita?” she asked.

“He’s not participating.”

“Not participating?”

Chabashira-sensei turned to the vacant seat with a puzzled look. She seemed concerned by his absence, as if the proceedings would be meaningless without him. No, not exactly meaningless, but... It was vague, but I had the gut feeling that what Chabashira-sensei was seeing was the evidence of Ayanokouji-kun’s involvement.

“Well, even if he’s not here, the results will be the same.” I didn’t want to admit it, but I did it almost as if to shake off the shadow.

“Well, whatever. It’s up to you guys to decide.”

Both teachers took their seats. We would begin deliberation as soon as the Class C students arrived. When that time came, how would the battle go? Well, that was simple. We would object to what the other side had to say. We would reiterate that the other side was lying, and then pierce through those lies before claiming that we were the ones telling the truth. That was it.

It would be the same for both sides. Through lies, we would arrive at the truth. This was a battle between truth and lies. We could bandy about ideas, but there could only be one solution.

Finally, the students from Class C arrived. They were all sweating, as if they’d been hurrying.

“You made it just in the nick of time,” said Sakagami-sensei to his students with a slight sigh of relief. “Well then, we would like to resume deliberations on this case, from where we left off yesterday. Please take your seat.”

Tachibana-san urged the students from Class C to sit down. However, they didn’t budge. Instead, they remained standing in front of Sakagami-sensei.

“Can you please sit down?” Tachibana-san repeated her request, but

the three did not move.

“Umm... Sakagami-sensei.”

“What is it?”

It wasn't just me. Everyone else noticed that this situation was strange.

“Would it be possible not to hold this trial?”

“What are you...? What in the world do you mean?” Sakagami-sensei stood up in response to this unexpected request.

“Did you want to come to an agreement? Or did you already do something to the effect?” My older brother gazed sharply at the Class C students. However, the three boys shook their heads in unison, signaling that no, they didn't want to compromise.

“We realized that we weren't really saying anything worthwhile about which side was at fault. Our complaint was a mistake. Therefore, we'd like to withdraw it.”

“You're withdrawing your complaint?” Chabashira-sensei chuckled as she spoke. She wore a thin smile, as if she found something amusing.

“What's so funny, Chabashira-sensei?” Sakagami-sensei did not seem to like her attitude, glaring at Chabashira-sensei in irritation.

“Oh, excuse me. I was just surprised because I hadn't foreseen this. I figured we would argue all day until one side collapsed, or until we could propose an acceptable compromise. However, unbelievably, they've said that they want to withdraw the complaint.”

“Teachers, members of this student council, we are sorry to have taken your time. However, after careful consideration this is the conclusion we've all come to.”

The three's ardent appeal signaled that their will was strong. It seemed that Ayanokouji-kun and Ichinose-san had handled things quite well. I tried to act calm and collected, without letting my relief show.

“Surely you can't accept this. You did nothing wrong. Sudou-kun caused all of this through one-sided intimidation and violence. Do you plan to just quietly sit there and take this?”

As if realizing something, Sakagami-sensei turned anger-filled eyes

towards Sudou-kun and me.

“What did you do? Threaten my students with violence so they’d withdraw their appeal?”

“Huh? Don’t screw around. I didn’t do anything,” Sudou said.

“There’s no way that my students would withdraw their complaint unless you had. Tell us the truth. If you do that, then we can do something about it.”

“Sakagami-sensei...we’re going to withdraw the complaint no matter what you say. Our decision won’t change.”

Sakagami-sensei, as if unable to comprehend what his students were saying, hung his head low and sat back down.

“If you say that you’d like to withdraw your complaint, we will accept it. It is certainly rare to cancel deliberations during a case, but we can do it.” My older brother, the student council president, tried to remain calm and composed.

“Wait. I don’t get it. Why are you guys just withdrawing your complaint like that?”

I grabbed Sudou-kun’s arm to prevent him from uttering another word.

“Horikita?”

“Shut up.”

I had no time to explain, unfortunately, so I pulled strongly on Sudou-kun’s arm and sat him down.

“If you wish to withdraw your complaint, we have no intention of fighting it. We accept.”

Although I could understand Sudou-kun’s dissatisfaction at being brought to trial based on a lie, if the complaint was withdrawn there would be no winners or losers. This was what we’d been working toward.

“However, according to regulations, we will require a certain payment of points in order to cover of miscellaneous expenses incurred over the course of deliberations. Are there objections to this?”

This was the first time we’d heard of such a thing. The students from Class C looked upset, but came to a conclusion right away.

“We understand... We will pay.”

“Very well, the proceedings have come to an end. We will now call this discussion closed.”

While we waited for the curtains to fall on this rather abrupt end, I wondered who could have predicted such an outcome. Meanwhile, I saw Chabashira-sensei direct a rather bold smile at me.

“Sudou-kun,” I said. “You will no longer face suspension. The school will not consider you a problem child. You will be able to participate in club activities from today onward. Right?”

I looked to Chabashira-sensei for confirmation.

“Of course. The same goes for the students in Class C, naturally. Youthful zeal is a good quality. However, the next time you think about causing problems, you should remember this incident as an example. Do not forget. Okay?”

She emphasized this point strongly to both sides. Sudou-kun looked rather dissatisfied, but nodded. I supposed that his joy at being able to play basketball outweighed his dissatisfaction. Kushida-san and Hirata-kun’s actions would be rewarded as well.

Sakagami-sensei slowly left with his students. The moment the door closed, it sounded like he started hounding his students for answers. But that didn’t matter. We wouldn’t have to deal with any more idiotic appeals after this, most likely.

“I’m glad, Sudou,” Chabashira-sensei said, sounding grateful.

“He he. Well, of course!”

“Personally, I think you should have been punished,” she added, rather harshly. Her words condemned Sudou-kun, who was still joyful over his victory.

“The reason this incident occurred at all is because of your behavior. Who told the truth and who lied is trivial. It’s important that you don’t let this kind of thing happen again. You do understand that, yes?”

“Yeah...”

“However, admitting your own faults isn’t ‘cool.’ So even if you

acknowledge that your personality was partly to blame, you act tough. You get stronger. That's fine. However, if you act like that, you won't be able to make real friends. Eventually, Horikita will abandon you. She'll leave."

"That's..." I wouldn't exactly call us friends.

"There's strength in admitting your mistakes, Sudou."

Chabashira-sensei had tried to reach out to one of her students for the first time, as a homeroom teacher. I think that Sudou-kun understood what she was saying, even if unconsciously. He hung his head low and sank in his chair.

"I understand... If I hadn't acted that way in the first place, then I wouldn't have hit those guys. It wouldn't have been such a big deal. I knew that, somewhere."

When this first came up, he'd asserted that Class C had lied, and had continued to say only that.

"I always fought all I wanted for my own satisfaction. But it's not like that anymore... I'm a Class D student, and my personal actions affect the entire class. Now I've experienced that firsthand..."

Sudou-kun might actually be dealing with a great deal of anxiety and stress in ways I couldn't see.

"I won't cause problems again, sensei. Horikita."

Those were the first penitent words I'd heard out of Sudou-kun's mouth. I wondered if Chabashira-sensei was surprised. If so, she shouldn't be. Sudou-kun might have understood this much, but he was still Sudou-kun. A person couldn't change in just one day.

"You shouldn't make promises so casually. You'll cause trouble soon again."

"Tch!"

Our teacher, who was rather perceptive about Sudou-kun's shortcomings, rejected his promise.

"What do you think, Horikita? Do you think that Sudou will become a model student?"

"No, I don't." I agreed with the teacher without hesitation. However,

that wasn't all I had to say. "However...Sudou-kun certainly made some progress today. He admitted he was at fault. So I'm sure that he'll grow more tomorrow."

"Y-yeah..." he said.

"I'm glad to hear that, Sudou. It looks like Horikita hasn't abandoned you yet."

"No, I've already abandoned him. I just won't allow him to run loose anymore."

"Wh-what does that mean?!" Sudou-kun scratched his head and smiled, as if he just shaken off something heavy. "Well, I'm gonna get going. I have club activities. See you later, Horikita."

With those words, Sudou-kun hurriedly stepped out of the room and into the hallway. He was not remorseful. He was definitely going to cause trouble for us again soon. He was a nuisance.

"May I leave now, Chabashira-sensei?"

"Wait just a moment. There's something I want to talk to you about, Horikita. You two leave first, though."

Chabashira-sensei urged my older brother and Tachibana-san to leave.

Once they were gone, she looked deeply interested, crossing her arms before her on the table.

"So. What methods did you use, Horikita?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't try to dodge the question. They wouldn't withdraw their complaint without a reason, would they?"

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

We'd fabricated a lie because we were backed into a corner.

"So it's a secret, hmm? Well, allow me to change the question. Who came up with the strategy that defeated Class C?"

"Why do you care about that?"

"Ayanokouji isn't here, so I'm a little curious."

Chabashira-sensei had been rather preoccupied with Ayanokouji-kun ever since we started school. I could somewhat understand why, now.

“I don’t want to admit this, but Ayanokouji-kun...might have something exceptional to him.”

I surprised myself by saying this, which could be taken as an admission of defeat. However, our victory would not have been as decisive without him.

“I see. So you recognize that, hmm?”

“Is that surprising? You were the one who first put me together with Ayanokouji-kun, Chabashira-sensei. You did it because you couldn’t overlook Ayanokouji-kun’s potential, right?”

“His potential, hmm?”

“Though he does try to hide his ability by pretending to be an idiot, for some mysterious reason.”

Yes, he was truly incomprehensible. I could not find meaning in such behavior. It was likely that he was simply being absurd.

“There are various things to consider. But if you want to reach Class A, I’ll give you one bit of advice.”

“Advice?”

“The students in Class D all have some kind of defect, more or less. To borrow an expression used by others in this school, Class D is an assemblage of people that could be called ‘defective products.’ You already understand this quite well though, don’t you?”

“I don’t intend to admit that I have a defect. But I do understand.”

“Well, what do you think is Ayanokouji’s defect?”

Ayanokouji-kun’s defect...One thing immediately came to mind.

“We’ve already established it. He already knows what his own defect is.”

“Oh? And what is it?”

“He ‘dislikes trouble,’” I answered, with confidence. However, I felt a strange sense of discomfort that I couldn’t explain.

“He dislikes trouble, hmm? Is that what you perceive when you look at

Ayanokouji?”

“No... It’s because he said it himself.”

Chabashira-sensei snorted and chuckled. She spoke again, her tone firm.

“Well, Horikita. Let’s try to learn as much as we possibly can about the boy called Ayanokouji, without delay, shall we? Otherwise, it’ll be too late. You already seem to have fallen into Ayanokouji’s trap.”

“What do you mean?” Fallen into his trap? That was nonsense.

“Why do you think Ayanokouji purposefully got scores of 50 points across on the board on his entrance examination? Why do you think Ayanokouji is helping you? Why do you think that Ayanokouji doesn’t put himself forward as a superior student, despite having superior ability? Is Ayanokouji Kiyotaka really someone who ‘dislikes trouble’?”

“That’s...”

If he truly wanted to prioritize peace and tranquility, then why score 50 points in all subjects and allow himself to draw this much attention? Had he deliberately poked his nose into this incident as well? I wondered if he ought to have been carefully monitored, like many other students. As Chabashira-sensei said, his behavior didn’t fit the pattern of someone who “disliked trouble.” That unconscious realization must have been the cause of my earlier discomfort.

“In my personal opinion, Ayanokouji is the most defective student in Class D.”

“He’s the most defective?”

“Higher functioning products are more difficult to handle. If you misunderstand how to handle him, the class might be completely destroyed in short order.”

“Chabashira-sensei, do you really understand what about him can be considered defective?”

“Get to know the person called Ayanokouji. What is he thinking? What focal point does he base his actions around? What is his fatal flaw? There’s definitely an answer there.”

Why was Chabashira-sensei telling me such things? As our homeroom teacher, she usually appeared unaware of and unconcerned with her class. But, if someone so disinterested thought this way, then...

Chabashira-sensei said nothing more.

7.6

I waited outside the student council room until the meeting had concluded. The students from Class C and Sakagami-sensei left first, with Sudou following a little while later. He wore a bright, cheerful expression.

“Looks like it went well,” I said.

“Man, I don’t understand what happened, but Horikita did something for me. Right?”

I nodded.

“I knew it. I knew she’d come through for my sake. Heh heh heh.” He looked incredibly happy. “Well, I gotta head to my club. We should have a party tonight.”

“Yeah.”

The next people to exit were the student council president and Secretary Tachibana.

“Excellent work.” I thought we’d just exchange a light greeting, but the president stopped in his tracks to address me. “I have approved Class C’s request to withdraw their complaint.”

“Is that so?” I said. “Well, I guess miracles do happen.”

Horikita’s brother remained still and looked me in the eyes. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

“So this was all to prove that Sakura wasn’t a liar, as you said? I suppose if Class C withdrew their complaint, then talk would spread quite naturally. If Sudou or Sakura weren’t the liars, then Class C was.”

“Your little sister handled things well. I didn’t do anything.”

“If that’s your answer, then I’m impressed. Even though it’s a simple story.” The unflappable Secretary Tachibana clapped her hands.

“Tachibana. Do you still have one seat open for secretary?”

“Yes. A first-year Class A student applied the other day, but was rejected after the first interview.”

“Ayanokouji. If you wanted it, I would appoint you to the position.”

I was surprised, but Secretary Tachibana appeared even more shocked than me. “S-student council president... Do you really mean that?”

“Do you disapprove?”

“N-no. If you say so, I have no objections. But...”

“Nah, I hate troublesome stuff. Besides, being in the student council is no joke. I want to lead an ordinary student life at this school,” I replied.

Secretary Tachibana was even *more* shocked by my response.

“Huh? Are you refusing an invitation from the student council president?!”

“Well, I’d just never do anything that I’m not interested in...”

I didn’t do what I didn’t want to do. Besides, there was no reason to invite me onto the student council in the first place.

“Let’s go, Tachibana.”

“Y-yes.”

Their interest in me had apparently run out with my refusal, so they left. A short time later, Horikita and Chabashira-sensei appeared. Chabashira-sensei just gave me a slight glance, leaving without saying anything in particular.

“Yo.” I raised my hand as I greeted Horikita, but was met with an intense glare the likes of which I’d never seen from her before. She quickly returned to her neutral expression, though.

“What were the results?” I asked.

“You’d already know, right?” she replied.

“I’m glad to hear that. Looks like your strategy worked well.”

“Hey, Ayanokouji-kun. Am I just your puppet?”

“My puppet? What are you talking about?”

“Ayanokouji-kun, you brought up the idea of surveillance cameras in the classrooms. Next, you took me to the special building and made me realize that there were no cameras. Then, you guided me to the idea of

inventing false evidence, so that we could parse the truth from lies... When I look back on it now, that's all I can think of."

"You're overthinking it. It's just coincidence."

"Who are you?"

"What do you mean, who am I? I'm just a guy who dislikes trouble, right?"

I realized that I had gotten involved a little too much this time. I'd need to reflect on that. The always-sharp Horikita probably guessed my thoughts, to some extent.

I had to dial it back a little. I just wanted my life here to be peaceful.

"Someone who dislikes trouble. If that's—"

As Horikita started to speak, a male student walked towards us. This was not a conversation that we wanted overheard, so both Horikita and I fell silent. We waited for him to pass, but the guy stopped in front of us.

It wasn't on accident. He had black hair, styled so it was worn long. He appeared to be around the same height as me, maybe a little taller. I glanced at his profile and noted that he wore a wide grin. His smile looked ominous.

"Setting up a camera? You really did something funny, huh?" The boy didn't even turn to face us entirely as he spoke.

"And you are?" Horikita asked the mystery student, seemingly perturbed.

"Next time, *I'll* be your opponent. I look forward to it."

The boy walked on without answering Horikita's question. We never got a clear look at him. We were only able to watch in silence as he walked away.

"Well. I'll be heading back now." I had the feeling it would be better for us not to be seen together, and turned my back on Horikita.

"Wait. We're not done talking, Ayanokouji-kun."

"*I'm* done talking." I kept going without looking back.

"You promised, right? You promised you'd help me reach Class A."

"You sort of forced me to. You helped Sudou in this case, too. Right?"

“That’s not what I meant. I want to know what you’re thinking.”

“I’m thinking ‘This is annoying,’ and ‘I don’t have any motivation to do this.’ Stuff like that. That’s what I’m thinking. Even if you took back what you said just now, Horikita, I do intend to live my life quietly. Whether we aim for Class A or whatever, that’s it.”

I’d hoped that answer would satisfy her, but Horikita didn’t listen.

“If you really hated drawing attention, you wouldn’t make all this effort to get involved. You say you’re someone who ‘dislikes trouble,’ after all. Yet you act all evasive and non-committal even while you help me. Why?”

I assumed that this change in Horikita’s behavior was Chabashira-sensei’s doing. She was probably pulling the strings here. I wouldn’t be surprised if she knew about my past.

“I thought that I should help the first friends I’ve ever made. Probably.”

If I kept talking, I might say something unnecessary. I walked faster.

By now, I had reached one absolute conclusion. If Horikita were truly aiming for Class A, it would be impossible under our present circumstances.

We’d received a declaration of war from some guy apparently known as Ryuen. This could be just the start of a cunning, audacious, and brutal attack. He would probably stand in our way as a vigilant enemy in the future.

Then there were Ichinose and Kanzaki from Class B. They were two capable people who took only small, indirect steps. Ichinose probably had more plans lined up in her ambition to reach the top than I could imagine. It was impossible to fully understand how we’d landed in this situation, or her methods and process.

I didn’t understand what she wanted, but her goals would most likely prove a huge obstacle for us. In other words, it was fair to say that trying to reach Class A in three years was hopeless. Even if we tried to tackle this situation head-on, then...

“Ugh!”

I unintentionally let out a small noise.

I really was an idiot.

What was I getting worked up for? I had arbitrarily started analyzing Class D and considering the options. I didn't want to. I mean, *she* was the one who chose this school, right? Horikita and Ichinose were aiming for the top, not me. All I wanted was an ordinary, regular life where nothing ever happened. Otherwise? I couldn't do this.

I knew more about me than anyone else. I knew just how defective, just how foolish I was. I was a horrible human being.

Postscript

It's been four months since we last met. This is Syougo Kinugasa.

The summer heat still lingers during this time of year, but are you all doing well? Lately I've been suffering every day from some dull pain on my right side, back pain, and dizziness that comes from the headaches I've been getting. I'm going to go in for a thorough medical examination as soon as possible. Doing physical examinations is impossible, though. I'm an old man.

Anyway, this book focuses on a disturbance centered on Sudou, following the midterms. It's rather difficult for troublemakers to simply change their ways, right? Moreover, since Class D is filled with all kinds of problem children, the day where they can work together is still a long ways off...

Anyway, the story will progress greatly from this point on. You could say that the first act was a fierce battle waged over class points, right? I think that the classmates also revealed things about themselves that weren't visible before. Anyway, please wait a little while longer. I will do my best.

Shunsaku-sama drew such gorgeous illustrations for this book. I nearly suffocated when I saw the cover art with Kushida. It just had the best expression. It was really good, a wonderful accomplishment.

However, Shunsaku-sama, can you please stop clicking your tongue at me whenever new male characters show up in the story? No matter how much you dislike it, men are going to appear, you know? Anyway, we went out for yakiniku just like I said (see Novel 1). Did you like the taste of the meat? I'd originally planned to take you to an all-you-can-eat place that cost 1280 Yen, but after some pestering, I ended up paying about 3980 Yen for one order of some high-class yakiniku. I should have known. That was the first time I've faced such humiliation.

Please treat me next time. I'd like to eat some sashimi. Maybe some maguro, or some maguro, or some maguro. My house is super close by, so you can't escape.

(I will report in the following volume whether or not I was able to successfully make Shunsaku-sama treat me).

Anyway, acknowledgments are below.

To my editor, thank you very much for staying on top of me until I met my deadline. I will be sure to pay back your kindness next time. “I already finished the manuscript early, didn’t I?” is what I would say. I’m sure you would definitely be impressed. However, if I just barely manage to squeeze it in before the deadline, I’m sorry. Tee hee! ☆

Lastly, to you, all of my readers. Thank you very much for reading Novel 2 all the way to the end. Even during times when my hands won’t move because of (what is likely) my poor physical health, the fact that people are holding this book in their hands and reading it gives me the encouragement to keep going. I will be diligent from now on, so thank you all very much.

Author:
Syougo Kinugasa

Born in November. Blood type, AB. Primarily responsible for the scenario and PC game planning. Most important works are *Guards of Daybreak* and *Reminiscence*. His body has begun to break down, which has strengthened his resolve to go in for a medical examination. He has begun to open his eyes to enlightenment.

Illustrator:
Tomoseshunsaku

Born in September. The lead animator and illustrator for the Sagittarius games. Lead animator for *Guards of Daybreak*, *Reminiscence*, etc. If he loses eight kilograms by the end of the year, his friends will buy him a PlayStation 4, which has strengthened his resolve to work hard to lose weight.