

ようこそ
実力
至上主義
の教室へ



衣笠彰梧
KINUGASA SYOUGO
トモセシュンサク
TOMOSESHUNSAKU

11.5





11.5

ようこそ 実力至上主義の教室へ 衣笠彰梧
トモセシュンサク

ようこそ
じつりょく
しじょうしゅぎ
のきょうしつへ





「ちょっと待って」

そんなケヤキモールの
カフエからの帰り、背後から
堀北に呼び止められる。
振り返ろうとしたオレに対して、
堀北はじつは止める。



「振り返らずに
聞いて欲しいことがあるの」

そう要望を受ける。



11.5

ようこそ実力至上主義の教室へ





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Chapter 1: Graduation Ceremony

Intro

March 24th. The graduation ceremony

To the third years, not only was this an event that marked the end of their high school life, but it also marked the beginning of another journey they will be embarking on.

To the students enrolled here, this was merely just another event. However-

To me, it was something worth watching.

I was rather curious about the results of the battle between the elder Horikita and Nagumo.

I was still unaware of what happened in their final battle that had lasted until the very end... was the elder Horikita able to graduate from Class A? Or had Nagumo's intervention stopped him?

Although it should have been revealed to me yesterday, I had something that needed to be done, so I didn't leave my room.

So the results would be revealed today instead.

I was also interested in what a graduation ceremony would feel like.

Whether it was the graduation ceremony or the closing ceremony, experiencing something for the first time would naturally be exciting.

With it almost being time for school, I locked the door to my room and headed out.

“Good morning.”

Keisei, who was in the elevator with me, greeted me, and I responded quietly. Because there were students from the other classes with us, we didn't talk about anything important.

Just like that, we quietly walked out of our dorm lobby.

“We worked so hard to get promoted to Class C only to get pushed back to where we started... At least we didn't suffer as much damage as I thought we would.”

Keisei's murmurs quickly dissipated into the bright and cloudless sky.

Class C's failure in the final special exam of the year will have demoted us back to Class D.

Although many of the students were affected by the loss, our opponent was, fortunately, Class A, so it was to be expected.

As I held the protection points, it meant that I was the commander during the exam as well, burdened with the duties of being a moderator.

And so everyone would believe that there was no helping our loss and that if we had already tried our best, then it was already good enough.

Even though we had been demoted back to Class D, the difference in our scores was encouraging.

These were the class points in late March:

- 1131 Points for Sakayanagi's Class A
- 550 Points for Ichinose's Class B
- 347 Points for Horikta's Class C
- 508 Points for Ryuuen's Class D

These class rankings would only last until the end of this March.

Class Points were determined and confirmed at the start of each month, and only then would the class rankings change.

As a result, we're still technically Class C.

But following Ryuuen's rise back to Class C, their Class Points are virtually the same as Class B's.

If everything stayed the same as it was now, the class rankings would definitely change.

But we couldn't forget that at this school, the existing class points could change every month due to the different situations that occur.

Ichinose's class had a lot of diligent students, but Ryuuen's class, even if they could be complimented on their achievements, couldn't be labelled as first-rate students.

And due to the different lifestyles each class led, the points that each class received would be different.

The students of Class B might be worried about that possibility.

But even so, the fact that Ichinose maintained Class B's ranking throughout the year could offer them peace of mind as well.

That being said, the difference between Class B and Ryuuen's Class was a mere 42 points.

After the next special exam, there was a high chance that Ryuuen's class would take Class B's spot.

Looking from that perspective, it seemed like the Class D that I belonged to was way behind everyone else.

However, we couldn't forget the situation with the class points of each class in April and May last year.

Last April, all the classes started at 1000 class points. Back then, the overwhelming advantage of Class A and the inferiority of Class D did not exist.

Thinking back now, that was the best time to establish our position.

Unfortunately, Class D lost all our class points within a month.

The rankings back then...

Sakayanagi's Class A 940 points

Ichinose's Class B 650 points

Ryuuen's Class C 490 points

Horikita's Class D 0 points

As a result, the cumulative class points for the entire grade had fallen. It was the start of the competition between the classes, and who won and who lost in them.

Think of it this way. Our class gained a total of 347 points in the entire year.

Affected by factors such as our attitude, tardiness, absence, etc., the class points might still decrease at the end of the month.

But overall, we still gained at least 330 to 340 points.

That's my point. Our class was the fastest in the entire grade when it came to gaining class points throughout the year, even overwhelmingly exceeding Class A's, the runner up, number. Class A had only received an increase of 191 class points.

Thinking back to spring of last year, when we dropped to 0 points in an instant, we already did quite well in catching up.

However, when we become second years, the class had to become more proactive as a whole.

That was the only way in which we could close the gap with the upper ranking classes.

With Horikita and Hirata's leadership, as well as the growth of the other members of our class, the overall capabilities of our class will increase as a whole.

If we could accomplish this, competing with students in the upper classes would become a reality.

After noticing that there was no one around, Keisei seemed like he wanted to say something.

“Don’t worry about it. Most of the students don’t blame you.”

Maybe Keisei felt that I was troubled due to our defeat. I certainly did not care about it, but I noticed something in Keisei’s words.

“Most?”

Within these comforting words was a hole right in the middle of it.

In other words, there were still a minority of students who were dissatisfied with me.

“This... is not a perfect situation. They’re not saying that you were a bad commander, but they felt as if there could have been a better, more competent person as the commander.”

In a sense, this was also a form of blame. Humans were irrational creatures. Even if it had agreed on something before, to take a different stance afterwards was not at all uncommon.

There would be people who thought that the reason we lost to Class A was because of the gap in skill between the commanders, which was understandable.

“Even if someone accuses you, remember you have the upper hand. You were our only choice for commander since you were the only one with

protection points..."

Kei told me this after considering the possibility of students confronting me in the future.

"Although most people would agree with that, there's also the example of Ryuuen."

After I said that, Keisei smiled bitterly, and shook his head.

"That bastard is pretty special. I reckon that his recklessness is just a facade. It was because of his unexpected rise, as he didn't have any protection points, that led to Class B's fall, suffering a crushing defeat."

From the surface, it seemed like Keisei's words were all true.

But in reality, it wasn't. This was all part of Ryuuen's calculated strategy, all for the sake of winning.

The unexpected appearance was only a part of his setup.

"...Kiyotaka, I need to ask you something."

Just after those words were spoken, Keisei continued.

"When I suddenly decided to try and get involved with Katsuragi to win him over, why didn't you report me?"

In order to beat Class A at the end of year exam, Keisei proposed to Horikita that we try to win Katsuragi over to our side since he was defeated by Sakayangi... But Horikita rejected this due to the high risk of failure and the difficulty of the task.

Despite what Horikita said, Keisei couldn't accept it. This led him to try and convince Katsuragi alone, which resulted in failure.

Despite his failure, this did not have much of an impact in the grand scheme of things.

Although Katsuragi was unwilling to cooperate, the actual damage suffered was also negligible.

“The damage we suffered wasn’t that significant, so isn’t it fine?”

For Keisei, that wasn’t important.

I knew this, but I said something comforting anyway.

“That’s because Katsuragi doesn’t like to resort to underhanded tactics. If he were someone like Sakayanagi or Ryuuuen, we would be subject to even more devastating attacks.”

Keisei, who felt deeply responsible due to the failure to forcefully get Katsuragi on our side, was worried about a future that did not happen.

It sounded like Keisei told Horikita about trying to win over Katsuragi himself.

“Ah. I mentioned this to Horikita. I think I should be responsible for this”

He acknowledged his failures bluntly, with a tone of bitterness.

“Kiyotaka, are you confident that Katsuragi won’t betray Class A?”

He then asked me directly.

“No. Katsuragi may indeed change sides. Won’t he?”

“Maybe...”

As for whether the possibility of it happening was 50% or 1%, this wasn’t the time to consider.

“I didn’t report it to Horikita because I forgot to. Back then, all my worries were about my position as the commander tower and having to bear the responsibility of being one. If you think of it like that, I hold responsibility too. If your plan had succeeded and won over Katsuragi, I would’ve taken

some blame for not being able to communicate well with Horikita and the rest of the class. We're in this together.”

After both sides admitted guilt, we could put this case to rest.

“Even so, I felt that I was too naive. If I had considered the risks, I wouldn’t have even tried to win Katsuragi over.”

Even if we couldn’t erase the past, we could use it to reflect on our actions in the future.

“If it were about being too naive, I would be guilty too. Because I didn’t say anything at the time.”

“I feel better, hearing you say that.”

During that exam, many students were passively participating. However, Keisei tried to do everything he could to lead our class to victory.

“And don’t you understand what happened then? A strategy like that would’ve been difficult to pull off anyways.”

You could learn a lot from mistakes.

As for whether he could make his plans work, that depended on him.

“Yeah, I was so focused on winning that I couldn’t see anything else. Now that I’ve calmed down, I feel ashamed.”

He muttered to himself as he reflected on his actions.

Appeasing to Katsuragi was indeed a naive idea, but the fact that he thought of such a plan and tried to accomplish it on his own was something worth praising.

“So what did Horikita tell you?”

“Horikita didn’t blame me, but it was obvious that if I failed, I would’ve harmed the class as a whole. Not only that, but she also said that next time I

had an idea, I had to tell her about it. She also advised me not to rush anything.”

It seemed like Horikita made a similar evaluation.

People grew from constant failure. If you merely look at the results before reprimanding someone, then you couldn’t be a leader.

Of course, if someone continually fails without learning from their mistakes, then they will be abandoned sooner or later.

“Bluntly speaking, I’m not sure how Horikita still holds the spot as the class’s leader. Sure, she’s smart, and she’s good at sports, but no matter what she says, she still has this condescending attitude towards people. It’s hard for people to accept that.”

I couldn’t deny the point he made. At least I couldn’t now.

She wasn’t the same type of leader as Hirata or Ichinose.

When alliances were established, enemies were bound to be created.

“But... I’m the same too. I believe that athletics isn’t necessary and look down on people who aren’t smart. We’re the same, me and Horikita.”

Just after school started, Keisei tended to look down on students with poor grades.

That was because he believed that as a student, academic performance meant everything, for better or worse.

“The Keisei right now and the Keisei a year ago is completely different. You’ve changed a lot over the past year.”

“Ahhh, the fact that I’m thinking like this now is incredible. Although academics are still the most important, I’ve come to understand that athletics, the ability to communicate, as well as friendship, are also all necessary. Horikita is also slowly changing. She’s more reliable now than ever before, and that makes it easier to trust her.”

Keisei didn't really trust anyone outside of the Ayanokouji group. Nevertheless, he still expressed affirmation towards the aspects of Horikita that were worth praising. That allowed me to firmly believe that what he was saying was from the heart.

"That might be the case."

I agreed with what he said.

The kind of student Horikita was had slowly been revealed after a year. Ever since the class vote, she had gradually become more accepted by our classmates. The main reason was not because of her abilities as a leader and tactician, but because the great wall in her heart was slowly starting to crumble. As long as that wall stood, she would consider students apart from herself to be nothing more than a burden, abandoning them without the slightest hesitation. In that way, she was similar to Keisei.

"Of course, I'm not going to obey Horikita blindly. If I believe that she'd made some sort of mistake with her judgement, then I won't hesitate to object and call her out on it. Is doing that wrong?"

Keisei replied after organising his thoughts.

Things that are true ought to be believed, and things that create doubt ought to be doubted.

"No, that's completely correct. That's how the class operated from the beginning."

No matter how reliable she was, she was still just a high school girl.

She would make mistakes from time to time as well.

Now, if any of the students pointed out those mistakes, it was still something worth feeling positive about.

We can work together as a class to solve our problems, as equals.

Due to the authoritarian rule of Sakayanagi and Ryuuuen with their respective classes, that approach wasn't an option to them.

It can be said that our class was slowly turning into something similar to how Ichinose's class operated.

Afterwards, we'll need to use our strength to close the gap.

Part 1

The gymnasium

Students and teachers alike gathered together.

Everyone lined up, watching the ceremony enthusiastically. The prominent figures of the school, including some people we don't see normally, were all present.

This was the moment when the 3rd year students took a big step forward into a new beginning.

Whether they were the ones moving onto higher education, the ones who were going straight into work, or the ones who had stopped, failing to find their way in the road of life, they were all about to stop being a child and gallop towards society at full speed.

I was thinking.

What would my position be on that stage 2 years later?

What would I be thinking of then?

I wanted to believe that even after deciding the route in life we would take, we would still be able to paint these events into our hearts.

I wanted to believe that what we learnt in this school would be as crucial to survival as food is.

“Next, I want to invite the students who, after three years of hard work, have graduated in Class A up to the stage.”

The host said this through a microphone.

The already quiet gymnasium was cloaked in an even deeper silence.

“Class A’s representative——”

If the name that was called out here wasn’t Horikita Manabu or one of his classmates...

It would mean that the results of the final special exam had changed the rankings of the classes in the third year.

Many of the students and teachers were waiting for this moment, paying close attention to the words of the host.

Because as long as you were enrolled in this school, graduating from Class A was the greatest achievement there was.

“Horikita Manabu, please come up to the stage.”

After that name was called out, Horikita would probably be relieved from the bottom of her heart.

Although I don’t know how much pressure Nagumo exerted on him, the elder Horikita still graduated from Class A without a hitch.

Impressively, he stepped up to the stage, casting his eyes on the students and the staff.

“Greetings. On this beautiful, blossoming spring day, I welcome you to this graduation ceremony.”

The elder Horikita’s speech had started.

He first showed gratitude towards the grand graduation ceremony itself.

Then he talked about what had happened three years ago when he had first entered the school.

“I still clearly remember the first day I set foot into the campus of the Advanced Nurturing High School. I felt that there was a different atmosphere compared to normal schools. As I was shouldering the burden of the future, I vowed to make these three years a meaningful one.”

I felt some sort of warmth from the assertive and composed nature of his speech.

The elder Horikita felt like a different person from the one who presented on the same stage as the student council president a year ago.

I felt this change as the speech advanced.

It wasn’t just him. The students of this school had also grown significantly over this time.

“Although this was a personal matter, I spoke to the 1st year students last year as the student council representative.”

As if he were thinking the same thing as I was, the elder Horikita said this.

“Compared to what you were like last year, I can see how much you’ve grown with just a glance.”

A year ago, the elder Horikita’s silence changed the attitude of us fickle first years.

That was something many of the students hadn’t experienced before.

And now at this graduation ceremony, not one student was whispering.

The elder Horikita’s warm eyes looked upon us, as a student who was going to graduate.

“At the same time, I hope that the students who will soon be the new 3rd years provide a suitable example for the new 2nd years to fully exert their

strengths, all the while complying with school regulations, and practising discipline.”

After a few minutes, the speech slowly came to a close

“I wanted to assure you that the things we learn in this school will not only play a role in our future lives but also become our most valuable asset.”

Horikita’s brother once again stared at the students before him.

“The person who will stand up here and speak to you next year, and the year after that, will be able to understand what I’m feeling.

The person who gave the valedictory.

In other words, the leader of the graduating Class A.

Was Nagumo the most probable candidate for that?

The students in the first year were still engaged in chaotic warfare. Who would come out on top? Horikita? Ichinose? Ryuuken? Sakayanagi?

Or would it be another person replacing one of the current leaders of the classes?

But then again, only $\frac{1}{3}$ of our time at the school had passed.

The classes would change in the future as more students dropped out.

But even so, only the leader of the class who won the final battle would have the right to stand up on that stage.

The elder Horikita slowly continued. “Thank you, all of you, for the past three years.”

Soon, it came to an end.

After the speech to the students, he then turned towards the teachers and addressed them, and then finally to the school itself.

After the grand speech, the graduation ceremony moved onto the next stage.

Part 2

After the ceremony, we took the lead in leaving the gymnasium.

Then we returned to our classrooms.

Afterwards, there was to be a thank you meeting held by the graduates and all the teachers and their guardians.

It was said that the ceremony held was by the students and their guardians to show appreciation towards the teachers.

The rest of the students were allowed to return to their dorms, but those who were close to the third years due to club activities or some other reason were preparing to see them off after they came out.

Maybe it was to gift them with bouquets, or perhaps a confession.

The students seemed very anxious, and at the same time, quiet from the tension.

“Okay, even though we can mention this tomorrow during the closing ceremony, let’s briefly summarise what happened this year. “

Once the students sat in their seats, Chabashira-sensei spoke to us.

“First of all, during the final examination, you achieved commendable results despite having Class A students as opponents. The other teachers are also surprised at your growth.”

Although it was a defeat, Chabashira-sensei, who was usually harsh on us, gave us praise.

“My impression of you guys since first entering school has totally changed. It’s honestly incredible for you to be able to grow to this point.”

“But Sensei, we’re going back to becoming Class D again, so doesn’t that mean we’re still failures?”

Ike said, upset.

“On first glance, it does seem like you’ve gone back to square one, but throughout the year, you’ve all grown. Don’t mind the simple gap in class scores, your strength is actually getting closer to the other classes.”

“I’m actually scared that you’re praising us like this. Sensei, what’s the catch?”

The fact that Sudo was expressing worry towards Chabashira’s praise did have some logic behind it.

Considering the suspiciously uncharacteristic tone she used, suddenly holding an exam right now wouldn’t be that surprising.

“That’s what I truly think. This is my 4th year as a teacher. Compared to the previous Class D, you guys really are a step up.”

Chabashira lightly tapped the blackboard.

“Although the closing ceremony is tomorrow, meaning there won’t be any classes, remember that it’s still a school day.”

Chabashira ended the discussion and dismissed the class.

I didn’t know how many students would go see off the 3rd years, but what would the girl in the table next to me do?

She was the sister of the student who had not only served as the student council president, but was also the student who had delivered the graduation speech as the leader of the graduating Class A.

Horikita stared motionlessly at the blackboard, thinking deeply.

Even though I felt like if I carelessly poked the snake, it would bite back, I tried to ask anyway.

“Are you going?”

“What are you referring to?”

“That... it should be clear what I mean.”

“Are you asking if I was going to see my brother? If that’s it, then I have no plans to go.”

As Horikita said this, her gaze moved elsewhere.

Not going...huh?

“Have you already gotten the chance to talk with him?”

“...What has this got to do with you? We all have our own problems.”

But only you had this problem right now.

“If you miss this opportunity, there might not be another chance.”

“That...”

Although their relationship was slowly thawing, the fact that she still showed reluctance towards this important moment was proof of their distorted relationship in recent years.

“I’ll go see him.”

“Hmm? You’re going to see your brother off?”

It was because of the fact I didn’t interact with people very much, that Horikita’s expression was so surprising to me.

“Although I don’t communicate well with him, this might be the last time I see him.”

Well, it wouldn’t hurt just to say hello to him.

“Is it...?”

“Do you have any questions?”

“Nope. You can do whatever you want.”

My face clearly revealed my doubts about why she wanted to meet him, but I couldn't say it aloud.

I stood up.

The teachers were required to go to the thank you meeting. Even Acting Director Tsukishiro couldn't get away with not participating.

“Where are you going?”

“To kill some time. I have nothing to do until the end of the thank you meeting. Can you wait for me if you're going to see your brother?”

“...I'll think about it. How long are you going to take?”

Although she said she hadn't planned to go, it seemed like she changed her mind.

“I don't know. Maybe an hour or two.”

The scheduled time for the meeting was 90 minutes, so it was going to be a while until it ended.

In the meantime, I'll do what I have to do.

Part 3

Yesterday

On the night marking the conclusion of the event selection exam, I called a certain person.

“Hello, Sakayanagi here.”

It was the voice of a calm adult.

Who I called wasn't Sakayanagi Arisu or her sibling. It was her father.

Chairman Sakayanagi, who was confined due to a trap set by Tsukishiro.

He certainly would not recognise this phone number.

"Sorry to bother you this late at night. I haven't seen you in a while. It's Ayanokouji."

I said that to let him know who I was.

"Hmm? Ayanokouji?... Are you Ayanokouji Kiyotaka?"

Hearing my surname and voice, Chairman Sakayanagi understood and continued speaking in a surprised tone.

I had to tell him that I wasn't calling just for fun.

"I apologise for calling you so suddenly."

"No, no, I'm just surprised. How did you know my phone number?"

"I asked your daughter which phone number I should dial when I wanted to get into contact with an important figure in the school."

On my way home from the final exam, I asked Sakayanagi, and she told me.

"It turns out that even the Chairman would tell his daughter his phone number."

Although he wouldn't outright take his daughter's side, did he really love his daughter enough to tell her that?

Well... that's what I thought, but Chairman Sakayanagi's response was unexpected.

“What? No... I didn’t tell my daughter my phone number.”

Surprisingly, he denied this.

“When and where did she find out?”

Chairman Sakayanagi said with a forced smile. From the way he said it, it did not sound fake.

“Is the number of the chairman supposed to be a secret?”

“Of course, well, all the teachers know, and there should be records from information sent to relevant people...”

In that case, it wouldn’t be very difficult to get a hold of his number. It wouldn’t be surprising if Sakayanagi Arisu saw it somewhere, and wrote it down. There was one thing that confused me, though. Chairman Sakayanagi was a man who would enforce fairness even in the face of his cute daughter. I don’t think he’s a man who would just help anyone that cried for it.

So why did she deliberately write down his phone number? It doesn’t seem like she’s reporting anything to him or doing this to hold a conversation with him as father and daughter either.

I remembered that when I asked Sakayanagi for the chairman’s phone number, she happily obliged.

Would it be possible that Sakayanagi had anticipated that I might run into trouble one day and ask her for the chairman’s phone number...?

“So... How should I react to your appearance?”

Compared to how Arisu had obtained his phone number, it seems that my appearance was more important.

It was unheard of for students to directly call the chairman, as well as being seemingly unwelcome.

“There are no rules which state that students cannot call the chairman, right?”

That needed to be confirmed first.

If what I said was rejected now, I would not be able to continue talking to him.

“Actually, there isn’t a rule like that, so I won’t be hanging up now.”

We could advance the topic this way.

“But... I personally think that the call should end as soon as possible. What do you want with me?”

Although he sounded a little confused, he didn’t seem to blame me for contacting him.

That was because there were no rules which stated that students couldn’t call the chairman.

“Chairman Sakayanagi, I heard that you are now under house arrest for suspected wrongdoing. Is this true?”

“That is a very direct question coming from a student. It’s inappropriate for a student of our school to ask such things from the chairman.”

In the end, he politely avoided the question.

But the question was directly related to the topic I wanted to discuss.

Let’s be a bit more insistent.

“If possible, can you answer my question?”

“...Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, I don’t know what your goal is, but I cannot answer your question. I have no reason to tell you why.

“Because it’s not appropriate for a student to know, right?”

“Yes. This matter has nothing to do with you.”

Taking into account the current situation and position of Chairman Sakayanagi, as well as the fact that the matter in hand had nothing to do with the students, such refusal was only the natural response.

“I know this very well. However, I have my own reasons for asking.”

First of all, it was necessary to tell Chairman Sakayanagi my situation.

“Although I don’t know your reasons, you are still a student at this school. Even if it were Sakayagani instead of you, your position would remain the same. Have you forgotten this concept?”

He explained this seriously.

You could see that he was an accomplished man just from our short exchange.

“Of course, the relationship between Chairman Sakayanag and I is nothing more than one between a student and a teacher. No, I don’t think I forgot.”

Because this was a special situation, I couldn’t have him hanging up.

“If that’s the case, then this call is over. I will forget whatever happened here today——”

“No, if you do that, then we’ll never be able to eliminate the foreign existence at the school.”

I’ll use that sentence to send a signal to Chairman Sakayanagi, allowing him to understand the situation.

“You’re saying that there is a foreign object at our school?”

“Yes. This foreign object I’m referring to is Acting Director Tsukishiro.”

I got straight to the point, as there’s no advantage in taking it slow.

“....What did Tsukishiro do?”

The tone of the other party changed, even for just a moment.

Because of what he associated with Tsukishiro, the connection immediately came to his mind.

“During an important examination between the students, Acting Director Tsukishiro acted on his own to obstruct the course of the competition. Does you not know about this?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Tsukishiro intervened in an exam? What the hell is going on...”

In any case, Chairman Sakayanagi seemed to be ignorant of the situation on the surface.

Because he didn’t know my true intentions, this was the best response.

“You were suspected of wrongdoing, and Acting Director Tsukishiro pounced on the opportunity. Maybe it’s because you valued fairness too much, and as a result, you were too obstructive for what he really wanted.”

On the other side of the phone, Chairman Sakayanagi seemed to be thinking about something.

Although we shared somewhat of a connection with each other through the white room, I was still just an ordinary student.

The affairs of adults wasn’t something that should be discussed with me.

However, if all this was related to me, then it was a different story.

Chairman Sakayanagi should have been aware of this from the very start.

But as long as there was no visible damage, then the senior management of the school couldn’t take action.

“Why would Tsukishiro do such a thing? He’s already a powerful man. He’s not someone who has any reason to target someone like me on purpose. Coming to the school to obstruct an exam? I don’t see any need for that.”

This was the final confirmation that I needed.

The confirmation of whether he was willing to share information with me as equals.

“Tsukishiro’s objective is to get me expelled from this school. That’s the only reason he came here.”

Here, I spoke of what I regarded as an established fact about him.

“If this has no basis, then I can’t help but doubt it.”

“I know that, but I have no time to leisurely negotiate with you. That man is determined to accomplish his objective, by fair means or foul.”

This depended on how much the chairman understood my father.

If it’s only a tenuous relationship, then he wouldn’t be able to figure out what I meant.

But based on our previous conversation, I could roughly guess what he would say.

Chairman Sakayangi understood my father’s thoughts and feelings very well.

“You’re saying that sensei...your father’s trying to retrieve you through this method?”

The sentence that was just spoken could be used as confirmation that he was feigning ignorance.

But I haven’t said anything about Tsukishiro being controlled by my father.

Without confirming this point, he connected this situation with my father. This was proof.

“You said that there was external obstruction at the end of year special exam, but was there any actual damage done?”

Of course, Chairman Sakayanagi had no way of knowing the circumstances behind the special exam.

If he knew, then he would have figured out a solution by now.

“I will explain in detail.”

At the end of year special exam, Tsukishiro seized control of the system and tampered with my answers.

To remove my protection points, he needed to snatch away 1 win from me.

Although it was only one win, it was still an action which affected the entire year.

If we had that one victory, then our class would have been thrust into the running of the upper classes.

As I explained things, his responses faded.

In order to expel a single student, Tsukishiro was willing to do what he did. That was a definite fact.

But it didn't end there.

This wouldn't stop, as long as the student named Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was still at the school. This was just the beginning.

“That's the situation. Will you believe it?”

In any normal situation, what I said would probably be dismissed as a student's prank.

But Chairman Sakayanagi knew my father, and he knew my past.

Naturally, he reached a conclusion. The conclusion of whether this had actually happened or not.

“If that’s the case, I can only believe what you said. He came to this school with the sole objective of getting you expelled. I heard that they were implementing a new system, so is that connected....”

Although nominally, the new system was for the students and the school, in reality, this was only another way to get me expelled from the school.

“You’re saying that in order to get you expelled, he’s willing to disregard everything else? Now I understand why you’ve contacted me. To a student, this is a situation with no way out.”

Since Chairman Sakayagani said that, he probably understood the extent of the situation.

“For you to come to me, is it because you want my help?”

“More or less.”

I admitted this.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Problems within the school can only be dealt with by people within the school.

Also, that person should be someone who could contact the Acting Director easily.

“But before that, I would like to ask.... No, I would like to confirm something.”

“What is it?”

Regardless if I could answer the question or not, I was prepared to give an answer that would satisfy him.

“Facing off against Tsukishiro, who can even intervene with special exam results, this will be an extremely difficult battle for you. Since you resorted to asking help from me, there is no doubt that this has reached the level of a crisis. Yet, you are still extraordinarily calm.”

He then continued.

“If you misunderstand, then I’ll correct it for you. I don’t have the confidence nor position to make sure your expectations are met.”

I know what he’s trying to say.

Chairman Sakayagani cannot outrule Tsukishiro.

If I was calling him with such expectations, he was saying that I had taken the wrong path.

“I’m now incarcerated for suspected wrongdoing, and I don’t even have a way to get out of this situation. If your expectations for me in this situation are too high, it will only cause complications for both of us.”

I clearly emphasised the next part, so he didn’t feel the slightest anxiety.

“Indeed, if this was just a mere call for help, that would be the case.”

“What?”

“So far, my belief is that I’ve been living in this school as unobtrusively as possible. Because I entered this school with the belief that I would live as an ordinary student for 3 years.”

That was the reason I came to this school. My desire, my original intention.

“It’s also the first time in my life that I’ve set my own goals, and sought about accomplishing them.”

“...Well, I know that much, that’s why I accepted you.”

Although I don’t know how it happened, in the end, I was still grateful for that act of kindness.

“However, if I let the acting director intervene this way, then there’ll be no guarantee of me staying in this school as a normal student.”

Tsukishiro would abuse his position to use methods that I hadn’t even considered before.

Sloppy countermeasures cannot counter what Tsukishiro can do as an authority figure.

In other words, the position I’m in right now won’t do.

“So that’s why you came for me for help?”

“The purpose of the call wasn’t for asking you to stop Tsukishiro. If the opposing party makes use of rule-breaking strategies, then I will take corresponding actions. As a result, the school might become involved in the disturbance.”

“So it’s like that. In other words, you called me because...”

“Well, in the event of an accident, the existence of a supporter is indispensable.”

It’s not that I wanted him to get rid of Tsukishiro for me, but instead, I wanted him to prevent the consequences that might befall me when I get rid of Tsukishiro myself.

It’s like if I use a knife to fight against an attacker, there still needs to be a witness to verify that it was self-defence.

The school’s help would be necessary at that time.

Moreover, at that time, Chairman Sayakanagi would be my biggest trump card.

As long as the doubts surrounding Tsukishiro's removal are eliminated, the post of chairman will be restored.

For Chairman Sakayanagi to smoothly remove these doubts, the fact that it was me in this situation would be beneficial, as I do not like to resort to violence.

He should be a little hesitant to put hope on a child, and so I needed to eliminate this hesitation.

"But can you really stop Tsukishiro? Although it's hard to say, for a student, this is..."

It was true that Tsukishiro, who had the authority of the chairman, would be troublesome to deal with. He couldn't be removed by failing an exam, which, in comparison to a student, was much different.

Added to the fact that he didn't show himself often, there weren't a lot of chances to launch an attack.

Only when he acts will we be able to deal with his fraudulent existence.

"Since I can't make the first move, I'll keep track of Tsukishiro's actions."

"But can you withstand his attacks while doing this?"

"There are several things that must be done now. First of all, it is necessary to lay out the groundwork of our defence network."

If it were under the instructions of that man, Tsukishiro would not take long to execute his plan.

If he finally kicked me out of school after 1 or 2 long years, it would be meaningless. If he wanted to decisively win, the main battle would occur after the spring break, in April. If we win against him then, we won't even need to do anything else to force him into a tight spot. But after being forced into desperate straits, he'll respond with even tougher measures.

"Time constraints are that person's biggest weakness."

But by the time that happens, I'll have already made preparations, ready to take him on.

"I don't think this is something a student should say about a staff member of the school. If an ordinary person heard that, the response would have been anger... But since I know you're sensei's son, I'm able to accept that."

"Towards people who deserve respect, I will adopt an appropriate attitude. But I do not intend to forgive someone who had forcefully intervened with our competition."

Chairman Sakayanagi had nothing to say to that and accepted this as something normal he would hear everyday.

"Although you say this is unforgivable, how do you plan to stop Tsukishiro's interference?"

He wanted to know how we should expand our defensive network. I had already decided what needed to be done.

To prevent Tsukishiro's wrongdoing, we'll have to use the staff of the school.

"The first thing I need is a staff member who can actively fight against Tsukishiro. If we can closely monitor him, we can hinder his freedom, which will keep him from acting as freely as he did last time."

We couldn't let our opponent do whatever they wanted. This was an action that must be taken no matter what the situation was, a strategy that couldn't be ignored.

We didn't necessarily need someone as powerful as him, just someone who was brave enough to face him.

"Yeah, without them, I don't think your plan could even exist."

Chairman Sakayanagi also seemed to figure out what I was looking for.

I didn't know the state of the school. Who to trust, and who not to.

Out of all the people in this school, whether there was someone who was willing to implement justice was unknown.

There was also a possibility that there were some teachers who've turned to Tsukishiro's side.

On the other side of the phone, Chairman Sakayanagi seemed to contemplate his thoughts.

The choice of our personnel determined what our fate would be, and no one knew that better than Chairman Sakayanagi

“Do you know Chabishira-sensei? I asked her to take care of you.”

“Yes, she seemed to understand my situation.”

“Mhm, she seems to have a bit of knowledge towards your unrealistic situation.”

Of course, whether she could be used was another thing.

“I don't think we can ignore someone who understands the situation. Starting with her, we can figure out which teachers can be trusted and bring them over to our side. That's the best way.”

My father tried to force me out of school by forcing Chairman Sakayanagi to step down, and then also secretly fabricating results for the school exams. Trying to explain that to just anyone would be hard to do, but if Chabishira can confirm and elaborate on what happened, then the situation would be different.

“If that's the case——”

After a little thinking, Chairman Sakayanagi gave his answer.

“Sure enough, Class 1-A's homeroom teacher Mashima-sensei should be the most suitable. He's the one in charge of the 1st year's examinations, and he's an excellent teacher who puts his students before anything else.

“Can this unrealistic story really be accepted by him?”

“It’s hard to say... he won’t believe it immediately. But once he understands that this is the truth, he will definitely stand by the students. I can attest to that. He will not succumb to power and will carry out his beliefs.”

If there was no other person more suitable than he was, I wouldn’t be dissatisfied.

Knowing that there’s a teacher like that close to me... It’s definitely not a bad thing.

“I have high expectations for both him and Chabishira sensei, who graduated from the same year. It should not be difficult to talk to them.”

“I see. It’s Mashima-sensei, right? I’ll first talk to Chabashira-sensei, and then I’ll do what I can to make sure the conversation goes smoothly.”

“This is not going to be easy. People are everywhere, and there are surveillance cameras throughout the school. You’ll have to consider the time and place of the meeting very carefully.”

Tsukishiro didn’t watch me 24/7, but even so, it wouldn’t be surprising if he had some sort of warning system. If he found out that I was meeting Mashima secretly, it would be extremely suspicious.

I didn’t know where Tsukishiro usually was, but he could freely move around the school. If I were to run into him into the corner now, it wouldn’t be surprising at all.

“It would be easier for me to act if you gave me some suggestions.”

I sought advice from Chairman Sakayanagi, who knew the staff at the Advanced Nurturing High School more than anyone else.

I sought advice from Chairman Sakayangi, who understood Advanced Nurturing High School more than anyone else and understood the duties of a director.

“If you are to act as soon as possible... then you should do this. After the graduation ceremony, the third-year students and the teachers all have to attend the closing ceremony afterwards. According to tradition, the director has to attend every year as well. In other words, Tsukishiro will definitely go and participate. No matter if he’s interested in it or not, he still has to perform his duties.”

“So, if he neglects his role as the chairman, he’ll definitely get in trouble with the school?”

“Mhm. That’s the case here.”

To gain the freedom to do whatever he wants, Tsukishiro will need to prove that he’s a superior director compared to Sakayagani.

In other words, his surveillance of me during this period will inevitably weaken.

“Will the first year homeroom teachers participate too?”

The closing ceremony lasts for around an hour, but it may be extended up to 90 minutes. There wouldn’t be a problem if two teachers disappeared for about 20 or 30 minutes. It was normal for someone to leave, and the only teachers who had to be present were the third-year homeroom teachers.

In other words, the best time to hold the secret meeting would be after the graduation ceremony, during the closing ceremony.

“For the location—the reception room should be fine. Because there are no cameras, it should be the most suitable.”

This way, there will be no record of our meeting.

Besides, it wouldn’t be appropriate for teachers to come to the student dormitory.

“I have no objection to this proposal.”

I approved of the meeting venue.

“The first step is for me to explain the plan briefly to Chibashira-sensei. But what you talk about in the meeting is up to you to decide. If you can’t convince them, I think it would be best to give up.”

“This is quite enough.”

With Chairman Sakayanagi contacting them, Chibashira-sensei and Mashima-sensei will not be able to ignore this.

That’ll be my best opportunity to get some help.

“Sorry for suddenly calling you at this hour.”

“No worries. —ah, lastly, can I ask you something completely unrelated to this topic?”

“An unrelated matter?”

“I’m glad you came to this school because you dreamed of living a normal life. But, have you considered what you will do after graduation? Like, what job you want to do, where you want to go...something along those lines?”

Chairman Sakayanagi asked me this.

“Although I don’t know how much you know, my fate was already decided.”

“That means...”

This reaction was enough.

“After graduating, I will return to the white room and take up the role of the leader. That man has trained me for all these years up to now to become the next leader.”

The moment I step out of this school, the walls protecting me will disappear. If I lived in a cheap apartment, he would attack me at night or use some other method to take me back to the white room.

“So you’ve accepted your fate…And on that basis, you came here.”

“That’s the reason I wanted to protect these three years to the end.”

In simple terms, it is like being in a period of resistance.

To reject my father’s orders and do what I want.

“I hope this school will be a memorable part of your life.”

“Thank you. I hope so too.”

After the call with Chairman Sakayanagi, I felt relieved.

Although I wasn’t sure to what extent he could be trusted, at least I was able to certify the fact that he wasn’t on Tsukishiro’s side

Furthermore, his daughter was in the same year group as me. That would be one of my advantages going into the future.

Part 4

That was the conclusion of my little talk with Chairman Sakayanagi yesterday.

And now, I’m headed towards the arranged reception room by myself.

I reached the door of the reception room. Had anyone arrived already, or was I the first?

“Excuse me.”

After knocking, I entered the room and was greeted by Chabashira-sensei.

She stood by the window and looked at me.

“You’re early, Ayanokouji. There’s still 10 minutes before the designated time.”

“It doesn’t make a difference. You’re early as well.”

Chabashira stared at me, contemplating how she should reply.

I could more or less guess what was going on in her mind when Chairman Sakayanagi told her about the situation.

The sofa was unoccupied, but neither of us sat down.

“Where’s Mashima-sensei?”

“I’ve already met up with him, but it wasn’t suitable for him to come with me. This is a bold move, Ayanokouji. Didn’t you want to live a peaceful school life?”

Before Mashima-sensei arrives, I’ll play along with Chabashira-sensei.

“You say that, but you were the one that initially disrupted that peaceful school life.”

“No matter what, that isn’t how you should speak to a teacher. You might want to correct your attitude.”

“I’d say my attitude is appropriate considering that what you’ve done back then wasn’t something a teacher should have done.”

Chabashira-sensei, who wanted Class D to rise to Class A, even resorted to threatening me, a student, to accomplish what she wanted. Ever since, I’ve always had a sense of distrust...No, disgust, for her.

Chabashira-sensei looked away, seemingly ashamed.

“I can’t deny that.”

Her desire for reaching Class A was too strong.

Because Chairman Sakayanagi trusted her, she couldn’t blatantly use me, but she could have handled it more smoothly.

No. No matter what she did, the result would have been the same.

Even if Chabashira tried to talk me over, my stance wouldn't have changed.

But then again, my situation had changed a lot since the beginning.

“Since you hate me, why call me here, Ayanokouji?”

It seemed that she was surprised that I called her over in this situation.

Although her purpose was to just get Mashima-sensei involved, I still could have chosen to exclude her.

It wasn't hard to find out why I didn't do that.

“At the very least, it's true that I don't like you.”

“It seems so.”

No matter what my feelings were, I must use whatever I could.

Like and dislike was a separate matter than loss and gain.

That's because I judged that the presence of Chabashira would increase the chance of bringing Mashima-sensei to our side, even by a millimetre.

I had judged that the presence of Chabashira would increase the chance of bringing Mashima-sensei over, and so I had chosen to involve her.

“How much did he tell you?”

“He asked me to prepare the meeting by contacting Mashima-sensei. He also said you had something important to talk about, and asked me to help you, but...”

Did she know anything about the situation with Tsukishiro?”

It seems like the Chairman intended for me to have all the power in this situation.

“What’s the reason you wanted to talk to us then?”

“I’ll say it once Mashima-sensei comes. I don’t want to say it twice.”

“Although I don’t know what you got yourself into, if you want my help, shouldn’t you use a more suitable tone?”

She was defiant, and that was perhaps because she was on the defensive in this situation.

“As a teacher, I will obey the instructions of Chairman Sakayanagi, but his word isn’t absolute. Do you know what I mean by that?”

“Do you dislike my attitude that much?”

“Heh, I hate it. Although you are an excellent student to an extent, You’re still only a 1st-year high school student, aren’t you? And although it was a confrontation between classes, you were defeated by Sakayanagi at the end of year exam. Looks like you don’t actually have the extraordinary strength I expected of you.”

So she was disappointed that I didn’t have the power she thought I had.

“If you have the necessary ability, I will tolerate what you say and what you do. However, if what you’ve displayed up to now was the extent of your power, it’s a different story.”

If I couldn’t defeat Sakayanagi of Class A, then what Chabashira wanted couldn’t be achieved.

It seemed like she could no longer hold in what she wanted to say to me in this situation where I held the advantage.

Although Chabashira was a teacher, what she was doing right now was already beyond the scope of a teacher’s duties.

Depending on the content of the conversation, she could, of course, refuse to help.

Depending on the situation, she might even choose to go over to Tsukishiro's side.

If I kept mentioning the fact that I wasn't in her control any longer, it would only be counterproductive.

I breathed out a sigh of relief, seeing that she had some kind of knowledge about me and my situation.

"I understand, my attitude will change, Chabashira-sensei."

"What?"

Chabashira was surprised by my outspoken agreement.

I guess she didn't expect that her defiance on that level would make me yield to her.

Although it seemed like I wanted to change the topic, it was mainly because I wanted to leave her with the possibility that I could be tamed.

However, despite this possibility, Chabashira still couldn't trust me entirely.

She could also be thinking that I was laughing at her in secret while I said that.

I intended to express the fact that I was a "positive presence" for the whole of Class D.

"My way of thinking has changed. After April, I plan to seriously target Class A."

"What's the joke here? Preparing this meeting as well, what are you thinking?"

"I'm completely serious. I plan to break away from being labelled as Class D or Class C. However, because of the differences in Class Points, there's no guarantee to be promoted to Class A at the end of the next year. But I'm confident that we'll be able to rise to Class B."

For Chabashira, this was the thing she desired the most.

Rising from Class D to Class A.

That was something that had never happened in this school before.

“It seems like you’ve finally come to realise...but anything coming out of your mouth would mean nothing if you don’t actually intend to do anything.”

“That’s true. But don’t you want to keep your ticket to Class A?”

Regardless if this ticket was real or fake, it was better than having nothing.

“I’ve already said this, but you lost against Class A at the end of year exam. Although you held an admirable record of 3 wins and 4 losses, a loss is still a loss. Although the exam required a certain amount of luck, I can’t let you use that as an excuse.”

She re-emphasized what was said before.

“No matter who the opponent is, and no matter what the exam is, even if you win, it seemed like I had been expecting a little too much out of you.”

It seems like she had some sort of fantasy about me.

“You’ll learn the truth later in the meeting.”

“Learn the truth.....?

“Listen to me until the end, and if you still can’t trust my strength, you can do whatever you want.”

“What is this-”

Although Chabashira wanted an answer, a loud knocking sound blocked out her voice.

“...Please come in.”

As soon as Chabashira replied, Mashima-sensei entered the reception room.

“It seems like you were already here.”

And immediately after-

“Hello.”

A student of Class A, Sayakanagi Arisu.

She came in with Mashima-sensei. An unexpected guest.

I didn’t remember calling her, and I didn’t think Mashima-sensei would bring her here himself.

“I’m a student of Class A, so even if others see me walking with Mashima-sensei, there’s isn’t a problem.”

Needless to say, Sakayanagi must have followed Mashima-sensei here.

“I received a notification from Chabashira-sensei. But Sakayanagi here said she was related to this incident, so I brought her...”

Chairman Sakayanagi probably told his daughter about the phone call to confirm that I had contacted him through his daughter.

But was that really related to why Sakayanagi was here?

Was she following orders, or was this just mere curiosity?

9 times out of 10, it’s the latter.

“No problem, it’s within the realms of my expectations.”

I accepted this visitor as someone I should welcome and responded accordingly.

Sakayanagi nodded slightly with a smile.

Then, without even looking at Chabashira's direction, Mashima-sensei closed the door to the reception room.

It seems like Chabashira couldn't understand why Sakayanagi was here.

Mashima-sensei was the same.

Regardless of that, all the necessary people were in place.

This limited amount of time must be used meaningfully.

"You seem to have something to say to us, Ayanokouji. Making a special announcement through Chairman Sakayanagi, allowing us to skip the closing ceremony to have a secret meeting... What's the big deal? What's going on?"

"I will explain that now."

I first urged the two teachers to sit down.

But Mashima-sensei told Sakayanagi to sit down first.

"Ah, thank you."

Mashima-sensei stood, letting the crippled Sakayanagi sit, crossing his arms.

It seemed that whether he would sit depended on the contents of the conversation. Chabashira seemed to do the same as him.

The three other people in the room all looked towards me.

20-30 minutes was the maximum amount of time they could slip out of the closing ceremony, so time was minimal.

Although I wanted to get straight to the point, I didn't know how long it would take for them to understand.

Because the current situation wasn't something that could be easily understood with just one explanation.

Time was precious, so I started with the matter of Acting Director Tsukishiro.

"You might be wondering why we're meeting at such a busy time, and that's because of important matters relating to Acting Director Tsukishiro."

"Important matters relating to Acting Director Tsukishiro? What are you talking about?"

Mashima-sensei's face had a perplexed expression, due to my unexpected statement right from the start.

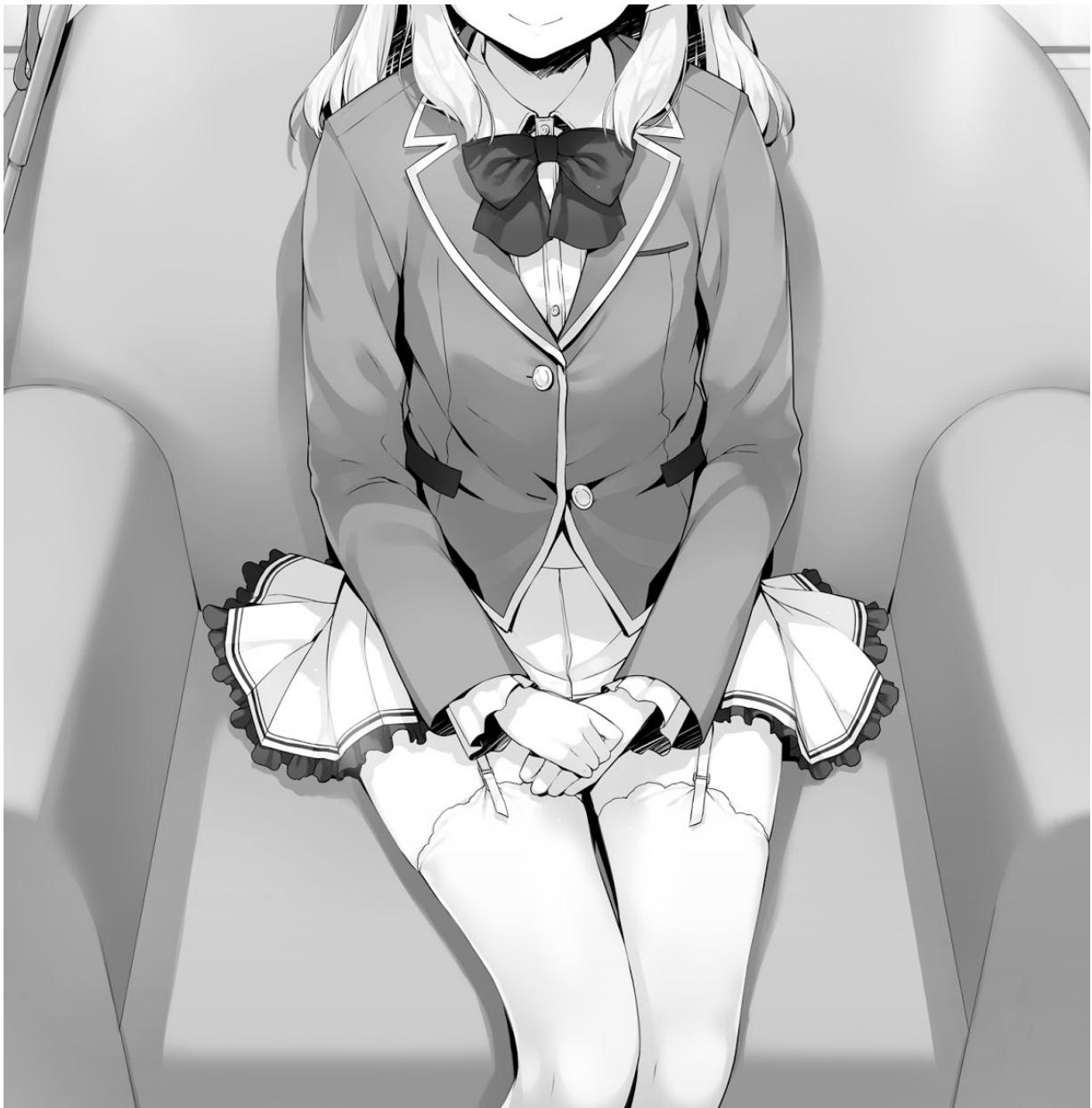
Hearing a student saying such a thing, the expression that he had was understandable.

Chabashira also seemed unable to keep up with this, and instead turned her attention to the unexpected turn up. Sakayanagi, who confronted the attention head first, flashed an innocent smile.

An expression which seemed to express her superior knowledge of the situation.

This cheerful expression that was on her face, that's the classic manner of Sakayanagi.





“The current events are affecting the school’s operations, and it has reached the point in which we cannot ignore it. To smoothly settle this situation, I hope that you two teachers can help me while keeping this case confidential.”

“I heard that there was something important to tell me... Is this a joke? Chabashira-sensei.”

While finding it very difficult to believe, Mashima-sensei asked Chabashira sensei for an explanation.

“I didn’t intend to make fun of you. Did you think I’m someone who does meaningless things like Hoshinomiya-sensei?”

“That’s what you say, but I don’t understand the situation at all. Right now, there’s also a closing ceremony going on which I should be at.”

This was originally going to be a valuable time to interact with the graduates.

He showed no interest in listening to a child’s imagination run wild.

“What does Ayanokouji want to do?”

“I don’t know, even if I want to explain, I can’t. Like I said yesterday, I just prepared this location under Chairman Sakayangi’s orders. I also need an explanation for me to understand what’s going on.”

Both teachers cast a doubtful gaze at me, but I continued to explain.

“If I said that I’m the reason why Tsukishiro replaced Chairman Sakayanagi after being confined for suspected wrongdoing, what would you say, Mashima-sensei?”

“What?”

Even if we get straight into the topic, it wouldn’t be easy to progress in this situation.

Not only that, but Mashima-sensei’s doubts are growing deeper.

“This makes no sense. Why is it because of you?”

Of course, this would be the natural reaction.

He would never have thought that a student would shape the very structure of the school itself.

Sure enough, we should start with the end of year exam.

“Let me explain what happened—”

When I wanted to bring up the end of year exam, Sakayanagi raised her hand.

“Sorry, but is it alright for me to explain? ”

Sakayanagi seemed to have anticipated this would happen and suggested to explain it herself.

“Sakayanagi, you said you knew about the situation right? ”

“Well, if you may excuse my rudeness, I think I understand the situation a little better than you teachers.”

Sakayanagi acted immediately. Maybe she thought that rather than having someone merely involved explain, it would be faster for someone who understood the situation to explain. I nodded slightly, so Sakayanagi turned her attention to Mashima-sensei.

“Are you saying that you’ve already heard about this from the Chairman?”

“No, it’s just from what I’ve gathered. Ayanokouji-kun and I- How should I say this... Simply put, we’re like childhood friends.”

Sakayangi said this happily. Although I wasn’t sure how the others would react to this, the teachers seemed surprised, at the very least.

“I never expected you two to be... childhood friends...”

Sakayangi explained to Chabashira what she meant.

“It’s just something similar to that. Anyways, I’ll explain the situation to you.”

The matter of the childhood friends was glossed over by Sakayanagi, and she began explaining the situation.

“Let’s review what happened during the confrontation between Ayanokouji-kun and me as the two commander towers at the end of year exam held a few days ago. Back then, my victory during the final chess event determined the outcome of the exam.”

This was the result, which was a fact, at least as far as the school knew.

“What happened then?”

Of course, Mashima-sensei and Chabashira wouldn’t have any doubts about what happened.

“What if I said during then, someone stepped in to interfere with the match, which changed the outcome, and therefore had a great impact on the test results? Wouldn’t that be a serious issue?”

“Exams are carried out very strictly, and there was, and will be, no problems with how they’re conducted.”

“Let me ask, on what basis are you to say that the exam was strictly run? Neither of you were present during the exam.”

Because they couldn’t serve as an invigilator for their own class, Chabashira and Mashima-sensei were in charge of Ichinose’s and Ryuuuen’s class. In other words, they did not see our exam take place in person.

“I was originally the loser of that chess game, Ayanokouji-kun came out victorious.”

“Ayanokouji won that match? But I saw the results of the match, and I’ve also seen what happened during the match.”

The first person to say something about this was not Mashima-sensei, but Chabashira.

It was because of Class C’s defeat in chess that led to her class falling back to Class D, which was why she cared so much about this issue.

“You still don’t get it?”

Sakayanagi used that question to sound out Mashima-sensei and Chabashira.

“What are you trying to say? Could it be that acting director Tsukishiro manipulated the results of the chess game? Sakagami-sensei and Hoshinomiya-sensei met up after the exam, and they didn’t find anything irregular had happened.”

“The thing that has changed wasn’t the result, but the process. It’s impossible to see the truth if one is bound by common sense. The orders that the commanding tower sends out weren’t directly sent to the students. Instead, it was passed onto the school to review, and then after that, finally sent through the headphones.”

Did they understand now? Just like that, Sakayanagi made them slowly come to an understanding.

For the first time, doubts about Acting Director Tsukishiro and the end of year exam flashed through Mashima-sensei’s mind.

“It was rare to have an exam that made use of such large scale equipment and the teachers knew that, but the fact of the matter is that Acting Director Tsukishiro prepared that in order to illegally intervene with the exam.”

Sakayagani subtly intertwined lies, mysteries, as well as the truth together.

Because of how much Tsukishiro had planned out, only he would know the situation completely.

Instead of confirming the facts, it was an appropriate explanation based on her conjectures, and she acted as if it were the truth.

Such words will be accepted by the teachers.

Mashima-sensei and Chabashira wouldn’t be able to understand it entirely due to the sheer volume of information just revealed to them. As Sakayagani was still explaining the topic, in order to keep up with her, their minds will have to treat what she said as a fact.

“That is to say that the information Ayanokouji-kun inputted and the information Horikita-san heard- that is, the content read by the machine, was different. If she had followed Ayanokouji-kun’s real instructions, I would have lost instead. Do you understand what that means?”

Sakayagani smiled, testing their ability to understand.

Could they understand with just that? This restricted the answer of the other party to only one possibility.

“You mean that Acting Director Tsukishiro-manipulated the results from behind the scenes?”

“Because for him, the protection points Ayanokouji-kun holds was in the way of his true objective, to get Ayanokouji-kun expelled.”

The two teachers did not speak.

But before long, Mashima-sensei asked something.

“Was what Sakayagani said true, Ayanokouji?”

“Yes, it’s as she said.”

“I’ll admit that what you both said made some sense. As I’ve been Sakayanagi’s teacher for a year, I have a certain understanding of her personality and how she thinks. If she really wanted to lose against Ayanokouji deliberately, she just needed to choose different examination events carefully to manipulate the results to what she wanted, including the chess event. You couldn’t gain anything by lowering yourself in order to elevate Ayanokouji.”

As the leader of Class A, even if Sakayagani was lying, admitting her defeat would have no benefits.

It’s as Mashima-sensei said. If she wanted me to win due to personal reasons, there were many ways to concede victory, either by exceeding the time limit or some other method.

There was no need to deliberately set up something while also saying something of doubtful reliability.

“But even if you do know the whole sequence of events, there isn’t a way for a third party to confirm it’s authenticity, right?”

Chabashira replied to Sakayagani’s unfounded argument.

“This was hard to believe at the start....what do you think?”

Chabashira asked the opinion of Mashima-sensei, who was intently listening to what was said.

“Never mind what I think, the current situation is hard for anyone to accept.”

Just when Mashima-sensei wanted to step back for a bit, Chabashira stopped him.

“My personal opinion is that what these two said has some kind of truth in it. Ever since Acting Director Tsukishiro came to this school, the whole school feels a bit abnormal.”

“If you believe that only because of your personal feelings towards Tsukishiro, then I don’t need to consider what you think. It’s the same as thinking your class can win.”

Mashima-sensei spoke sternly towards Chabashira in front of us.

And then immediately talked to us students.

“Do you two have any evidence?”

“If we said we heard about the improper behaviour directly from Tsukishiro himself, would you believe us?”

“...Of course not.”

A person who engaged in improper conduct behind the scenes would not reveal their behaviour.

Even if the matter came up, that person wouldn't respond to anything. That was something which everyone understood.

"It's hard to believe that there is a child that wants something similar to what Acting Director Tsukishiro wants. To get rid of each other. That is what I truly think."

"It's the truth."

"I don't want to doubt what you students say. I also don't think that you're stupid enough to realize that lying right now won't do you any good. But this lacks any basis, as well as evidence."

Even though he really wanted to believe it, if there were no reliable evidence, Mashima-sensei would not accept it.

"What kind of person are you, Ayanokouji? Please tell me."

It was only a matter of time before Mashima-sensei asked that question.

Chairman Sakayanagi was confined for suspected wrongdoing, so a man named Tsukishiro was sent to this school.

Tsukishiro started acting for me to drop out of school. Even if it meant interfering with a special exam, he had to carry out his order. So it was inevitable that questions would arise about myself.

Should I explain it myself, or leave it to someone else.

Seeing that there was no response from me, Mashima-sensei turned to Chabashira.

"Do you know anything about Ayanokouji?"

Mashima-sensei asked Chabashira, who believed what we said to a certain extent.

“To be honest... From my past experiences, I only know a little.”

She glanced at me. I coldly ignored her.

There was no harm in Chabashira-sensei exposing some superficial information about me.

“I looked at Ayanokouji’s entrance exam results, and he scored 50 on all subjects, which I thought was extremely peculiar.”

“50 points for each subject... does that mean he deliberately tried to score half marks for every subject?”

“If you investigate deeper yourself, you should see that it’s true.”

“Hou? How intriguing.”

“But this doesn’t prove anything. In general, students won’t hold back their abilities during the entrance exam, but if you have high academic ability, it is not difficult to attain scores like that. In fact, the method I used to calculate the scores of the entrance exam was actually very simple.”

“Also, when Ayanokouji enrolled in this school, Chairman Sakayanagi told me that he was a special student.”

“Chairman Sakayanagi said that? Is that why you are here? Chabashira-sensei?”

Chabashira-sensei nodded and began talking about what happened at that time.

“He entrusted me, as his class teacher, with the duty of reporting back to him any inconveniences relating to Ayanokouji. As far as I know, Ayanokouji’s father is a very authoritative person, and he didn’t want him to enter this school in the first place. Chairman Sakayanagi had to use various forceful methods in order to permit him to enter the school in the first place.”

“So you’ve enrolled into this school without your guardian’s permission? Looks like the Chairman is also someone willing to use such forceful means to get what he wants.”

If we ignored compulsory education, every ordinary child needed their parent’s permission in order to enter high school. The world wasn’t so naive to let children do as they wish.

“Because of the fact my father and Ayanokouji-kun had some sort of relationship, I sympathise with his unfortunate situation and will assist him when needed. But now, various problems have arisen because of this incident. The Acting Director, Tsukishiro, fabricated evidence in order to restrain my father in terms of dishonest behavior, and tried to get Ayanokouji expelled.”

That was the most important point for Mashima-sensei.

“The father was against his child entering this school, so he sent Acting Director Tsukishiro here...”

This wasn’t something that an ordinary person’s authority could achieve.

“He didn’t need to do all this, he just had to complain to the school itself.”

“His father had already set up a meeting between him, the chairman, and Ayanokouji himself after he enrolled.”

“So you’re saying that his guardian had already communicated with the school with the wish that he wanted Ayanokouji to withdraw from the school?:

“Yes. It’s as Chabashira-sensei says. I once talked with Chairman Sakayanagi and my father in this very room. You can check the surveillance cameras out in the corridor to confirm if that’s the truth.”

“And after that, since you’re still at the school, does that mean that the Chairman had rejected the withdrawal application?”

“Yes.”

Mashima-sensei wanted to confirm that fact, so Chabashira nodded her head.

“Chairman Sakayanagi respected the will of the students. Although this was just a temporary replacement...I didn’t expect Acting Director Tsukishiro to be sent to the school just to get Ayanokouji expelled.”

Sakayanagi jumped on what Chabashira said.

“That isn’t a surprise, it seems like Chabashira-sensei doesn’t actually know anything about the situation.”

“It seems that you’re confident of that.”

“Yes. I understand Ayanokouji-kun more than you do, Chabashira-sensei.”

Sakayagani always had this unnecessary aura of superiority around her.

“Seeing me come here without an invitation without even objecting to my presence, wouldn’t it be obvious?”

Presenting indisputable facts, Sakayanagi smiled haughtily.

“Finally, I get to understand the big picture. At least the part about the father that wanted his child back, I can accept that as a fact.”

Mashima-sensei had figured out what was happening in the current situation but still couldn’t accept most of it.

“But...although I don’t know the extent of Ayanokoji’s father’s authority, why did he have to try to get Ayanokouji expelled in this way? This doesn’t seem realistic.”

“Because Ayanokouji-kun possesses means that other ordinary people do not.”

“I’ve taken a look at Ayanokouji’s exam results from the past few days. In terms of calculation and processing speed as well as choosing chess moves,

he's definitely top tier. But there are other similarly outstanding students, and it shouldn't be enough to label him as an extraordinary specimen."

"Mashima-sensei. I won't try to reject the method in how you've attempted to accept this situation. But have you actually thought about what's going on? From the start of school, my father had been paying attention to him, and then Acting Director Tsukishiro tried to use dishonest means to expel him from school. This is a fact, and the only truth."

Mashima folded his arms and closed his eyes.

"Mashima-sensei presumably has reached his verdict. You can look for evidence in the future yourself."

After staying silent, he opened his eyes and looked at me, Sakayagani, and finally, Chabashira.

"Yeah...The part about how the father was dissatisfied with his child's decision to enrol into the school and tried to get him expelled, I believe. And I don't want to help him with that. I'm sure you're clear with why."

Mashima-sensei understood the surface of the situation we were talking about very well.

"Aren't you going to tell me everything?"

It seems that Mashima-sensei had figured out something that was kept secret during the conversation by organising the contents of the discussion in his head.

But if he couldn't even decipher something on this level, then I'll be troubled.

"Yeah. Even if I told you, it wouldn't be of any help... no, it would be meaningless."

Even if I talked about the white room from the very start, I'm afraid the adults wouldn't be able to understand it.

Even if you relied on only common sense, it was obvious that that man was doing something suspicious.

And, even if I talked about the white room here, it was still difficult to reach the truth.

Because that matter would have been completely covered up by now.

That being the case, there wasn't any point in doing such meaningless things.

“What if I refuse to assist you?”

“Although I don't intend to do nothing, if you refuse, it'll be a headache when dealing with Acting Director Tsukisiro. The school's events, whether it's a special exam or something else, would be a lot easier for him to intervene illegally. You can see that in the event selection exam, as it had already happened.”

Students alone couldn't prevent that from happening.

If we could convey that fact to Mashima-sensei, we could determine if he was a person who would turn a blind eye to that sort of thing.

“Are you trying to feel me out, Ayanokouji? ...Fine. In future special examinations and tests, I will handle it appropriately, and will not allow Acting Director Tsukishiro to engage in illegal participation.”

Finally, Mashima-sensei had said that he stood on our side.

“Mashima-sensei, you do realise that this isn't such a simple thing to do, right?”

Chabashira warned Mashima-sensei, who had accepted all of this.

“Even if it's true that he did something against the rules, if we aren't careful, we could get fired.”

I could understand why Chabashira said that.

Resisting against Tsukishiro would undoubtedly threaten their career.

The opponent this time wasn't someone you could fight against with just a strong sense of justice.

"Although I don't fully believe this, if what you said was true, then it'd be a grave matter. The school should never manipulate the course of the exam and change the results at will. If you're going to do this, you'll have to do this thoroughly and carefully."

"But, wouldn't it be better if you just paid a blind eye towards these issues? You just got your wages cut this morning for violating the rules during the event selection exam anyway."

Sakayanagi thought that was interesting, so she pounced on the opportunity.

"Pay cuts for violating violations? What exactly did you do?"

"I'm not going to tell you that."

"Is it because of something that happened during Class B and D's exam? We'll hear about this sooner or later. But if it has something to do with Tsukishiro's improper acts, I think it's better to speak out now, or problems may occur later."

"That has nothing to do with the current situation."

Instead of Mashima-sensei who was not planning to explain, it was Chabashira-sensei that spoke up.

"Let me explain. During the selection event of class B and D, one of the selected events of Class D was Judo. The student participating was Albert Yamada. Class B's Ichinose lost all her fighting spirit during then, which resulted in her failing to select a student to participate."

"Because the opponent was Yamada-kun, this was expected. Probably no-one among the first year can beat him in judo."

“Of course, Ichinose had already decided on who was going to participate in the judo event. However, if the student was chosen randomly, just like that, what would happen? Something unpredictable would occur. You should be aware of this.”

Once the time was up, students who hadn’t yet participated in any events would be automatically selected.

Not only the boys, but girls are also no exception too.

“Even if they had lost immediately, nothing would have happened as a result. But this was Class B, and they would do anything for the sake of their companions. The selected students will most likely go all out for Ichinose.”

No matter who the opponent was, Albert would not hold back in order to bring them down.

In that case, it was likely it would have resulted in a major accident.

As a result, Mashima-sensei decided that Class B was defeated, without even having a fight. This might have caused Acting Director Tsukishiro to become unhappy with him.

Was that why Mashima-sensei wages got cut as a punishment? If I had to say whether this violated the rules or not, it indeed would be considered a violation.

“Both these situations are connected. If something is considered dangerous to the students, I’ll quickly stop it. If there’s improper behaviour, I’ll quickly see it corrected. We teach them this, so what would happen if we teachers don’t even apply what we teach to ourselves?”

And for that reason, even if he got fired, he would not regret anything.

“It looks like I can’t stop you.”

“I’ve always consciously done my job as a teacher.”

The words he said seemed simple, but Mashima-sensei really was an excellent person who was able to do what he said.

“Your...no, if Mashima-sensei’s decision is final, I will have nothing else to say.”

“Is this a temporary agreement?”

Sakayanagi asked me, and I nodded in agreement.

Chabashira backed down, presumably because she realised that trying to persuade Mashima-sensei was pointless.

“Since Mashima-sensei agreed, I’ll help as well. Is that fine, Ayanokouji?”

“An additional person on our side is greatly appreciated.”

“Let’s put an end to this discussion now. I’ll keep this to myself. There’s no problem with that right?”

“Of course.”

After all, both Mashima-sensei and Chabashira hadn’t actually seen Tsukishiro’s wrongdoings with their own eyes.

And if we increase the number of teachers who are in the know, the chances of a leakage of information increase substantially.

Once Tsukishiro finds out that there are people who are trying to expose his wrongdoings, then he would naturally be more alert.

“I also intend to stand at Ayanokouji’s side at the time being.”

“Sakayanagi. Even if you do know Ayanokouji’s situation, if people see you giving special treatment to him, it will raise some questions.”

“What are you talking about? Of course I’m going to give him special treatment. I’ve got the right to do so.”

Sakayanagi rebutted Mashima's words.

“...What right?”

“Well, although this school’s system revolves around competition between the classes, the students themselves will have various situations among them. Some of them might have friends or lovers in other classes that they’ll have to betray, and some might have relationships that revolve money, which can be mutually beneficial or commensal. Sometimes, one’s feelings can go beyond the boundaries of classes, forming mutually beneficial relationships with people in other classes. Is the social climate of this school always the same? No, it’s constantly changing. In that way, it’s the same as society itself, isn’t it?”

It didn’t matter if Chairman Sakayagani had someone he wanted to protect, he had no power to do anything.

“Even if I only was able to save Ayanokouji-kun and left my classmates in Class A, the teachers won’t have any reason to blame me. The only ones who can resent me will be the students I have betrayed.”

Mashima-sensei may be dissatisfied with what Sakayanagi said, but he did not retort.

“But-he may find special treatment to be unwelcoming.”

“Why?”

“I’ll wait until the Acting Director is gone, but after that, things will be different. And if Class D obstructs Class A, I will beat them out mercilessly at any time.”

“Will you? That’s good.”

Mashima-sensei accepted that and faced Sakayanagi determinedly.

“Let’s recap. Right now, you couldn’t find any evidence to prove that Acting Director Tsukishiro has committed wrongdoing, is that right?”

“Evidence has been erased, so it would be meaningless to investigate now.”

He would not do something as foolish as deliberately leaving evidence.

“Then, it seems that we can only wait for his next move.”

The teachers have a better understanding of the exams we will face after we become 2nd years.

As for what Tsukishiro will do, I’ll leave that to Mashima-sensei to think about.

“It’s been more than 30 minutes, and it won’t be good to be absent from the closing ceremony for too long. You students head out first, then we’ll leave the room separately.”

“Got it.”

Sakayanagi and I walked out of the reception room and out to the corridor at the same time.

Then the two of us walked side by side together.

“Although it’s a bold move, it’s very beneficial to have Mashima-sensei on our side. As the person in charge of the first year, he’s closer to the acting director than anyone else.”

“Heh. Even if it doesn’t stop Tsukishiro completely, if it’ll restrain him, then it’ll be a good result.”

“But the problem of too strong a sense of righteousness is a little worrying. That should be considered one of Mashima-sensei disadvantages.”

“Yeah. Although he’s beneficial, there are also situations where he can’t be used in.”

“If he gets involved too deeply, Mashima-sensei will get fired. But since he’s this sort of person, it will happen sooner or later anyway.”

Sakayagani said. Looking at the side of her face, it seemed like she was happy.

“You seem happy.”

“I’m delighted. Aren’t you happy?”

“It’s hard to say. The situation I’m in is a bit troublesome after all. For example, that the reason you’re here is that-”

“Yes, I’m here because this seems like fun. Did I bother you?”

Sakayagani immediately admitted all that.

“No. Because your appearance improved my chances of persuading Mashima-sense, I thank you for that.”

“Well, that’s great then.”

Sakayanagi turned to face my direction and smiled.

“I won’t allow the school to repeatedly interfere with the outcome of our battles.”

Sakayanagi was extremely angry at what Tsukishiro did to her.

Afterwards, she said she would face a complete battle with Tsukishiro, and work towards removing him from the school.

“The enemy that’s right in front of us is carelessness, and we should resolve that as soon as possible.”

In Tsukishiro’s eyes, we’re nothing more than a few high school students. No matter how much we try, we can’t create a big enough storm to affect him.

If he thought like that, mistakes would occur.

“Ayanokouji-kun. At the moment, please let me work towards getting rid of Acting Director Tsukishiro.”

“Thanks for your help.”

Whether she can be trusted wasn’t something that needed to be considered as a critical issue.

Because based on our previous interactions, I was already familiar with Sakayanagi’s personality.

Part 5

After the two students left.

Mashima openly revealed his opinion to Chabashira.

“I still can’t believe what’s happening.”

“I’m the same, Mashima-sensei. But what Ayanokouji-kun said was true.”

“Interfering with the very structure of the school, all for a single student?”

Mashima-sensei exclaimed. No matter how many people around him emphasised the authenticity of the situation, it would still be hard to believe.

“You’ve observed Ayanokouji for a year now, Chabashira-sensei, so what kind of existence do you think he is?”

“That’s a difficult question.”

Because they couldn’t stay for long, they left the reception room a minute after Ayanokouji and Sakayanagi left.

“At first glance, he seems like a normal high school boy you couldn’t find anywhere, indifferent to his surroundings.”

The other teachers of the other classes would probably think of him in that way.

Their impression of him wouldn't be deep, maybe it would be up to the point where you could barely match up the name to the face.

"But there are two sides to him. It's unnerving. Those eyes which see through everything, those aren't the eyes of a child."

"I'm still in disbelief..."

"Yeah. A first-year who has already reached that level..."

"Although I've only been a teacher for a few years, I've seen a lot of types of students. If we focus on the past two years, Horikita Manabu and Nagumo Miyabi are the ones that have left an outstanding impression of themselves."

"That's true."

Both of those students had excellent academic and athletic abilities, second to none throughout their respective years, as well as possessing rare leadership ability on top of that.

"This year's first years gave me the impression that they are slightly inferior compared to those two people. Of course, some students can match them in some aspects, but not in every one of them. Overall, what do you think is the extent of Ayanokouji's abilities?"

"Will my answer have any impact on what you do in the future?"

"No, not at all. No matter what kind of student Ayanokouji is, I won't allow Acting Director Tsukishiro to do what he wants. This is just out of curiosity."

"Curiosity... That's unusual for you. But I'm still trying to figure that out myself."

Chabashira was also one of the people who wanted to learn more about Ayanokouji.

It was true that she couldn't answer.

"That really is a difficult question."

Mashima grudgingly folded his arms.

"Originally, the teachers were to maintain a proper working distance with the students and govern them like that. Forming such close relationships isn't the best thing to do."

"So we just have to eliminate Acting Director Tsukishiro as quickly as possible."

"But after we eliminate him-Is that really going to be the end of all this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Even if we expose the Acting Director, there's no guarantee that there will not be another person sent afterwards. In that case, Ayanokouji's situation will create a disturbance for the entire year...Depending on the situation, even the school itself might suffer from it."

Mashima expressed his own unease.

Of course, even having said that, he still would not abandon the students.

"The way this situation is unfolding, it's like I'm sinking deeper and deeper into quicksand. This scares me."

"Yeah."

If this continued, other students would not be able to receive a fair evaluation.

This is something that the teachers must prevent from happening.

“But I hope my hunch won’t turn out to be true.”

The two teachers envisioned what would happen in the future, and prayed that those were just groundless fears.

Part 6

After passing the rest of the time following the end of the conversation with the teachers and Sakayanagi, I went to the gym.

Soon, the 3rd years who were in the thank you meeting would come out.

The people around me were eagerly awaiting their arrival.

As that time approached, the anxiety of both the first years and second years seemed to increase.

Some of the 3rd years would leave directly after the graduation ceremony, but maybe some would stay, wanting to say something that they’ve always wanted to before.

How many people were there in total? From what I could see, there were about 100.

There was a person that I recognised, standing a small distance away from the main group of people.

“You actually came.”

I greeted Horikita, who was standing in the middle of the waiting crowd, but only got a stare in return.

“...What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, I’m just impressed.”

“Impressed? I don’t know what you mean by that.”

“I was thinking that if it were up to the old you, you wouldn’t have come here.”

Horikita seems a bit displeased with my praise.

“Really? I haven’t changed a bit. I’m still me.”

She denied her growth. You could see that she didn’t even attempt to reexamine herself.

No, she just didn’t want to admit it in front of other people.

The thank you meeting held at the gym was finally over, and the doors opened.

It was officially over.

Now was the final chance for the graduates to formally communicate with the remaining students.

After it ended, a stream of 3rd years came out.

Most of them were happy, but some were not smiling.

Was it because of the loneliness they faced having left school, or the failure of not graduating from Class A?

If it was the latter, then it was weird that most of the students weren’t distressed.

However, even after one glance towards them, I could see that there were also students outside of Class A that had expressions of joy.

“What do you think?”

I asked Horikita for her opinion on the situation.

“Even if the shortcut to their dreams has been cut off, they can still use their own strength to make it a reality. As long as they have the strength, it can

be accomplished.”

The path of life will continue to be trodden.

That is to say that many students had faced reality, and had determined their way forward, intending to continue on their path to their dreams.

If you look at it in another way, you could say that the 3 years they’ve spent on this magnificent stage was already mightily impressive.

Some of the 3rd years returned to their dormitories without talking to them anyway, but the majority of them stopped.

The evidence of these three years the students here had endured was now as visible as scars.

Former student council president Horikita Manabu was still here.

No one had gathered around him yet, so this should be a good opportunity.

If the number of people around him increases, then Horikita would find it hard to approach him.

Deep within her heart, Horikita was looking forward to this, and yet she didn’t take a single step.

“You should go.”

“I know.”

I didn’t need to say that. Horikita was only here because of her desire to talk with her brother.

However, her body wouldn’t move.

During her moment of uncertainty, more and more students started to approach the elder Horikita.

If I did nothing, there would be no progress, so I took a forceful approach.

I pushed the hesitant Horikita's back.

"Wait... Wait a minute-"

"Use your privileges as his sister."

Although I repeatedly urged her, Horikita insisted on not moving forward.

"It's going to be weird if I ran to his side now."

"Even if you mix in with the other students, it won't be weird."

"It's definitely weird. I'll be a complete outsider."

Horikita negatively evaluated the situation at hand.

This reminded me when school first started.

I remember her staring at her distant older brother while he was giving a speech to the first years. Even if she slowly became more mature throughout the year, her core remained unchanged.

Even if one accumulated a lot of experience, there will be parts which would be challenging to develop.

It was because of the timid expression on her face, which made me think of all that...

"But don't get me wrong, I'm not scared. My brother's three years... I just wanted to see the culmination of these three years for him to get to this point."

"I see."

She meant that she wouldn't be satisfied with just a small chat with her brother.

Not bad.

A few more second-year students ran towards the elder Horikita.

“Your brother is pretty popular.”

He was the student council president and the boy who’s always stayed in Class A. Of course he was popular. I initially thought he wasn’t very close with the first years, so I never would have thought that this many first-year students would have come over.

Soon, the circle around him began to grow larger, surrounded by other graduates.

He occasionally smiled and gently opened up to the younger generation.

But at the end of that, I saw a slightly different expression.

I sensed the atmosphere that he had been relieved from the heavy pressure that was on him.

Next to me, it was like Horikita was trying to engrave this sight into her eyes, staring at him without blinking.

And then-A boy appeared next to the elder Horikita.

The current student council president, the second-year Class A’s Nagumo Miyabi.

Immediately followed by vice president Kiriyama, Secretaries Mizowaki and Tonokawa, as well as Asahina Nazuna.

The atmosphere did not turn into something cumbersome, but instead, it developed into something unique.

“Congratulations on graduating, Horikita-senpai.”

Dropping a sincere compliment, Nagumo approached Horikita with a smile.

Horikita greeted Nagumo without any hesitation.

“Ahhhh, you really are worthy of being called my senpai. In the end, I still wasn’t able to threaten you.”

“It wasn’t like that. To be honest, I didn’t know what would happen in the end. If I must, I’d say the reason for your failure was because we aren’t in the same academic year. No matter how much you interfered, in the end, you were still just an outsider.

No matter how much he wanted to fight, he couldn’t bridge the gap between grades.

Since he couldn’t directly participate in the exams, what he could do was very limited.

Although, if Nagumo really wanted to bring him down, he could have adopted Ryuuen’s chaotic and reckless fighting style.

However, Nagumo seemed to have no intentions.

“Yeah. Ah....., why was I born a year later than you?”

He wasn’t dissatisfied, but just disappointed for not being in the same year as the elder Horikita.

“Can I still shake your hand like this?”

“Of course, I have no reason to refuse.”

The elder Horikita gladly obliged, and they shook hands.





A brief and pleasant silence ensured.

Both being Student Council presidents, they could communicate and understand each other in certain situations without using any words.

“There’ll still be a long year ahead of you. Be sure to spend your remaining school life on something that will satisfy you.”

Advice from his senpai. And in those words, he showed that he didn’t care about Nagumo running wild anymore.

In other words, he’d given Nagumo permission to do whatever he liked now.

“Mhmm. After you’re gone, in that short period where I’ll be the senpai, I’ll do whatever it takes. I’ll turn this school into a meritocracy based on one’s abilities. Because I’m prepared and determined to accomplish it.”

Horkita’s brother accepted his speech openly, nodding his head.

“You said you regretted not being a year older. I kind of feel the same. Not being able to see what you’ll do to this school is a pity. If I could witness what you’ll create up close, I’ll surely gain a better understanding of you.”

“I won’t be so sure of that. I don’t think I’ll be compatible with senpai.”

One who followed school rules and regulations, and one that wanted to destroy them

Since their ideologies were utterly different, a confrontation between them is inevitable.

“Also, it won’t matter if you can’t see it yourself. Don’t you have a sister in the 1st year?”

With that said, Nagumo’s line of sight seemed to focus on next to where I was, a bit further from the rest of the people-and started staring straight at Horikita.

Although it was only a slight change, Horikita’s body language became a bit more nervous.

“As long as your sister is here, she can help me spread the word to you.”

Once both graduations, the siblings will inevitably meet once again sooner or later.

What he meant was that in the future, Horikita's brother would still know what Nagumo would have done at the school."

"Perhaps."

With that said, Horikita's brother and Nagumo's strong handshake finally ended, and their hands separated.

"Thank you very much."

"Likewise."

The former student council president, Horikita, and the current student council president, Nagumo.

A heavy curtain fell on the unexpectedly gentle atmosphere.

Perhaps because he didn't want to bother the other students, Nagumo immediately distanced himself with Horikita's brother. Although the combo of the two student council presidents was exciting, it might make it a bit difficult for the other students to approach.

Nagumo instead walked towards Horikita, who was observing from a distance.

As a fellow student of Class 2A, Asahina Nazuna was also there with him. The other student council members had probably left to see off the other graduates.

"Did you hear what I just said? Please enjoy what I will do next year. I remember your name was—"

"Horik-Suzune."

Horikita's voice was nervous.

If it were the usual Horikita, she wouldn't have been shaken up like this. This was probably the result of hearing the conversation between him and her brother.

Nagumo seemed to enjoy her reaction and looked back.

The one in Nagumo's line of sight was, needless to say, former student council president Horikita.

Ignoring the risks, he had continually challenged different opponents.

And now, he was surrounded by his underclassmen, accepting their gift of a graduation bouquet.

"Suzune, your brother is a truly amazing person. You should be proud of being his sister."

After the word of praise, he once again directed his gaze onto Horikita Suzune.

"Yes. I am proud of that."

Faced once more with the eyes that had turned their attention back to her, Horikita forcibly replied.

"If you have anything you want to ask me, I'll answer it. Because I'm in a good mood today.."

"Then I won't hold back."

Horikita then asked Nagumo a question.

"Don't you regret it?"

"Regret?"

"Because I don't see any hints of regrets in your eyes."

This should be referring to the handshake and the dialogue between those two people just now.

Nagumo seemed genuinely happy for the elder Horikita graduating from Class A.

However, their relationship couldn't be described as simply a relationship between two student council presidents.

Nagumo persistently attacked Horikita, in the hopes of dragging him down from Class A.

Horikita would obviously have a sense of hostility towards Nagumo who did those things to her brother.

Because of this, she was confused by the honest praise given by Nagumo towards the elder Horikita.

Nagumo's painstaking attacks have been securely defended against.

"I don't think I can beat Horikita-senpai that easily. He's pretty much an invincible opponent, right?"

"Well... That's true."

"So you fully admit you lost to Horikita-senpai."

Miyabi gently cast his eyes towards the interjecting Asahina.

"Lost? Why do you say I lost, Nazuma?"

"Hmm? Horikita-senpai graduated from Class A, so doesn't that mean you lost?"

Asahina didn't need to answer the question with another question, but that was how she replied.

As for what she said, Nagumo immediately pointed out the holes in them.

“Indeed, if you only look at the outcome, I have not prevented senpai from graduating from Class A. But what does that have to do with losing?”

“Won’t that be considered as losing...? At least that’s what I think, am I wrong?”

Asahina looked towards Horikita, who was standing beside her, for confirmation.

Horikita did not answer and instead listened to Nagumo’s justification.

“I certainly wanted to challenge him to a fight. However, it wasn’t for the sake of finding out who would win and lose. Even if Horikita-senpai really did fall to Class B, my fundamental evaluation of him wouldn’t have changed. That person’s strengths cannot be determined by the position his class is in.”

Asahina still did not seem to understand what Nagumo was talking about.

“Still don’t understand? Then I’ll ask you this. Did this incident lower your evaluation of me? I’m still a student of Class A as well as the student council president. Is there anything about me which shows that I’m a failure?”

“No, but...”

“You can’t distinguish who wins and who loses in a conflict of people in separate grades.”

It wasn’t hard to understand what he wanted to say.

But, even knowing that he couldn’t directly confront him, Nagumo continued to challenge Horikita.

“I just wanted his approval... his recognition. That’s why I’ve been continuously attacking senpai.

Judging from how Horikita Manabu looked at Nagumo, he definitely acknowledged his strength.

No, I should say that he had recognised Nagumo's strength from the very beginning.

He just couldn't accept the way Nagumo handled things.

Maybe Nagumo wanted Horikita to acknowledge his method of solving problems.

"That felt like a young girl proclaiming her love."

"Maybe. I've already inquired about what Horikita-senpai will do in the future, and I will chase after him."

There wasn't a hint of remorse or regret in Nagumo's expression.

Was he purely enjoying the contest with Horikita to the very end?

"Even after graduation? Really? Even the path you take in life has to be the same as Horikita-senpai?"

"Yes. At least that's the current me's objective."

"Ah~ You really do like Horikita-senpai."

"I don't have any rivals in the second year, and of course, none in the first year as well. I only have one thing left to do in this school. That is, to directly transform the structure of the school, and make this boring school more interesting."

Half of Nagumo Miyabi's time as student council president had already passed.

However, to this day, nothing new had been implemented.

After Horikita graduated and Nagumo became a third-year, he would finally start to take action.

As for what would happen in the future, it was still impossible to predict.

“Speaking of which, this year, I still haven’t been able to evaluate you, Ayanokouji.”

Nagumo’s attention finally turned to me.

Coming from the look in his eyes, it seems that I was “boring” compared to the Horikita siblings

“There’s nothing about me worth investigating.”

Because of the fact that I had Horikita-senpai’s attention, Nagumo felt that there might be an underlying connection between us.

However, because it might just be a coincidence, there still wasn’t enough to interest Nagumo.

Seeing that he still had this sort of attitude towards me, there was no reason to provoke him.

“But this coming April, even if you don’t want to, you’ll still have the answer. After this school becomes a true meritocracy, you’re going to have to fight even if you don’t want to.”

With the graduation of Horikita’s brother, the school will be entirely under the control of Nagumo.

It was hard to say how much of an influence the student council had over the school itself, but considering how confident Nagumo was, there’ll definitely be a notable difference at the school next year.

“So you’re saying that the competition between students won’t just be limited to class warfare?”

Horikita raised a question, seemingly worried about what Nagumo said.

“If you’re able to implement it, then it wouldn’t be too bad, but it wouldn’t be possible anyway. The school won’t allow it.”

Nagumo shrugged and sighed.

“But I can change the school’s system which can allow me to gain more power so I can easily change the school itself. Excellent students staying at the top classes is something that should be a given, right?”

To this point, Horikita neither agreed or disagreed, instead listening to it quietly.

“Other than that, I’ve also proposed to the school to mix up the students from 1st year to 3rd year in certain exams. If the school allows it, fighting against you wouldn’t be impossible.”

Of course, from Nagumo’s point of view, I’m not considered to be anyone important.

But even so, I feel like he is instinctively measuring my strength right now.

“Ah, looks like it’s time to leave, huh? Don’t you want to say goodbye to some of the upperclassmen? They’ll be going soon.”

“Yes. We can chat whenever we want in the coming year.”

And so Nagumo and Asahina walked towards the 3rd years and away from Horikita.

“Haa.... it’s a pain to talk with that person.”

“He’s the student council president, after all.”

Although there was only a difference of a year, it seemed like he was way out of reach.

“I’m going back. I’ve done everything that I should’ve.”

In the end, she seemed to have given up on trying to speak with her brother.

“Can you do that? He’s leaving school tomorrow.”

“That... you didn’t need to tell me that....”

Faced with this dilemma, Horikita retreated.

Forcibly stopping her wasn't an option, so I chose to just watch her while she left.

"Are you going to go back?"

"Ah, I still want to stay here for a while."

"Oh...Then I'll see you later."

Although Horikita was curious about what I was doing, she still turned her back on me and went back to the dorm.

I decided to take a look at the situation with Horokita Manabu and the other 3rd years.

I wasn't particularly interested.

If I had to tell you, I just wanted to engrave this scene into my eyes.

At the same time, I couldn't help but imagine what I would be like in 2 years, but it was impossible to see that now.

The atmosphere was pleasant for a short period of time, but then they started to leave one by one.

After the elder Horikita said goodbye to everyone, he noticed me and came over.

"You're still here?"

He should understand that I didn't fit well into that kind of atmosphere.

"Were you waiting for me?"

"Yes."

I didn't talk to any other of the third years, that much would be obvious to even a bystander standing far away.

"This may be the last time I'll speak to you. When are you going to leave?"

I decided to hurry and inquired about the most important thing first.

Because if he was going to leave the school immediately after this, I had to tell Horikita.

"Noon on the 31st. I'm taking the 12:30 Bus."

So a week later. Although it wasn't today, there wasn't a lot of time left.

"Looks like Suzune went back."

"The culmination of your 3 years in the school. She engraved that into her memory and then left."

We both glanced in the direction of the dormitory.

Of course, Horikita was already long gone.

"Really?"

I couldn't read his emotions from the expression on his face.

But if the two of them didn't do anything, this situation could end without having them meet even once.

I didn't think she would be this afraid of this...

"If possible, please pass on this message to Suzune. I will be waiting for her at noon on the 31st near the main entrance."

"Isn't it better for you to tell her yourself? Even if you go now, there's still time."

It would be simpler if they both just had the intention of meeting up.

Horikita might rush here immediately if he did.

“Even so, she may not be very open to that. That’s why I hope you’re able to convey the message to her.”

“It may be counterproductive. If I tell her, she may not come.”

This was because of her stubborn attitude.

＼”That’s Suzune’s choice if that’s the case.”

“Can you really leave it to me?”

After I repeatedly warned him about this, Horikita answered without hesitation.

“Yes, I’ll leave it to you.”

Well, there’s no reason to refuse. As long as I’m not the one taking responsibility for this.

Besides, if Horikita was to hear about this, she would most likely agree to come to see him off.

After all, their relationship was gradually getting better.

“I wanted to talk to you more, but I have an appointment afterwards.”

It seems that many of his underclassmen had invited him for a gathering.

Today, he just wanted to forget about the matter relating to his sister, and spend time as an ordinary student.

“Besides, you’re not one to engage in long meaningless conversations, right?”

“That’s true.”

No matter how much his popularity declined, the previous student council president would be still present in social gatherings and situations.

“If possible, on the 31st, I hope you come to see me off.”

“I’m not good at speaking in front of others.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t plan to call anyone else over other than you and Suzune.”

Since it wouldn’t be a problem, I gently nodded and agreed.

“Sorry.”

Leaving behind that one word, Horikita Manabu left.

Once he left, I had nothing to do, because he was the only third year I talked to.

I guess I’ll go back then.

“Ayanokouji-kun. If possible, can we head back together?”

Suddenly, Hirata spoke to me.

Just now, I saw that he was talking to a bunch of third years away from where I was.

“You’re done settling things already?”

“Yes, although the graduation ceremony was today, many of the upperclassmen will stay on campus for a few more days. I heard that some underclassmen are holding a farewell party for them.”

Since it was Hirata, he should’ve received several invitations to these occasions.

The third-year students could stay until the 5th of April at most.

Of course, students who planned to leave earlier were also allowed to leave.

Because their time left was limited, they were preparing for their school life to end.

And because I had no reason to refuse him, I returned to the dormitory along with Hirata.

Part 7

I was walking with Hirata, and after walking past the convenience store, Hirata glanced at me.

Then, as if nothing happened, he faced forwards again.

Hirata had repeated this action several times in the past few minutes.

It was as if Hirata was waiting for an opportunity to start a conversation.

Soon after, Hirata made up his mind and started to speak.

“Actually-Ayanokouji-kun, I want to talk to you.”

Hirata hesitantly said.

For a moment, I thought he was going to speak about the end of year exam, but he did not give me that sort of feeling.

“Is there anything you wanted to discuss?”

“Yeah... Well, I really want to talk about this with you.”

After thinking a little, Hirata admitted that.

“Well, I’m not sure if I’ll be of any help, but I’ll do my best.”

Having Hirata depend on me for a change didn’t feel too bad.

It's just that I couldn't predict what the topic of the discussion would be.

Although he was depressed when Yamauchi dropped out, that matter had already been resolved.

Even if there were certain feelings he wasn't able to let go of, it wasn't worth consulting me.

That matter should have been resolved to the extent that the rest of the problems would fix itself.

"You might find this unexpected of me..."

Starting with this sentence, Hirata continued.

"I, just, it feels like I can't be bothered with relationships and love anymore...I'm not sure about myself."

That was an unexpected start.

I didn't think that Hirata would come to me to talk about love.

"You're not sure?"

Let's clear some stuff up first.

I pressed him to continue.

"I think I might have never liked a girl in my life..."

Hirata confessed, embarrassed.

"So you're saying that you've never dated a girl before?"

"Other than the agreement with Karuizawa, never."

Maybe this isn't so unexpected, but it's still surprising.

Hirata treated boys and girls equally, so I would have thought he experienced love at least once or twice in his life.

Although you couldn't really count the relationship between Hirata and Kei.

Pretending to be lovers, all to protect Kei from being bullied.

But if he said he never liked a girl before...

“So you’re saying that you’ve never liked a girl before? Even now?”

“Yeah...”

Although one of his merits was the ability to treat everyone fairly, including the girls, this was still a bit unbelievable.

“Then what about the situation with Mii-chan?”

Mii-chan really hoped for progress with her relationship with Hirata, showing that she clearly had feelings for him.

“I can’t see myself in a relationship with her, but I can’t tell her that.”

Mii-chan said that she wanted to start with being friends.

After that, of course, she looked forward to the chance for them to develop into lovers.

But since Hirata didn’t have that desire, it would be difficult for her to make any progress.

And there’s no reason to avoid her, so dragging on like this wouldn’t do her any good.

So that’s the situation.

This was the source of Hirata’s uncertainty that he wanted to discuss with me.

“I think it’s best to just say this directly to her. But I can see how that would be difficult.”

To make her realise without hurting her was a difficult thing to accomplish.

“So we have contrasting views again. I kind of expected this.”

“Yeah.

It was because of Hirata’s kindness that he was always involved with situations like this.

“But, that’s just the situation now, and who knows what will change in the future?”

The feeling of love wasn’t something you can control.

It could quietly sprout at any time.

...At least that’s what I think.

“Sure, I don’t know if that’s a possibility. But...”

However, Hirata didn’t want his relationship with Mii-chan to progress any further.

In terms of Mii-chan’s appearance as well as personality, there was nothing that Hirata could be dissatisfied about.

But of course, love wasn’t just determined by those factors.

“I can assert to you that...I won’t have those kinds of feelings, even in the future.”

Although he wasn’t entirely sure, Hirata still insisted on his answer.

If that’s the case, then I have only one thing left to say.

“It’s better to tell her, because Mii-chan still has hope that her relationship with you can progress.”

I looked into Hirata’s eyes while I said this.

If the answer to that question was kept to himself, Mii-chan would keep waiting and waiting.

So, it would be better to clear things up as early as possible.

If Mii-chan continued to like Hirata even after that, then that would be her own choice.

But Hirata avoided my gaze.

“Even...if, it would hurt her?”

“Having the answer but instead choosing to delay it would only cause more damage, right?”

I once again looked into Hirata’s eyes and said.

After our eyes met, he quickly diverted his gaze elsewhere.

“Yes, yes, right, that’s right...”

He nodded two or three times as if he was admonishing himself.

And then he came to a conclusion.

“Thanks for talking about this with me, Ayanokouji-kun. I have the courage now to admit that in this situation, keeping this to myself to avoid hurting her is the same as running away. “

He seemed to have successfully found the answer.

“So are you able to explain your feelings to her clearly?”

“Although I don’t know if this is the best way to go about doing this, I do understand that the other way would really hurt her. “

Hirata considered both approaches.

He was silent, with his thoughts being conveyed on his face.

Hirata understood that the second option would be better for Mii-chan, and so he was no longer conflicted.

If he were the old Hirata, he would be constantly worried about the situation, and would waste a lot of time in finding the answer.

He would be obsessed with the notion of “not hurting others”, and would be lost inside the maze of his feelings and emotions.

After his worries had been resolved, Hirata still seemed like he had something to say.

“What is it?”

I asked.

“Oh, err... from now on...Can I call you Kiyotaka-kun?”

“Eh?”

I was wondering what he would say, but this turned out to be very unexpected

“Well, if it’s okay with you, you can call me by my first name as well... is that fine?





Is this a step forward for our friendship?

My friendship with Hirata had progressed even further now, just like with Keisei, Akito, Haruki, and Airi.

“Why not, if you think it’s okay.”

Seeing how I agreed so willingly, Hirata smiled from the bottom of his heart.

“Really? Can I really?”

“You mean calling me by my first name? Don’t you have experience with that sort of thing, Hira-Yosuke?”

Although from my memory, Hirata generally used surnames to address both males and females, calling people by their first name wasn’t an unusual thing to do.

“Well, before that happened, it wasn’t rare for me to call people with their first name.”

He was talking about that incident, during Hirata’s middle school days when his friend was bullied, which led to his attempted suicide.

“Since then... I’ve always been afraid to get closer to people. I’ll treat everyone equally, but I wouldn’t get too close.”

It had been 2 years since then, and it seemed like Hirata had only used surnames to address others.

Speaking of this, Hirata treated everyone in the class the same way.

This held true even when the whole class unanimously chose to drive out Yamauchi from the class.

But it seems that yet again, he was able to break out of that shell.

Hirata’s development was also quite significant, even compared to the other students who have also grown throughout the year.

“That’s why I thank you... Kiyotaka-kun.”

His gaze that was avoiding me from the start came back. That look conveyed all he was feeling at that moment.

“I’m flattered, really.”

Although I got some sort of sappy feeling from all this, I still accepted it open-heartedly.

Chapter 2: Date Hiyori

Intro

After the graduation ceremony and the closing ceremony went off without a hitch, the spring break finally started.

The students forgot about the competition between them and enjoyed a short break.

Although the students weren't allowed to leave the campus, it wasn't particularly inconvenient for them.

The main reason for that was the existence of the Keyaki shopping mall. For both the students and the staff, the mall was an essential facility.

I won't go into detail, but there are coffee shops, a home appliances store, and even a karaoke place. All the necessities are available.

If there were other things that you might want, all you had to do was to order it online after gaining permission.

You could live a life of indulgence, as long as your private points allowed it.

Fortunately, there wouldn't be any starving students in the first year due to a lack of points.

Even the students of Class D would receive tens of thousands of yen in pocket money at the start of April.

There's a clear difference between that and the amount of money that normal highschoolers get throughout the country.

However, there are still students who encounter trouble.

However, there were still students that had encountered some difficulties.

Speaking of which, I'm one of them.

In my contract with my classmate Kushida, I had to hand over half my private points to her every month.

Although that contract had a purpose at the start, the situation was changing now.

The contract with Kushida, no, my relationship with her from now on, will all be decided during this break.

Should I proceed as previously planned, or go with another option?

I say that, but I'm not the one who has the power to make that choice.

Well, spring break had just begun.

There's no need to panic.

I put on my casual clothes and get ready to head out.

I planned to spend most of my break in my room relaxing, but today I was meeting up with a certain person.

I didn't expect it to be this quick, as I thought setting it up would take some time.

But after getting in touch with that person, I contacted another person.

“Is this the final confirmation?”

Because it's the first day of spring break, I'll need to adjust some things, but that's fine.

The person I contacted would turn out to be very important.

But this importance wouldn't be for today, but instead for the end of the spring break.

Part 1

In late March, the temperature began to warm.

As we neared the season for the blossoming sakura, news of it seemed to be everywhere.

Although I went there early, when I arrived, the person I was meeting today was already there.

“Hello, Ayanokouji-kun.”

I met with Hiyori, who was smelling fresh and was wearing casual clothes at Keyaki mall.

“Good morning.”

“I was the one who called you out here, so I couldn’t keep you waiting.”

After I said that, Hiyori smiled slightly.

“Sorry I agreed on such short notice for it to be today.”

“I’ve got nothing to do over the break, so there’s no need to apologise. Let’s go-“

“They finally added new books to the library yesterday.”

Hiyori showed me what she was carrying, letting out another small smile.

It seemed like this was an even happier smile than before

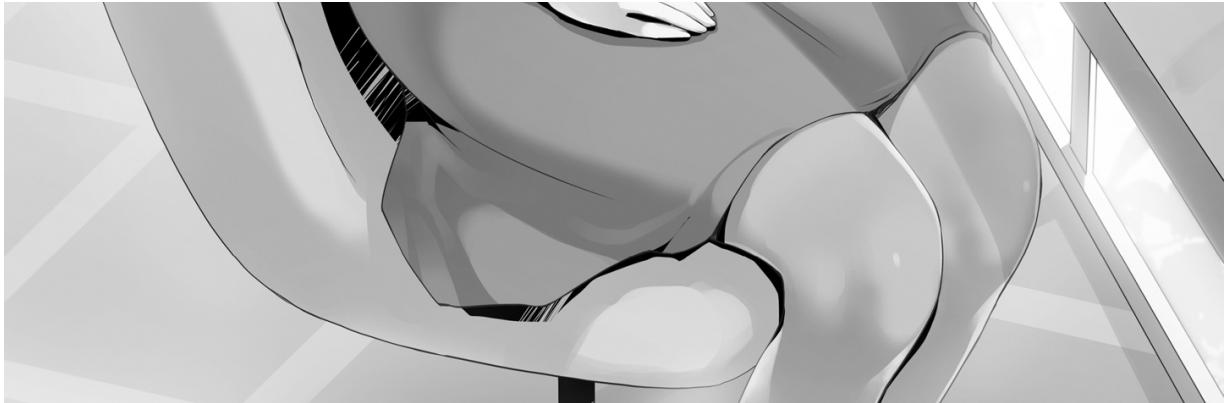
Class C’s Hiyori Shiina. She was a girl who loved books more than anyone else.

“I wanted to share some information with Ayanokouji-kun as soon as possible.”

The books of the author both me and Hiyori liked were hard to get ahold of at the convenience store and the bookstore in the mall.

And since digital versions weren’t available, we could only borrow them from the library.





Although you could borrow it from the library, it would have been seen by many before.

So I cherish the opportunity to be able to talk about a book like this with someone else.

“There are more people than expected.”

The tables of the cafe were filled with students.

This was expected, being spring break. Whether the cafe was full or not depended on the time of the day.

Fortunately, there still seemed to be some seats left, and we walked over there together.

“We haven’t met up like this during a holiday before, so it’s kind of refreshing.”

This was true that we never met up on non-school days, so this was a rare occurrence, seeing Hiyori outside her school uniform.

“That’s true.”

We talked to each other, and a fresh mood overcame us.

“Let’s not waste any time... I brought some books, do you want to have a read?”

She happily took the book out while saying that.

Suddenly, her hand stopped moving, and she raised her head as if she just remembered something.

“Oh, that’s right, before we start talking about the book, can we discuss something else?”

Just when she was about to continue, a loud voice came from behind.

“How annoying. As expected, it’s crowded. Are there no seats left?”

A familiar voice emerged nearby, complaining about the situation of the crowded cafe.

“Are these seats fine?”

“Yep, that’s fine.”

After a bit, those two students took the seats beside me.

I turned my attention to the voices of the two students, and it turned out to be my classmates, Ike and Shinohara.

They were busy talking about something, so they didn’t notice me and continued on with their conversation.

Not long ago, I noticed they started getting closer, and it seemed like this was continuing.

“That’s... Ike and Shinohara, right?”

Hiyori asked me this at a volume which would not be noticed by them. The distance between us made it impossible for them to hear us whisper.

“You seem to know them.”

“A year has already passed, so I know a lot of people from the other classes.”

Hiyori's eyes were sparkling, and she looked proud of that fact.

We stood silent, and listened in to the conversation between Ike and Shinohara.

"So our monthly private point income has decreased to about 30,000 points."

"There's no helping it. With Class A as our opponent, we had no chance of winning."

"Maybe so. But we'll be back to Class D next month, right? That sucks..."

As if finally remembering that we had lost during the end of year exam, Ike scratched his head.

"But do you know the reason for our loss?"

"What, whose fault was it?"

Was he going to say that it was my fault as the commanding tower? I thought he was going to say that for a moment, but...

"It's me, it was my fault."

Ike made a startling statement which left Shinohara stunned.

"No, I'm serious, I think that I was one of the reasons that we lost. To be honest, we could have won if our class was more unified. Class A is powerful, but we got some pretty good results against them."

"Hmm, that's how you see this, huh? You saying this is really surprising to me, Ike."

"Don't use my first name, Shinohara."

"You use my first name, so this way it evens out."

Although they occasionally spoke about mundane topics, they returned back to reviewing what happened this past year in the end.

“Next year, I want to try harder. In both academics and sports.”

“Seriously? I don’t think you can do this.”

“I won’t be able to do it perfectly, but I really do want to.”

It seemed like he really had put some thought into that statement.

“I just wanted to ask, why?”

“Because of Ken and Haruki.”

Until recently, a trio of friends known as the “three idiots” were in our class.

I remember when I first came to this school, I was close with that little group, but left soonly afterwards.

A more suitable description of events would be that I was kicked out by them.

“Ken’s obviously not suited for it, but hasn’t he been studying a ton recently? He’s been listening in class, and I thought he was just pretending but has he actually turned into someone who has half a brain?”

“His grades have improved as well.”

“Yeah. His grades have been getting better and better, and he’s already great at sports. I already know that I can’t win against him in any category.”

“Weren’t your grades better than his at the start?”

If you compare Ike with the current Sudo, in both academics and athletics, Sudo would have the upper hand.

“That guy... he’s probably going to get even stronger next year.”

On one hand, he was happy because of the growth of someone close to him, but on the other, he was scared of the possibility of being left behind.

And the biggest reason for this fear was....

“If I go on like this, the next candidate to be expelled will be me.”

“Ike...”

The lower your grade was, the more likely you would be the next to drop out.

After seeing Yamauchi, who had his own fair share of problematic behaviour, drop out, he began to realise that he might be next.

“Don’t laugh, it’s not like me to say these kinds of things.”

“Although I’m not compatible with you...I’m the same.”

Shinohara wasn’t someone with excellent grades, nor was she a person with great merit.

Although their gender separated them, they both had a similar status.

“I don’t laugh at guys who want to work hard.”

Shinohara nodded her head resolutely towards Ike while saying this.

“I’ll work harder next year. I won’t lose to you!”

“I’m not even afraid of losing to you.”

You could say that Ike and Shinohara’s relationship has made some progress here.

In the future, they might even inspire other students to work harder.

If someone walked ahead, the others would follow. Making use of this mutual relationship was important.

“Look, Shinohara.”

“Hm?”

Ike, who was sitting next to me, suddenly turned serious.

“This- look, I have something to tell you, so will you listen to me?”

“What’s this, why are you being so serious?”

“Err, how do I say this... Our relationship right now is kind of like friends who constantly argue with each other, but....umm...”

Hiyori and I looked at each other.

It was precisely because this wasn’t our business that we had a better understanding of what those words meant than she did.

Maybe a new couple will be born here.

That would be the most obvious development based on what was happening right now.

“Will you-”

“Ah!”

Shinohara loudly interrupted just when Ike was about to say it.

Although this was an open area, the campus was a small place. No matter where it was, there were still going to be people that were watching.

Shinohara, who was looking at Ike’s direction, finally noticed we were here.

Ike turned his head towards the source of Shinohara’s shock.

And he jumped up in surprise as soon as his eyes met mine.

“Ahh, Ayanokouji!”

Because he was about to confess, his reaction to seeing me was pretty exaggerated.

“You, you... you’ve been here the whole time?”

“What?... Why can’t I be here? Is there a problem?”

“Even, even if there’s nothing wrong with you being here, you should have still said hi to me! You didn’t even say anything, you’re too sneaky!”

No, in this situation, greeting him would have made things worse.

He also said I was sneaky... but we were here first.

“Were you listening to our conversation?”

“What were you two talking about just now?”

I reversed the direction of the questioning and asked Ike a question of my own, who hurriedly looked away.

“No-nothing.”

Shinohara, who was listening to us, changed the subject.

“...Hmm, are you and Hiyori-san on a date?”

It seemed like I wasn’t the only one who could ask those sorts of questions.

Of course, after seeing the two of us here alone drinking coffee, such a question isn’t a surprise.

“It isn’t like that. What about you?”

“No, no, I don’t have that sort of relationship with Ike.”

Shinohara quickly rejected that notion.

Ike quickly intervened, perhaps not liking what she said.

“Yes, yes, Ayanokouji, don’t misunderstand, okay? Who would want to date someone as ugly as her!”

“Huhh?? Who’s the ugly one here?!?”

“It’s you, obviously!”

No, no, no, why are they arguing now?

The two of them stood up, ruining the pleasant atmosphere the cafe had before, and glared at each other.

“Argh....! You’re pissing me off.”

“That’s my line. I’m the one who took the time to hang out with you today!”

“Huh? Huh? Huh? I had no other choice, so I asked you.”

“What! That’s disappointing....!”

I thought the two of them would sit down eventually, but somehow I had lost sight of them after they went somewhere else, arguing all the way.

I thought the two of them would sit down eventually, but somehow I lost track of where they went as they continued arguing.

This was so close to being the birth of a new couple, but there was a plot twist.

“We don’t need to worry...right?”

Hiyori was also slightly affected by how suddenly the situation had changed from just now and said that quietly.

“I don’t know...”

They could only blame themselves for sitting next to a classmate.

I’ll hope that they reconcile as soon as possible, and maybe after that their relationship will go further.

“What were you saying just now?”

“Oh that, yes, yes. Although that was an...adventure, it’s similar to what they were saying just now.”

Similar? I was taken aback when she said that.

Was it related to how Ike was going to confess? Such thoughts flashed through my mind, but they were immediately rejected.

“I have something to ask you regarding the end of year examination.”

Ike and Shinohara did indeed talk about the end of year exam.

“What do you want to ask me?”

“I apologise if I’m wrong, but I’ll ask this bluntly. Are you the one who changed Ryuuuen?

Hiyori stared at me with her innocent and curious eyes.

Thinking back to when we first met, she always had a keen insight.

“If you’re serious when you ask this, then I’ll have to ask something from you first. What do you mean by that?”

Pretending to have nothing to do with this was the best route I could have taken.

But her eyes had such conviction in them, so I didn’t take that route.

“Yes. But, since it’s you I’m asking, I don’t think I need to elaborate on it.”

Changed Ryuuен.

Generally speaking, most people after hearing that would just shake their heads.

The people who didn't have that kind of reaction either had some sort of understanding of what happened, or was the one who caused the change.

"Why do you think that?"

I asked Hiyori what her reasoning was instead of denying it.

I needed a clear answer for why she believed that was the case.

"I just put the pieces of the puzzle together. Ryuuен-kun had always targeted your class. But he suddenly stepped down from his position during his targeting of Class D. Apparently, this was due to Ishizaki-kun's taking him down, but no matter how I think about it, it still seems like a cover-up. After I tried contacting Ryuuен-kun's close associates, Ishizaki-kun and Ibuki-san, about Ryuuен-kun himself, I became sure of it."

Hiyori seemed to have conducted an investigation behind my back.

And during that, she became suspicious of Ryuuен's actions.

"If this upsets you, I apologise. I've been nervous this whole day because I had to reveal what I knew to you. Because I'm afraid that getting too involved with this would anger you. No matter what the truth is, one glance at you tells me that you don't want to talk about it."

"So you reveal this to me after gaining an understanding of the situation."

This was entirely different from the everyday gossip you hear. It's a decision made after careful consideration.

"If we can't be friends after this... I'll definitely regret it. If I can't talk to you like this anymore, I will definitely regret what I did."

If that was the case, she should have kept this to herself.

But, even so, she still said what she said.

“I think that if you don’t look into this any deeper, there won’t be any... further developments.”

“What kind of developments?”

After hearing that, Hiyori replied, with a hint of surprise in her words.

“Yeah... I don’t really know what I’m saying myself.”

Hearing that, Hiyori had a puzzled expression.

“Can I ask... if you’ve heard about the battle between Class B and our class?”

“I just know the results.”

I didn’t know the details of what happened.

Hiyori changed the topic and started talking about how they got the win.

“If you look at it as an outsider, the way we won would have been considered a bit problematic.”

“That’s true, Ryuuen’s style of fighting raises many questions. But it was a necessary evil for your class to get promoted. Do you think it’s a crafty approach?”

“I can’t deny this, at the very least.”

Even if it couldn’t be praised, and even if it was criticised behind their back, it still brought victory to their class. People like that were needed in society. If you were going to fight in a way that was going to be looked down upon by everyone else, you had to have an indomitable mental strength.

“It’s just that this approach is equivalent to crossing a very dangerous bridge. Class B would have their suspicions. However, I don’t think they can find any concrete evidence since they should have taken measures

dealing with the surveillance footage already and still haven't taken any action."

This school was equipped with many surveillance cameras.

It wasn't only the school building, Keyaki mall and its surroundings were also under surveillance.

But that didn't apply to everywhere. Toilets, dormitory rooms and the karaoke rooms don't have surveillance cameras, of course.

If Class B had doubts about what happened in the previous exam, they would already be investigating it. However, they would probably not find anything of use and would be hard for them to investigate further.

"Those were 5 beautiful wins, so can't you consider it a perfect strategy?"

"Beautiful? I don't think so. Actually, I think it's better to call that strategy extremely flawed."

"What do you mean? That it was possible to get 6 or more wins?"

"5 wins is already really good. Actually, I think we were too greedy. Because Ryuen-kun had to adopt a very dangerous strategy to get those wins."

Hiyori reviewed and analysed her class in the last exam.

Then she also told me how they won.

"Although it's fine to place continuous pressure on Class B students, targeting their bodies to weaken them is a clear violation. Although this method was used because Class B had so many kindhearted students, even they would not tolerate this."

After hearing that, I felt the same as Hiyori did.

I knew that this girl lived a completely different life from me.

Our existence should have nothing in common.

However, there were some similarities in our thoughts and our ideas.

Because of this, doubts started to creep up.

“So before Ryuuen employed his strategy, you already had knowledge of it, and you didn’t try to stop him?”

“Do you think he’ll listen to what I say?”

Compared to Ishizaki or Ibuki, Hiyori’s suggestion may hold more value to Ryuuen, but it would probably not be listened to anyway.

He would not listen to the suggestions of others, instead only sneering at them and ignoring it.

“True. So, how do you think Ryuuen can be stopped?”

I wanted to know how she thinks and acts.

Perhaps Hiyori already understood that just by sensing it. That understanding was why she decided to act today.

“By someone similar in power to him... No, by the criticisms from someone even more powerful than him.”

Ryuuen will not take advice from anyone. However, if this advice was coming from someone Ryuuen acknowledged and approved of, then it was another matter. So that’s why she was telling all this to *me*.

“Hiyori, can you help me pass on a message?”

I decided to not answer her directly.

Because I reckon I didn’t need to. This was enough.

If it was another student, then this was a different story. But Hiyori wasn’t the kind of person to use this situation to make things difficult for me.

Because she understood that there was a reason why Ryuuuen, who identified me as the leader of Class D, didn't expose me publicly.

"What is it?"

Hiyori, with her unchanging attitude, gently looked at me.

"Tell Ryuuuen that if it were me, I would have been able to secure more than 5 wins, using a better method. Please pass that on to him."

"-Okay, I understand. I've memorised your message, and I'll pass it on for you."

As if she was expressing gratefulness, she held her hands together, closed both her eyes and smiled.

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It seems like in addition to Ishizaki and Ibuki, Ryuuuen also had other good allies.

If Hiyori were able to easily control those 3 people from going out of control, then she would become an even more dangerous opponent.

And just like this, Hiyori ended the conversation about the end of year exam.

"So..."

Normally, we would already have left, but the most important thing would come after this.

"If you'd like, please take the book and read it."

She opened her bag again and took the book out.

We originally met up to talk about that book.

"Can I? The book's borrowed under your name though?"

“I’ve already gotten permission from a teacher. Although it’s not ideal, it’s fine as long as I returned it on time.”

Because Hiyori was a top student who always went to the library, it wasn’t surprising that she got special treatment.

And after we’ve discussed everything there was to discuss about the book, drank our tea and said our goodbyes...

“It seems that I should change my evaluation of her.”

Until today, I’ve only regarded her as a student from the same year. Maybe if I went further, she was a friend with mutual interests.

Soon after Hiyori left, I saw Kei, who was also at Keyaki mall.

“...What do you want?”

Kei, who appeared in front of me, looked quite unhappy as she spoke.

“How about sitting down first?”

I urged her to sit on the seat which Hiyori had sat on, but Kei refused after just glancing at it, looking at it as if it were trash.

“Rumours about us would circulate if anyone saw us sitting together and drinking tea.”

She said this while looking into the distance.

Even if a third party was looking at this scene, it wouldn’t look like we were talking.

“Is there a problem with those rumours?”

“That’s a huge problem! If you just casually interact with the opposite sex, rumours will start immediately, shouldn’t you know this already? You don’t understand this situation at all.”

Put simply, this was precisely what I'm doing now, casually interacting with the opposite sex.

“So, what do you want?”

“Sorry, I forgot. I'll contact you when I remember.”

I had already done what I needed to do with Kei.

“What the hell? This is such a mess. I'm going back...”

After sighing in disbelief, Kei turned away.

I watched her walk away without attempting to stop her.

It's not hard to see why she was in a bad mood.

Because I deliberately upset her.

Chapter 3: Lost Lamb

Intro

As the spring break passed by, the 30 days of April would inevitably arrive.

I didn't do anything in particular during these past days, as I mostly just spent my time in my room, enjoying the holiday.

I wanted to welcome the new school year carefreely, just like this...

I woke up just before 8 and noticed I had received a text message on my phone.

It was from one of Class B's students, Ichinose Honami.

It was an invitation to meet sometime during the spring break.

It seemed like the rest of the break wouldn't be as uneventful as it had been up to now.

The date was still in consideration, and she also wanted Horikita to come along.

From that, I could guess that Horikita was the main event, and I was just in the undercard.

I could roughly predict what the contents of the conversation were going to be.

It should be about the final examination of our 1st year, the event selection exam. Although Ichinose would have collected some information about it

already, she would want to know the details of our own 3 wins and 4 losses against Class A.

The topic of becoming 2nd-year students will also come up.

It would relate to the cooperative relationship between Ichinose's class and mine. Would it continue? Or would it end? She should want to confirm and decide what would happen to it.

The conversation was probably going to be a mixture of those two topics, rather than only one of them.

Especially about the latter topic, discussion on that should take priority during this spring break.

"Has Ichinose recovered from what happened yet?"

I thought about the girl who I haven't seen at all during the spring break.

It seemed like the results of the end of year exam were still weighing on Ichinose's heart.

They got 2 wins and suffered 5 losses, a miserable defeat.

Although we fell back into Class D, the differences in the scores were shrinking.

A change in the class ranks due to a new special exam was now very likely to happen. Class B and the classes below it were now evenly matched, so sooner or later, we had to discuss what our classes would do in the future.

The cooperative relationship established in the first year between our two classes wasn't bad for either of the classes.

If we were to continue this cooperative relationship, it would reduce our mental burden by a bit.

But in the future, the fact that this relationship would eventually become detrimental to both classes had finally crossed the mind of both parties.

And when the situation escalated, we would have to dissolve the relationship forcefully.

Which would make us seem dishonourable if it came to that.

Basically, the situation was that the lower ranking class didn't need to do anything, as it was the higher ranking class that needed to decide what their plans were for the future.

If Horikita knew about Ichinose's invitation for a talk, she would be able to figure out as much as I had.

This wasn't going to be a simple conversation. Instead, it would be an important point of divergence which would consider what the future held for the two classes.

Even if Ichinose wasn't planning to talk about that, Horikita would probably bring that topic up herself.

Essentially, this conversation was going to happen, no matter what.

Then there's the issue of time. I was available all day today, but what about Horikita?

Horikita's brother said that he would leave on the 31st.

And deep down, Horikita should still be eager to want to talk to her brother.

If they wanted to do something together today as siblings, it wouldn't be surprising.

As for whether her brother would be willing to do it, and if Horikita had the courage to go meet him, that was a separate matter.

I'll send a message to Horikita first.

I also added another line, [Are you ready to talk to your brother?]

I simply wrote up what Ichinose wanted to do and sent it to her, so it'll be read after a few seconds.

She didn't take long to reply.

[I'm available at any time.]

That was her answer. No, you're not available at any time.

As I said that within my heart, I wanted to know what her response would be if the time was set to be tomorrow. But deliberately poking at things she cared about would prove troublesome for me.

Her reply had ignored everything to do with her brother leaving.

[So how about April 2nd?]

Pay attention to that day, and leave your thoughts of today and tomorrow behind.

[I'm free today.]

Her immediate reply had a sort of commanding manner to it, meaning that I shouldn't be sticking my nose in this.

Although admitting that she wanted to spend time with her brother was hard for her, all she needed to say was that she was busy.

Even if I said I had plans myself, it would be tough to convince her.

[Yes. I want to deal with the troublesome things first.]

It would be troublesome to go against her now, so I decided to go along with it.

After the meeting ended, she still would have enough time to meet with her brother if she wanted.

[...That would be difficult]

It seemed like those two would not meet any time before the scheduled meeting they had tomorrow.

I replied to Horikita, agreeing to meet with Ichinose today.

After confirming it with Ichinose, it was decided that our meeting would occur at 10 in the morning, at the cafe on the 2nd floor of Keyaki Mall.

Part 1

As we approached April, the temperature gradually rose.

It was just after 9:30 in the morning. Although it was sunny today, the weather forecast said that it was expected to rain at noon. We decided to meet up earlier, so then we could avoid the rain.

There was still plenty of time left before the meeting, so I decided to go and walk around the mall first. I pressed the button to the elevator.

Since it was the holidays, I would see many students of the school on the way to the mall.

Of course, this included the students of the same grade as me as well as some of the 2nd year students.

Even though I didn't know that many people, as long as I walked around for a bit, I would encounter some familiar faces.

It's just that the presence of the graduating 3rd years were decreasing day by day, and now, there were virtually none to be seen around.

And when the first of April rolled around, only the first and second years would remain. I'm guessing the next few days would seem pretty desolate after the third year's left.

As I was thinking about that, I bumped into a familiar girl from the same grade on the elevator.

“... You again...”

The first-year student who was keeping her distance and speaking to me with a displeased tone was Ibuki from Class D.

I felt that the way she spent her holiday was pretty similar to how I did.

She was probably also thinking the same thing.

It was an elevator, so we were in an enclosed space together.

“I don’t see this as particularly strange, bumping into you, especially during the holiday.”

“You say that… but I don’t want to have anything to do with you anymore.”

“I know.”

She seemed to hate coming into my room last time.

If Ishizaki didn’t force her to come, she wouldn’t have.

Even though she hated me, Ibuki went with Ishizaki for Ryuuen’s sake.

This showed that she thought Ryuuen was an integral part of her class.

I entered the elevator that Ibuki was already in, as there wasn’t much choice.

“It’s not going to break down again…?”

“Now that you say it, that really has happened before.”

This reminded me of summer vacation again, during which, Ibuki and I got stuck in an elevator together.

Although we were both alert in case something similar happened, such improbable accidents don’t happen twice.

After arriving at the lobby on the first floor, Ibuki immediately stepped out of the elevator.

It seems like Ibuki was also heading in the direction of Keyaki mall.

“Are you fine with this? You’re walking at the same pace as me.”

She could have walked faster or run to quickly leave my presence.

“Why does it have to be me? Why don’t you walk faster then?”

Although she couldn’t stand me, it seemed like she did not want to be the one taking the initiative to leave.

This seems like exactly the kind of thing Ibuki would do, not being able to accept defeat.

Having said that, it would seem weird for me to walk faster just to get away from her.

As far as I’m concerned, walking next to her wouldn’t be a problem, although it would waste some of my energy.

And as a result, neither of us backed down, and we walked side by side.

My destination should only be 5 minutes away from the dormitory. We would be separated soon enough.

“It’s great that Ryuuen was able to come back.”

“You’re annoying. Shut up. Don’t speak to me.”

I couldn’t even get a sentence in. I better not say anything unnecessary.

I wasn’t afraid of the silence, so I decided to match her and shut my mouth.

And so we walked together within this fiery, tense atmosphere.

“Yo, Ibuki, wait for me-!”

After walking with this tense atmosphere for a good while, a loud voice came from behind us.

The voice was from Class 1D’s Ishizaki.

As one of Ryuuen’s close associates, he often acted together with Ibuki.

Maybe it was because of the fact we've accidentally come into contact multiple times, that we've been able to talk to each other normally recently.

Ibuki didn't look back, and her expression didn't change, and she just continued walking forward. It couldn't be because she hadn't heard.

"Hey, wait! Hey!"

"Shut up, you're noisy."

"But that's because you didn't respond-oh? Ayanokouji's with you, huh? What are you two doing? Could it be... a date?"

Ishizaki ran over to where we were and said this, so Ibuki kicked him in the knee immediately after he said it.

"Ow! What are you doing!"

"You know why you got kicked. I'm not going to say anything else, so get away from me."

"What, there's no point in doing that. We're going to see each other later anyway."

It seemed like Ibuki was meeting Ishizaki at Keyaki Mall.

"Is Ryuuuen coming?"

"Yea-No...umm..."

I casually asked that, and Ishizaki accidentally answered.

"Stupid-idiot."

It seemed like these two were going to meet up at Keyaki Mall for some reason.

From the reaction Ishizaki made when I asked about Ryuuuen, it wasn't hard to guess what that reason was.

It also seemed like the meeting was supposed to be a secret.

“Forget it, it won’t matter anyway, right? It’s useless to try to hide it from Ayanokouji in the first place.”

Although Ishizaki quickly bounced back from his mistake, Ibuki was still serious about it.

“It won’t matter now, but we’re still going to have to take this bastard out to climb up the ranks.”

“If you put it like that...”

Why are they talking about this when I’m right next to them?

Although I was doubtful about whether Ryuuken would indeed return, after seeing this, it seemed like it was true.

It was a secret meeting because Ryuuken had not actually officially come back yet.

For Ryuuken, who had already stepped down once as the leader, his classmates would not be able to accept his return so quickly.

Ishizaki also faced a dilemma, as he was the one who took the credit for bringing Ryuuken down.

“Hey, Ayanokouji.”

“Hm?”

As I was sorting these bits of information in my head, Ishizaki spoke to me.

“In order to rise to Class A, I’ve devised the ultimate strategy. Want to help?”

I didn’t know how I should answer, as what he said was too surprising.

“Let’s hear this first. Your ultimate strategy.”

““Heh!” Ishizaki patted his chest and said this proudly. “You, come to our class. That way, we can definitely reach Class A.”

“Huh? What the hell are you saying so suddenly?”

“If Ryuuen and Ayanokouji work together, they’ll be unstoppable. Not even Sakayanagi and Ichinose will stand a chance.”

So this was the ultimate strategy that Ishizaki came up with.

Ibuki rejected the notion of this strategy ever working. “Impossible, impossible, absolutely impossible.”

Joining forces with Ryuuen....

“I don’t think it’s a bad strategy.”

“Are...you serious?”

Ibuki shot a disgusted glance towards the two of us.

“Yeah, yeah, if you’re willing to partner up with us, we’ll welcome you with open arms. I think you and Ryuuen would be an unexpectedly powerful combination. I think Albert also likes you because whenever you come up in a conversation, he gets a bit excited.”

This was the first time I’ve heard that Yamada Albert liked me.

Was it really appropriate to use the word “like” to describe his feelings towards me...

I haven’t interacted with him much. In fact, the only time I really talked to him was on the rooftop.

Did he come to like me after our fight?

For me, I would have thought that the fight would only create resentment towards me.

“He didn’t say this explicitly, right?”

Ibuki also seemed to have questions about this, and so she asked Ishizaki.

“Men can feel these kinds of things physically. It’s intuition, I tell you, intuition.”

Really unreliable intuition.

It also seemed like if I really did join Ryuuen’s class, Albert might try to fight me.

The more Ishizaki thought about it, the more excited he became

I needed to thank his good intentions, so I answered seriously.

“It’s impossible to achieve. How are you going to get 20 million points for the transfer?”

Although they beat Class B at the end of year exam, they couldn’t have accumulated that much money.

“That, well, Ryuuen will definitely do something about that.”

“He won’t go out of his way to do something like that.”

“Are you sure? I think that if you’re willing to join us, Ryuuen will cooperate.”

“He definitely won’t help.”

In that regard, I agreed with Ibuki. That person wasn’t someone who would go out of his way to satisfy other people’s demands to make them happy.

He won’t rely on me just for the reason of reaching Class A.

His pride as a man wouldn’t allow it.

No, I wouldn't want him to be someone who would resort to something like that either.

"I'm happy that you invited me, but I'll have to refuse. It's more fun being opponents than allies anyway."

That took precedent, even before the issue of having enough private points.

"Really? Damn, I thought it was a great idea."

"You're weird. Why are you happy about going up against him again?"

Ibuki laughed grimly without even looking at me.

"Well, I'm looking forward to how he's going to attack me."

I answered honestly, in which Ibuki responded by making a disgusted face at me.

Although I didn't want to act myself too much, if the opponent was Ryuuken, I wouldn't mind having a rematch.

But for him to match me, he needed to develop even more.

He needed to show me that he could win against Horikita, Ichinose and Sakayanagi.

Not long after, we reached Keyaki mall.

"Sorry Ayanokouji, let's end it here. It would be a problem if anyone saw us together.."

Although I didn't know where they were going to meet later, exchanging ideas like this wasn't bad.

I accepted Ishizaki for looking out for me like this, something he usually didn't do.

I parted ways with Ishizaki and Ibuki, and headed towards the mall entrance.

When I first met Ishizaki, I never thought that I would be able to hold this sort of conversation with him.

Although my relationship with Ibuki might've regressed, it was still at least a change.

"It's been a year already..."

The circumstances around me had changed drastically over the year.

I could even hold conversations with Ryuuken and Sakayanagi.

Not to mention the many other students as well.

It may have only been one year, but it was a whole year.

This was evidence that time was indeed passing.

I didn't really get it before, but I feel like I've gained an understanding of the concept of time passing.

Speaking of which, this reminds me of what happened last year.

The time before I came to Advanced Nurturing high school. To prevent anyone from finding out about what I planned to do, I quietly got on with life.

I experienced small tastes of feelings I had never felt before. Especially when trying to not provoke that man... I tried my best to hide it from that person.

Because I knew that if I was discovered by that man, he would definitely stop me.

I got off lucky due to various factors. If he had been around me more, he probably wouldn't have let me run off that easily.

But that man rarely came home, as he was a busy person.

Although there was a so-called caretaker who was supposed to supervise me, he spent around 70-80% of his time that year living in a hotel.

And for me, I wasn't even that familiar with the place I called home, even though I lived there.

The white room was where I spent most of my time. For me, that home was just a temporary residence in which I've stayed in for no longer than a year. It felt no different from a hotel.

“The white room, huh.”

That man hasn't given up yet.

I've already felt his intense desire to get me out of here.

I didn't know much about what happened during this past year, but I was certain that the white room would have restarted its activities.

And as long as the white room needed me, I would return.

This would happen in the not so distant future, 2 years later.

But... I still had 2 more years left of this school life.

It didn't make sense to be thinking about this now.

Basically, I was in a situation now that I couldn't have imagined would happen a year before.

And these irreplaceable memories had definitely been engraved in my heart.

I arrived at the north entrance of Keyaki Mall, where we were going to meet.

Normally, the stores would open at 10 every morning on weekdays, but some stores would open at 9 during the holidays.

The cafe on the second floor where we were going to meet was one of those stores.

“This is the life.”

Doing whatever I liked, freely living my life as a high school student.

Talking with classmates with my phone as well as doing hanging out together sometimes.

Living a life like this, it always did seem a bit unreal.

But saying this life was unfulfilling would be a lie.

Of course, the campus had its own fair share of troubles.

A lot had changed from the past few months.

I had become more comfortable with the company of the multiple girls I was growing closer to.

Yeah... I seem to have turned into a real person on the surface.

I temporarily stopped thinking about it and turned my attention to the other issues for now.

I'll put my focus on the conversation that was going to happen.

“You’re here early. There are about 20 minutes until the meeting time. Don’t you have other things to do?”

Horikita, who was wearing casual clothes, said that as she looked at her phone.

“You say that, but aren’t you also as early as I am?”

It was like we were confirming that neither of us had nothing to do during the spring break.

We didn't discuss the topic immediately, as we went up to the second floor first.

"You should be clear on what the topic of discussion is going to be about today."

She seemed to think that was the case. Maybe because she thought that since I didn't ask her about it, I must have known.

She was correct, but I'll try to confuse her a bit.

"What are you talking about."

"You clearly know what I'm talking about, so stop pretending."

"No, I don't know what you're talking about. What's Ichinose going to talk to us about?"

I wanted to forcefully push the topic, and confuse Horikita, but...

"You really don't know? If it turns out you do, then I won't let you off that easily.."

"...Well, you should first calm down a bit."

I looked at Horikita and decided to stop messing with her, as she looked like she was about to bite me.

"I can guess what it'll be about. It's not difficult."

"It's not hard to just say that, so stop misleading me like this."

She rudely told me.

Seems like using this kind of method to try to figure out what Horikita was feeling would be useless.

"Were you trying to see how much I knew?"

“You’re thinking into it too much.”

“Am I really, though?”

Rather than say that she’s become keener now, she probably just got used to the way I did things.

Simple response patterns like that would not work on Horikita anymore.

If I was questioned again, I might get attacked, so I decided to avoid the issue.

“Anyway...let’s go.”

I saw Ichinose waiting at the entrance of the cafe, so I changed the topic.

It was still 10 minutes before the appointed time, but Ichinose seemed to have arrived already.

“Ichinose seems just as busy as we are now.”

I don’t think she just arrived. How long had she been waiting for?

“She can’t have as much free time as we do. Judging from this situation, I think she just simply wanted to arrive on time. She probably just hates making people wait. “

Maybe it was as Horikita said.

“So that’s what you think of Ichinose.”

“At first, I thought she was a hypocrite who acted like a good person.”

She might have overthought that a bit too much, as well as being a bit too quick to judge from her initial thoughts of her.

“But after a year, my thoughts of her has changed completely. She really is a good person.”

Many people disguised themselves as good people, and it was difficult to find one that truly did have a good heart.

Many people had ulterior motives.

As she was one of the genuinely kindhearted people, there would not be anyone who labelled Ichinose as a hypocrite.

“What kind of life did she live before, being such a kind-hearted person.”

This was the only thing I didn’t understand.

“Being kind-hearted is a weapon she possesses, but at the same time, it’s also her weakness.”

While walking towards the destination, Horikita praised Ichinose and sighed, as if she was worried for her.

The more kind-hearted a person was, the easier it was for bad people to use them.

“Do you think it’s better not to be that kind-hearted?”

“Being kind-hearted would be great if you were living in the mountains, surrounded by nature. But in order to survive in this competitive society, being kind-hearted would be a disadvantage.”

“I see.”

“But going by her personality, she’ll never stop being a kind and good person.”

Horikita was saying that Ichinose would continue being a kind-hearted person, even if it were disadvantageous to her.

“Even so, Ichinose knows how to distinguish between good and evil. If something were to happen that would endanger her classmates, she would be willing to do anything.

“If that’s the case then it’s fine, sure, we should end this boring conversation here.”

To get ready for the conversation that was about to occur, Horikita’s expression became serious.

I also stopped talking and called out to Ichinose.

“Ichinose, you’re really early. How long have you been waiting for?”

“Good morning Horikita-san, Ayanokouji-kun. I just arrived.”

That line was very cliche. Although she said that, when did she really arrive?

Ichinose, who wore casual clothes, greeted us with her usual smile.

“It’s a lot easier to get seats early in the morning.”

The students already in the cafe were spread out, making it look like there were available seats everywhere.

“Okay, order whatever you want to eat, I’ll treat you.”

She lightly tapped her chest with a clenched fist and said that she was going to settle the payments.

“This won’t- be for the sake of gaining an edge over us during the conversation, right?”

Because she had an experience using her own cooking to gain superiority over a situation, Horikita immediately raised her suspicions.

“She’s not you, she won’t do that.”

“I don’t like what you said but... you’re right.”

Just as Horikita noted just before, the other person here was none other than Ichinose.

She wouldn't use such a method to gain an advantage in the conversation like this.

And even if she really did gain an advantage in the conversation from that, Horikita should be able to wrestle it back.

"If so, thank you very much."

"Of course. No problem, Horikita-san, you can start ordering first."

Urged by Ichinose, Horikita went first and ordered.

I was worried about Ichinose, so I closed the distance with her to speak to her quietly.

Although it was subtle, I could smell the citrusy scent on her today again.

"Ichinose, will there be any problems with your private points?"

Although I was grateful for her treating us, her private points should be 0, as she used them all to prevent one of her classmates from getting expelled.

Although as the invitee, it was normal to treat your guests, I was still a bit worried about her financial situation.

"Ah, um, after paying here, I should still have about 3000 points. There's no problem."

April was approaching.

With that much remaining in her balance, she should have enough money to overcome this crisis.

But her private points should have been down to 0 for a while now.

Maybe after noticing my doubt, Ichinose added this:

"I got this money after selling my hairdryer to Class A's Nishikawa-san. I needed to do it so I could survive in March. The others also had to resort to

this.”

Although the school had a system in which one could survive without money, you still needed funds in hand sometimes.

If an item was being sold cheaper than it was priced in the store, it was common for people to buy from 3rd party sellers.

“So Ayanokouji-kun, you don’t need to hesitate. Come on, you can order now.”

Ichinose, who was now behind me, gently pushed my back while saying that.

Indeed, if I was too modest, Ichinose wouldn’t be too happy.

After Horikita ordered, I went and ordered a cup of coffee.

Then the three of us grabbed our food from the pickup area and left the counter to sit on the seats in the corner of the cafe.

Taking advantage of the fact that there weren’t many people here yet, Horikita immediately went straight to business.

“Are we going to talk about the end of year exam? Or is it going to be about the agreement between our classes April?”

Without talking to me in advance, Horikita was able to predict what the conversation with Ichinose was going to be about.

“Ahaha, so you’ve seen through it all.”

Ichinose, who was smiling as she said this, also had a serious look in her eyes.

This was proof that they both knew that this conversation would be extremely important.

“Am I troubling you guys?”

“No, I also felt like we had to talk, so it was a big help that you were the one to initiate it. After all, you’re a popular person, it’s hard for us to talk to you alone like this.”

“It’s not like that nowadays. I’m not busy at all during this spring break. You can talk to me anytime.”

As she replied, Ichinose had a slight smile.

From the expression on her face, it seemed like she was trying to hide some kind of bitterness.

It was probably because someone tried to ask her on a date, and she refused.

And as for the reason for that, Horikita should have noticed.

“The end of year exam seemed to take a toll on you.”

Even though it wouldn’t be a very appropriate way to start the conversation, I said that to Ichinose.

It was because even if we deliberately beat around the bush not to reopen the wound she had from it, we would eventually get there anyway.

And if that was the case, bringing it up earlier would be better as Ichinose would recover faster from it anyway.

Because she didn’t want to start with that topic, Horikita had a stiff expression for just a moment.

Even so, she realised what I was doing and adjusted.

“Ahhhhh, umm, I lost. We were completely defeated by Ryuu-en-san’s strategy.”

She seemed to have remembered something, sighing deeply, and shaking her head. Then she said that with certainty.

Drifting fretfully, Ichinose seemed to constantly sigh at her failure.

“We still don’t know anything. What was the reason for the loss?”

“The reason we failed is obvious. It’s because I lack the ability.”

Ichinose did not blame her opponent or her classmates.

She replied without hesitation, that the reason for the failure was because, of course, of her own failure as the commanding tower.

“Although we didn’t see the exam take place, it’s hard to imagine you making big mistakes.”

“You flatter me. Well, back then, I think I might have lost my head over fear...”

Ichinose humbly rejected Horikita’s praise.

No, it was probably true that she panicked back then.

She would have been troubled due to Ryuuen’s surprise appearance, which affected the outcome of the scores.

“At the start, we thought that the commanding tower was Kaneda, and when it was revealed that he wasn’t, it messed up our rhythm.”

“That’s understandable. Ryuuen should have already stepped down from as the leader, and he didn’t have any protection points, so he couldn’t have been the commander. That’s what we all thought, but it was all part of Ryuuen’s plans.”

That’s right. Even Sakayanagi and I didn’t expect Ryuuen to reappear.

For Ichinose, who was to be his opponent, it would be impossible for her not to be shaken.

If he lost, he would be expelled. No one apart from Ryuuen would be willing to carry out such a high-risk plan.

“I wasn’t able to fix my frame of mind at the end, so I’m responsible for our loss. This fact won’t change.”

While thinking about how they would fight against Kaneda, Ryuuen suddenly appeared.

Although it wasn’t my problem, I still felt sympathy towards Ichinose.

The things that the commanding tower could do were extremely limited.

But during that free speech event, Ryuuen would have completely backed Ichinose into a corner with his abilities with words.

“I heard that your class achieved excellent results in your battle against class A.”

Ichinose praised us in response.

Now, a problem had arisen. Back then, I asked Ichinose to let us fight Class A.

Horikita didn’t know this, as she had instructed me to target Class D. It didn’t go as planned during the lottery, so we drew against Class A.

Depending on the direction of the conversation, things can get a bit tricky if something contradicted what Horikita thought was true.

It might be better to discuss this with Ichinose first, but the problem was that I told Ichinose it was Horikita who wanted to target Class A.

Ichinose thought that Horikita was the one who requested to fight Class A.

And Horikita thought I lost the draw, which resulted in us having to fight Class A.

Both sides were at a position where they didn’t know the real truth.

It wasn’t impossible to avoid the topic if the conversation continued.

If I were the usual me, I would have made preparations beforehand.

Or enact temporary measures to deal with these emergencies without anyone noticing.

After I thought for a while, I decided to expose myself.

As for the reason I did not act up to now.

It was to see to what extent Horikita had grown.

“A loss is a loss. I remember that I asked you to give me the right to fight Class A. If Class B was against Class A, the results might have been different.”

After hearing this, Horikita’s gaze turned to me immediately.

I didn’t need to explain what she meant by that.

“What do you mean, asked her to fight Class A” was what her gaze meant.

But because I conformed to the flow of the conversation by saying that, Horikita decided to let it slide.

But because the look she gave me seemed natural and was faint, Ichinose did not notice it.

She understood I was saying that this wasn’t the time to discuss it.

If she were the Horikita from before, she would definitely question me right there, also causing Ichinose to develop doubts.

Even if it didn’t reach that extent, it would still have made Ichinose waver a bit.

Her ability to understand and her judgement had significantly improved. No, I should say that she’s become more astute.

Through Horikita's patience, Ichinose decided that Horikita was the one who chose to target Class A.

Because of this, my presence would be further diminished from the perspectives of the other classes.

"Because of my request, it resulted in you having to fight a tough battle.."

To support what I was doing, Horikita apologised to Ichinose.

"It's my responsibility, so there's no reason for you to apologise."

Class B going against Class D was a bad matchup, which resulted in Class B only winning 2 and losing 5.

Which then resulted in Class B losing a lot of class points at once.

"That's a hypothetical situation anyway. The winner of the lottery was Kaneda anyways, who chose Class B, so it didn't matter anyway."

Of course, this was indeed the case after looking at the outcomes now.

The battle between Class B and Class D was inevitable, even if they made prior preparations for it not to happen.

"That's not something you need to reflect on, Horikita-san. I... I need to figure out a more stable strategy that can lead us to victory. I'm the one who needs to deeply reflect on this."

Although she was enthusiastic as she said that, whether her mentality had adjusted was another matter.

"If it is possible, can you explain what the strategy you used was? Of course, in exchange, we will also explain our battle with Class A to you in detail."

Horikita must have heard some of the rumours of what happened already.

But only the commanding towers knew what happened between them.

Ichinose nodded her approval towards the proposal.

The events that Ichinose chose and the events that Ryuuen chose.

The order of the events, what events were chosen, and how Ryuuen went about doing them.

Where she won and where she lost. Ichinose revealed the answers for how she had failed without concealing it.

Ryuuen's Class D adopted a style of brute force when doing the events.

To the Class B students, this exploited one of their glaring weaknesses.

"They adopted a fighting method that plays to their strengths. I'll give that to them."

"If so, we don't stand a chance against them."

"Yeah... even on the boy's side, only Sudo-san could win. No, if his opponent is Yamada-san, there's no guarantee of victory."

If Koenji was serious, he might be able to win as well, but even if so, Horikita couldn't say that aloud.

As for the girls, outside of Horikita, I didn't think anyone else could put up a fight.

"Class A might be able to win against Ryuuen's methods."

"I agree with that."

It all depended on luck. If even a bit of luck was on Ryuuen's side, he would be able to defeat every other class.

If you look at all their battles, their win rate was the highest against Class B.

That would be proof of his intention to attack Class B from the very start.

“But, you also chose a few of your own events, so how did you lose on two of them?”

Although Ryuuen’s methods were powerful, it all depended on luck one way or another.

Class B chose 4 events, so Ichinose still could have won in those.

“....Ummm.”

Horikita didn’t know anything about this, and I was the same. So we listened to her attentively, without prior knowledge anything that happened.

What exactly did Ryuuen do? Ichinose told us everything.

He didn’t do anything to the students directly. Instead, he attacked them mentally.

He forcibly contacted and pressurised Class B.

There’s also the issue in which several of the competitors in Class B failed to exert their full strength due to sudden physical discomfort on the day.

After mentioning that, Ichinose added this.

“I lost at the event that I was supposed to excel at, and I wasn’t able to adapt to the situation. That’s all my fault as the commanding tower’s.”

She didn’t blame Ryuuen and instead said that it was her own fault.

“Many of your classmates had abdominal pain and showed symptoms of mental instability...”

Of course, Horikita recognised that this was all part of Ryuuen’s plan.

“I’m sure that this was part of Ryuuen-san’s trap. I heard from the students that felt unwell on the day that they bumped into Ishizaki-san before the exam when they were at the karaoke place.”

Karaoke, huh? That was one of the places that students were rarely monitored.

It would be an extremely high-risk plan if they really did poison them there.

“Shouldn’t you try to report this to the school?”

The exam had already ended for a week now.

The student’s food and drinks have, without a doubt, been disposed of.

You could trace the purchases of the drug they used back to the pharmacy, but there will still be arguments that Class D didn’t use those drugs.

“There’s no harm in reporting this to the school. Even if it yields no result this time, the report you make now might play a role in the next incident. If they continue doing things like this, the school will be more strict on them.”

If it was found out that Class D really were behind this, it would be a severe issue, and the school would have to take action.

“Maybe. But it doesn’t matter, I won’t report this to the school.”

Ichinose rejected the proposal. In the week after the exam, her classmates would all have advised her to appeal to the school multiple times, and yet she still didn’t.

“Why? Are you just going to submit to this humiliation? This is a serious incident that can change the results of the exam, and all you need to do is to reveal these details.”

The evidence wasn’t impossible to find, that’s what Horikita is saying.

Depending on the situation, Class D might be subject to disciplinary action.

The longer the delay, the harder it would be to appeal.

“I will assist you if you wish.”

If it were Horikita, she would have never given up on this. Because she was like this, she offered to help Ichinose.

“Thank you, Horikita-san. But I still don’t want to complain. There still isn’t any concrete evidence now, and… I want to use this incident as a lesson.”

“Lesson? What do you mean?”

Ichinose did not submit to Horikita’s persuasion.

“I think I’m lucky.”

Ichinose, who had a resigned expression just now, regained some life in her eyes.

It was like a broken-down engine desperately trying to ignite.

“I don’t know what would happen if this happened again during the crucial periods of the 2nd and 3rd years, but now, there’s still room for recovery.”

Ichinose nodded her head strongly, her eyes brimming with power.

Perhaps I was the only one who could understand her brilliance at that moment.

“Our whole class is taking this defeat seriously, and we’ve decided to make good use of this failure, and not repeat the same mistakes in the future.”

“Well, I’m not in your class so I won’t say anything more.”

“Alright then.”

Class B had now finished telling Class D what happened on their end.

We had finished listening to the details of the battle between Ichinose and Ryuuen. It was our turn now.

Horikita glanced at me, conveying her thoughts through her eyes.

[Are you going to talk in the perspective as the commander tower?] is what she wanted to ask.

As a commander, just like Ichinose, we had the same duties in the event selection exam.

But the details of what we did as commanders were rather bland and ambiguous.

What events we took part in, how we won the ones we won, and how we lost the ones we lost.

Of course, I won't mention anything unnecessary, like how I answered that one question in the mental arithmetic test.

"I already know the results of your battle, but it's still a great showing by your class."

"Even so, we still lost to Sakayagani during the 7th match at the end."

Chess was just a game. As long as I said that I was confident enough to win in chess, it shouldn't be investigated any further, and since I've lost to Sakayagani, they will think that I was weaker than her anyway.

"The only good news... well, you can't really call it that, but we only lost 30 points. But it's still not ideal as the gap between the classes has been opened up again."

"Your classmates are slowly getting stronger, so we can't take you as lightly anymore."

Even to a future rival, Ichinose still praised us straightforwardly.

"Yeah. Our class will only get stronger."

After hearing Horikita's confident words and seeing them in her eyes, Ichinose nodded her head.

"I have something to say to you that relates to the conversation, ok?"

“Mhm.”

This was the start of the next half of the conversation. The beginning of the real conversation.

It was Horikita who brought it up instead of Ichinose.

“Bluntly speaking, I want to cancel our partnership next year.”

Horikita made an unexpected proposal, but Ichinose was already mentally prepared for this.

“I thought you would say that.”

“We lost against Class A, and we’re Class D again. If you purely look at the rankings, you could say that it was a loss for us, but if you think about the big picture, we didn’t exactly lose. You could even say that we’ve closed the gap.”

“That’s true. Considering that you were at 0 points at the start of the year, your class was the one that gained the most points throughout the year. And since your results against Class A were 3 wins and 4 losses...”

After a bit of calculation, Ichinose noticed something.

The difference in those numbers was so small that it wouldn’t have been surprising if we emerged victoriously in that battle.

Although Tsukishiro’s interference could have affected the results, it was cancelled out by the fact that we had enough opportunities to win.

“But, can’t we still maintain this cooperative relationship?”

Ichinose did not readily agree to Horikita’s idea to cancel the partnership between the classes.

“Let’s discuss this again when the differences in class points reduce some more.”

“I’m thankful that you still want to continue this. But I still think it would be best to dissolve this cooperative relationship.”

There were 2 conditions required to maintain this cooperative relationship.

The first condition was if the class point difference was so large that catching up in terms of class points would be impossible.

The other condition was that if both parties were able to establish and maintain a stable relationship.

Last May, the difference in the class points was 650 points, and Class B’s points remained static throughout the year. Because of this, we were able to maintain our relationship without any problems.

However, those 2 conditions no longer apply. Class D gained 300 points, while Class B’s total class points were declining, which significantly reduced the gap.

In other words, the conditions were no longer fulfilled.

“Next year, I will definitely lead our class to Class B or above. And in order to defeat Class A, I plan to obtain all of the class points possible.”

In the face of Horikita, who had established such a resolute goal, Ichinose seemed to shake a little.

“...Oh, yes.”

What she was saying was that our class must also defeat Ichinose’s Class B.

Of course, if that’s the case, then the cooperative relationship couldn’t continue.

Horikita judged the unfledged relationship to be nothing more than a stumbling block now and refused to allow it to continue.

“No objections? Ayanokouji-san.”

“Of course, I agree with you. This is the right move that would lead us to Class A.”

Horikita asked, and I nodded. Her judgement wasn’t wrong.

Ichinose closed her eyes and exhaled deeply.

“I’m grateful to you, Ichinose, having proposed a cooperative relationship with us when we were at our weakest. But... even if you resent us now, we’ll still be enemies in the future.”

Ichinose quietly accepted what Horikita had said with conviction.

“How can I hate you? We were enemies from the start, and we only had a temporary truce. I thank you very much for this as well.”

Finally, Ichinose slowly opened her eyes and looked towards Horikita and me without a shadow of any bitterness in them.

“From the start of the 2nd year, we’ll be enemies.”

“Yes.”

Horikita firmly shook Ichinose’s outstretched hand.

Horikita had to be thinking about certain things at this moment.

Class B’s weaknesses and how we could exploit them.

And Ichinose must also be calculating the strength of our class now.

I’ll have to think about how to prevent that information from leaking now.

And that was the end of our brief conversation.

Starting in April, our battle with Class B would officially begin.

Part 2

Although the meeting was over, Ichinose wanted to stay there for a bit longer.

After her defeat and the breakdown of our cooperative relationship, she probably wanted to sort out her feelings.

So we left the cafe first. Shortly after, we reached the stairs and I was just about to descend.

“Wait a second.”

I was about to head back, but I was stopped by Horikita, whose voice came from behind.

Horikita stopped me and said this.

“I need to talk to you about something now, so just listen, and don’t turn this way.”

I did what she wanted me to do.

In the face of her serious tone, I didn’t turn back, a sign of my consent.

“What’s this?”

“So everything is suddenly fine again? Don’t you have something to say to me?”

An angry voice came from behind.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

As I expressed my confusion to her words, Horikita did not hesitate to get straight to what she meant by that.

“You negotiated with Ichinose in order to challenge Class A, didn’t you?”

“That is indeed the case.”

“If I didn’t match your words during the conversation, wouldn’t it have been troublesome?

“But you cooperated flawlessly.”

“That’s because- I thought it would create unnecessary trouble if I didn’t. Please explain why you’ve done that.”

“Ichinose already said it. Kaneda won the lottery, and decided to choose Class B. Basically, no matter what I did, the end result would not have changed.”

“I want to know this: why would you try to challenge Class A without my permission?”

“Because I thought our best chance of winning came from opposing Class A”

“But wouldn’t fighting against Kaneda or Ryuuken give us better odds?”

“If we were drawn against Class D, the probability of us losing like Class B did would be very high. We only have Sudo and you who can put up a fight against them.”

“That’s only because you know the outcome now. No matter what, Class D was the best choice at the time.”

Her voice seemed closer now, as she took a step towards me.

But she didn’t get too close.

“Was anything I said wrong?”

“No. Indeed, drawing Class A was the worst outcome. I can’t deny that.”

“Let’s put aside the fact that you completely ignored my orders. What was your reason for wanting to fight against class A?”

Even though she knew that I acted alone to get us to fight against Class A, she still didn’t know the reason.

“What do you think? Why would I go out of my way to set this up, can you guess?”

I tried to ask back. Although this was a question which she wouldn’t be able to correctly answer.

She didn’t know about my relationship with Sakayagani, and she didn’t know anything about the white room. There was no way she could answer that.

“If I go by the data and try to reach an answer through that...then the only answer would be what you said, the “best chance of winning” was against Class A. But what about Class B and D? Why were they ruled out? Well, we can exclude Class B first.”

Even if we didn’t deliberately plan out our moves with them, we still had a cooperative relationship with Class B.

The probability of Ichinose betraying us and targeting our class in the exam was extremely low.

“The problem is Class D. Normally, Class D would be the most obvious pick... But in this case, Class B lost badly against Class D, because they were caught in Ryuuken’s trap. If we were forced into fighting against them, there’s no telling how it would end up.”

We might have been evenly matched or even at a disadvantage against Class D.

“Everyone thought that Class D would be the easiest opponent. And so because of that, you had some doubts about it.”

I’m afraid that this was the limit to her deductive reasoning.

“So in other words, did you predicted Ryuuen’s sudden return in the final exam?”

“Maybe. That’s why I used Class B as a sacrifice.”

“If this is true, you should’ve discussed this with me beforehand.”

“Sure.”

I did not deny it and chose to accept her words.

But that wasn’t a good explanation of why I acted without her permission.

“But-is that really the reason?”

“What?”

“During the class vote, you came in first because you received a lot of praise votes from Class A. And then once you got your protection points, you decided to target Class A, without the risk of dropping out if you lost. It’s like... you and Sakayanagi planned this out in advance...”

Although what she just said had some accidental truths, she started to notice my relationship with Sakayanagi and the background behind it.

“Forget it... this is absurd. Most importantly, there isn’t any evidence backing what I said, just forget what I said.”

Saying that... Horikita withdrew her statement.

“I want to know what you’re thinking. Are you planning to work to reach Class A?”

“I just said it...”

“Sure. But I don’t know if you’re telling the truth. From the start of the school year up to now, you’ve always seemed reluctant to want to work to that objective.”

“People can change. Even you changed, and it makes me feel like I’ve misread you from the very start.”

As a matter of fact, I had already started to think about moving to the upper classes. But it wasn’t unreasonable to suspect that I was untrustworthy. Especially to Horikita, as I wasn’t always cooperative with her.

From other’s perspectives, it’s no surprise if they feel uneasy about my existence.

“Yes, people will grow... and perceptions will change.”

Although she was still slightly dissatisfied with the answer, Horikita still somehow convinced herself.

However, the conversation did not end there.

“Our class is growing, and it will continue getting stronger. But that’s still not enough to reach Class A.

“What are you trying to say?”

“So far, you’ve been half-heartedly participating, in both athletics and academics. You’ve been just an average student who isn’t a burden, but also hasn’t contributed anything.”

These words hurt to hear. However, on the surface, it did seem like I haven’t contributed at all.

“Will you free yourself from these restrictions? From today onwards, I hope that you will do everything you possibly can do. Only then can you prove to me that you truly want to reach Class A.”

This isn’t the same as a threat or a request.

This was to probe out what my thoughts were. Of course, the fact that she said that in such a thorny way was understandable.

“I refuse.”

“As expected.”

Instead of being surprised, she laughed bitterly.

“You’re all talk, you don’t actually want to help me reach Class A.”

“At least that’s the case for now.”

I retaliated against Horikita and reversed the flow of the conversation.

Horikita will soon understand what I meant by that.

“What? For now?”

Previously, she thought I would have never cooperated with her.

However, I think that the me right now would be able to cooperate to a certain extent.

“There’s a reason I’m conservative with this. If I suddenly went all out right after the break, there’ll be rumours within the class, no... the entire year. I wanted to avoid this situation if possible.”

“I acknowledge that you truly are an excellent student, but even for a self-evaluation, you speak highly of yourself. In terms of academics alone, even students in our own class such as Yukimura and I, as well as students in the other classes such as Ichinose and Sakayanagi, are on the same level. There are others as well, specialising with their own subjects. Can you compete with those people?”

Horikita said this with disbelief, she didn’t think I could compare to those people.

“Although suddenly showing a huge difference in your ability would garner negative attention, as long as your grades are stably in the top 10 to 20 per cent, you’ll slowly be accepted as one of the excellent students. After all, it’s not unheard of for students to suddenly achieve outstanding results in a short period of time.”

After considering it, Horikita reached that conclusion.

If her evaluation was correct, maybe we could stop here.

But if that wasn't the case, this conversation would not end just yet.

"Sorry, Horikita. I don't think anyone in the year is on the same level as me."

Apart from the students who hadn't reached their full potential yet, or hadn't seriously used their abilities.

"... You're really going to say something like that! Unbelievable!!"

Horikita didn't agree with my claim and retorted.

"Although my brother acknowledges you, that doesn't prove anything. You still haven't shown the true extent of your abilities yet."

"Couldn't you see it throughout the year?"

"Can you prove that you're the best in terms of academics? How about the things outside of academics?. If you want others to recognise your bold claims, you'll need to be able to overcome everything. Even though you consider chess to be one of your best talents, you still lost against Sakayanagi. I admit it was an extremely high-level battle, but you still lost. And you still dare claim that you have no equal."

"You can think about it as much as you like, Horikita. I could also be bluffing right now."

"At the end, you're still running away from this again. You're nothing more than a swindler."

"Feel free to call me that, if it makes you happy."

Faced with that response, Horikita stayed silent.

If what is needed to satisfy her was for her to stop being so angry, I'll stop the conversation here.

And as I was about to take a step down the staircase-

“-Let me test you.”

She spoke with an unyielding tone.

“Test what?”

“Your true strength. Although I know that you’re smart as well as physically capable to an extent, you’re still a mystery. I still don’t know your true abilities.”

Did she want to measure me with her own methods?

“I want to know if your strength is something worth hiding.”

“Are you sure you can measure my strength accurately?”

“I’m confident I can beat you in the written exams if I get serious.”

Indeed, throughout the year, Horikita’s scores had always been better than mine.

I also understood that Horikita thought that even though males had the superiority when it came to physical ability, when it comes to strategy and tactics, she could take the advantage.

But actually, Horikita fought admirably against Ibuki while under poor health conditions herself.

And she also saw me having a tussle with her brother.

And based on what she understood from those incidents, she confidently said she could beat me in an exam.

“So, how do you want to test me?”

“As many as you want. Whether it’s something I’m good at or you’re good at, we’ll use a written test to decide the winner.”

She didn’t allow me to turn backwards to face her to avoid any contact other than sound.

Just by looking at someone else, you could figure out what they were thinking or feeling.

She judged that to be unfavourable in this situation, so she stood behind me.

She didn’t want to wage psychological warfare against me, so she was vigilant.

“I can accept that, but I have nothing to gain from this, especially if you’re the one choosing the event.”

“Is this really a question of loss or gain? I know about your strength that you keep so secret. If you don’t accept my challenge, I will spread your secret around. You’ve been gaining some attention recently, and if I do that, there’s no way you can cover it up, is there?”

It’s too weak a threat. As long as she understood that spreading it wouldn’t have any benefit in the future, Horikita wouldn’t do it anyway.

However, since Horikita has grown, it may be better for me to compromise with her.

Horikita quietly waited for my answer as I thought for a while.

“How about this. In our next written exam after April, let’s decide on a subject to compete for the highest score. But if that’s what we’re doing, if I get 100 points, you could just accuse me of desperately cramming for that subject.”

And if the scores on the other subjects weren’t very high, this was a perfectly acceptable reason.

“Although using this method to measure strength isn’t enough...wouldn’t battling it out in all the subjects in the formal exam be better?”

“You can think about that if I lose to you. If we do that, I’ll have to get top scores on all the subjects, so it’s better to narrow it down.”

“Fine, I’ll agree with your plan. But how are you going to decide on the subject?”

“It’s up to you. You can decide any time you want. In addition to that, you can tell me what subject you choose right before the exam starts, I won’t care.”

“I see... so you intend to win even without prior knowledge of the subject, so studying all subjects would be the minimum requirement. This way, even if there is only one subject that mattered, your true strength will be displayed nevertheless.”

If it’s like this, Horikita should be able to accept it to a certain extent.

“If I win, I’ll judge that your abilities are only at that level, and in the future, I want you to do everything you can and work towards Class A, is this fine?”

“Yes. But if I win, you’ll grant me one wish.”

“Sure, this is a one-sided agreement anyway. What do you want?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll think about it.”

“...Aren’t you being a bit unreasonable here? If I agree, then I might have to accept some strange requests.”

“Are you already worried about the consequences when you lose? I thought you were more confident about this.”

“Are you seriously saying this...”

“There’s no need to force yourself. If you don’t have the self-confidence, you should just ignore the outcome of the battle, it won’t matter anyway, because I’ll win.”

If I say that, Horikita could no longer back down.

“Fine, if I lose, you can ask anything of me. Happy?”

“That’s enough. So it’s settled.”

So this was how a clash between Horikita and me in the written exam had been decided to take place after school started.

Horikita stepped forward and stood next to me.

Then she took another step, went ahead of me and started walking down the stairs.

“I’m looking forward to direct confrontation with you.”

Of course, Horikita will adopt all possible measures to challenge the exam.

Well... I’ll just act as usual.

I stood there and watched the determined Horikita’s back until it was no longer visible.

“Now, what should I do next?”

I planned to go straight home, but I changed my mind slightly.

I’m a little worried about Ichinose’s condition.

Although she asked us to go back first, what was she thinking about now?

Just as I was thinking about this, I saw a man looking at my direction.

As if invited by his gaze, I descended the stairs.

Part 3

On the same day, 11:30am.

At the 2nd-floor men's toilet of Keyaki mall.

Two men stood there, conversing.

One of them was Ryuuen Kakeru, who once stepped down as a leader, but returned to the front stage once again.

And the other student was Hashimoto Masayoshi, of Class A, the class that had maintained its leading position for the entire year.

They did not meet by accident, Hashimoto contacted Ryuuen, and they chose this secluded location to meet up.

“So? What kind of prank are you trying to pull on me, calling me out here?”

“Calling it a prank doesn't sound very good. I just wanted to summarise what happened this year.”

Hashimoto nonchalantly replied.

Ryuuen didn't necessarily hate this type of mysterious and unpredictable person.

However, he didn't necessarily like it as well.

Muscle-bound idiots like Ishizaki and Ibuki were easier to understand, and they gave more of a favourable impression.

Of course, Hashimoto didn't trust Ryuuen, nor did he think Ryuuen trusted him.

Their relationship was based on mutual interests.

However, both of them knew that in some cases, these kinds of relationships might develop into something more stable.

“You defeated Class B in the final exam of the year. Can I interpret this as your complete return?”

“Who knows. Maybe it’s just a whim.”

Ryuuen casually replied, raising his arms and flashing a cocky smile.

“A whim? If that’s the case, what a terribly frightening whim. I cannot take it if you’re aiming for Class A on a whim!”

Hashimoto gently raised his hands to show that he didn’t want a fight, as if he were raising a white flag.

“Are you that cautious of me?”

“You, who once retreated back into the shadows, showed up once again in front of everyone. Being cautious of you is normal.”

People always paid special attention to others who might obstruct them from accomplishing their objectives.

“Are you here on Sakayanagi’s orders?”

“Unfortunately, this isn’t an easy question to answer.”

Although Hashimoto was vague, Ryuuen knew that he wasn’t doing this on Sakayanagi’s orders.

To understand the situation, Ryuuen purposefully threw Sakayanagi’s name out there to gauge Hashimoto’s reaction.

“So, now what? What do you plan to do in the future?”

“Do I have any plans?”

Ryuuen approached Hashimoto with a sneer.

Hashimoto, who stiffened up, went into a defensive stance, just in case.

Although Hashimoto chose this place himself, it was still an inaccessible toilet.

There were no surveillance cameras that could provide any kind of protection in case something happened.

Although if Hashimoto had known earlier that this was going to happen, he would have used his phone camera to record all this, but if he was discovered, his relationship with Ryuuken would be destroyed.

“Don’t think you can win just by wandering in the middle of the two sides as a double spy.”

Although he was smiling, the pressure he exerted was not something that could be from an ordinary person.

“Ha! Even after getting defeated and coming back, you’re acting superior. How bold!!”

Although Hashimoto felt a bit anxious, he still felt a bit happy at the same time.

Although Class A’s current position was stable, this could change at any time due to Sakayanagi’s whims.

And if their ranking dropped, there was a high probability Ryuuken’s class would be the one to replace them as the new Class A.

Therefore, preemptively taking action would be the best action he could take.

Because of this, Hashimoto pointed out what was wrong with what Ryuuken said.

“Sorry, Ryuuken. I don’t plan on saving myself by just relying on two classes.”

“Oho, what does this mean?”

“Although it’s a bit early-”

Hashimoto took his phone out and showed Ryuuен what was on the screen.

While proving that he wasn’t recording the conversation, he called someone. Soon, the other person picked up.

Ryuuен quickly realised that the other person was waiting for his call.

“Come here. It’s the place we talked about in advance.”

After that short message, the call ended.

“Who do you think that was? Ryuuен.”

“Who knows.”

“It’s Ayanokouji.”

“Ayanokouji? Ah, for a moment I thought it would be him.”

Ryuuен didn’t seem to be affected by Hashimoto mentioning that name.

Hashimoto’s hopes of trying to gain whatever information he could unexpectedly fell through.

However, he felt it was too early to give up, and stubbornly continued to pursue what he wanted,

“Can you think of a reason why I called Ayanokouji here?”

“No.”

Ryuuен bluntly replied, and then quickly continued.

“Did you really call him over? I don’t think you did.”

The original objective was to feel him out, but now, Hashimoto was being felt out himself.

“...Really! It seems like vague lies won’t work on you.”

Hashimoto tried to test Ryuuen by saying Ayanokouji’s name and seeing if it would bring out a reaction from him.

But Ryuuen acted as if he heard nothing at all, and was being a bit troublesome.

“What you’re talking about is a complicated and chaotic situation. Do you have an inside story about it, Hashimoto?”

Instead, he asked the suspecting Hashimoto if he had gotten any information from an insider.

Ryuuen wasn’t putting on an act, saying those words.

Even so, it didn’t eliminate the doubts that Hashimoto had around the situation with Ryuuen and Ayanokouji.

It was because there was no way the all-powerful Ryuuen could be easily defeated by Ishizaki and the others.

He could also see Ayanokouji’s shadow behind Sakayanagi’s actions.

If he had just one more clue, his doubts on the matter could be removed.

“The one who’s really coming is—.”

The sounds of footsteps approached the second-floor toilet, and then a male student appeared.

“Ah? Looks like you called out an interested person, Hashimoto!”

Appearing in front of Ryuuen and Hashimoto was first-year Class B’s Ryuji Kanzaki.

These three people who normally didn't exchange words came together.

"He said he really wanted to talk to you. So I acted as a middleman to bring you two together."

"So? What do you get in return?"

"Isn't it obvious? Of course, it's a cooperative relationship with Class B."

"Sayakanagi framed Ichinose. In other words, they're enemies. Do you really think Kanzaki could accept it?"

"He'll accept it. Right? Kanzaki."

"I won't trust you, Hashimoto. But you're of value."

"You heard him!"

Hashimoto showed Ryuuken that as long as their interests were the same, even he and Kanzaki could cooperate.

Then, Hashimoto put his hand on Kanzaki's shoulder while laughing out loud.

"Listen to what he wants to say, do it for me."

"So that's it. You don't plan to save yourself with only 2 classes.

Until now, Hashimoto had only been interested in Ryuuken's class.

But after Ryuuken stepped down, he seemed to have expanded his connections.

"Ah. I intend to plant my seeds in Ayanokouji's class too."

Hashimoto declared his intent to save himself, no matter which class came out on top.

But Ryuuken's attention had moved from Hashimoto to Kanzaki.

“You’re not going to bore me, are you?”

“Although I don’t know what you’re expecting from me, I’m not going to say anything which will please you.”

Kanzaki continued without fear of Ryuuen.

He came here to say these very words.

“The end of year exam. That’s what I want to talk about.”

“Are you going to recount your feelings after suffering that crushing defeat?”

“I’m sorry Ryuuen, I don’t think we lost to you.”

In response to his resolute statement, Hashimoto whistled.

“You played dirty to steal the win from us. Don’t forget this!”

Kanzaki’s complaints were not hard to understand.

It was because he had the confidence that he could beat Ryuuen in a head to head confrontation, but the victory was snatched away from them due to Ryuuen’s despicable strategy.

“How boring. Did you come here today to specifically talk about that?”

In Ryuuen’s eyes, there was no difference between a clean and a dirty strategy.

A victory was a victory. And Kanzaki’s defeat was something that would never change.

“Anyways, what dirty strategy are you talking about? Is it about me being the commander?”

“Don’t act stupid! I’m talking about the stomach ache and your mental attacks on my class on the day of the exam.

Hashimoto, who didn't know much about the details of their exam, applauded happily.

"No wonder he's that angry. What a beautiful attack, Ryuuen!"

"I'll say this now, this kind of despicable behaviour will not work against Class B in the future."

"Hahaha. Do you think Ichinose can defend against my attacks? Or do you intend to cry and complain to the school?"

"No, she shouldn't be able to do anything about it."

Kanzaki immediately denied it. Because this was not something that a kind-hearted person like Ichinose could do.

"Then who can prevent it?"

"I will."

Facing off against Kanzaki without hesitation, two conflicting thoughts emerged in Ryuuen's mind.

Was he just bluffing, or—

"But as Ichinose's follower, what can you do by yourself?"

Ryuuen tried to feel out what Kanzaki meant by saying those words.

"Throughout the year, I stood by Ichinose to support her as her assistant. But that's because at the moment I came to this school, I decided that her leadership skills were superior to those from the other classes. That's it. My trust in her hasn't wavered yet, but she lacks the ability to deal with these emergency situations. She also has a huge weakness in being unable to abandon the weak."

"Hou? I thought this was going to be a bore, I didn't expect you to be this interesting. Who would have thought that someone from Class B, valuing cooperation and friendship and all that, would have such thoughts."

But Ryuuen was not at all worried.

“But you’re all talk. Even a dog can yell out empty threats.”

“Watch me. I’ll prove it.”

Hashimoto only helped Kanzaki in order for him to establish a relationship with Class B, but now his evaluation of Kanzaki had changed. Maybe he was more capable than he initially thought.

“Sure. If you wish, I’ll beat you down even harder next time.”

“I don’t know what dirty trick you still have up your sleeve, but I’m not the same as Ichinose. I won’t show mercy. I hate that we lost in our own territory, so I’ll fight with everything I’ve got.”

“Then let me look forward to when your class isn’t so shit.”

Ryuuen laughed half-heartedly and started to relieve himself.

Hashimoto, who wanted to continue talking, walked towards where Ryuuen stood.

“It’s getting interesting, Kanzaki. If anything ever happens, you’ve got to talk to me about it.”

Hashimoto thought that Kanzaki would leave after his declaration, so he left him with a parting message.

Instead, Kanzaki walked towards Hashimoto, and ended up next to him.





He exerted a pressure that was felt by everyone present, to show that he had no intention of losing to them.

After finishing off his business, Kanzaki once again spoke with conviction.

“Remember what I said, Ryuuen.”

He left the toilet after saying that, a step ahead of the other two.

“Hehehe. How scary!”

“So are you going to completely destroy Class B now?”

“Who knows.”

Ryuuuen laughed as he avoided the question, and then remembered something completely unrelated.

And that was the conversation involving Hashimoto and Kanzaki, which happened about an hour ago.

Part 4

After leaving Ichinose and Horikita, I was torn about whether I should go back or not.

However, I bumped into Ryuuen, who led me to a deserted corner in Keyaki Mall.

We kept our distance, so if someone saw us, we could just pretend to just be passing by each other as well.

“Did you hear this from Ishizaki? Me being at Keyaki Mall, that is.”

“Yeah, I was looking for you.”

So he talked with Ishizaki and Ibuki for about an hour? Or did it end earlier?

In any case, Ryuuen’s eyes had more spirit in them than before.

“You know my contact details. Wouldn’t talking on the phone be easier?”

“I wanted to talk to you and look at your senseless, severe face at the same time.”

Well, I’ll listen to what he had to say for a bit.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That”- would be referring to the message I told Hiyori to pass on to him.

I would have gotten more than 5 wins using a better strategy. I told her to tell this to Ryuuen. It seems like she had done her task well.

After hearing my message from Hiyori, it led him to try to find me, was probably how this went.

“I meant what I meant. I would have done a better job if it were up to me.”

“I’m free to use whatever means necessary.”

“I don’t want it to end like this. If you continue with your reckless strategies and get expelled as a result, I might even feel a bit lonely.”

I said those words naturally, but it didn’t seem to affect Ryuuен’s frame of mind.

“Ahaha, what a joke. Losing to Sakayanagi and you’re still this calm!”

“Our class did indeed lose to Sakayanagi. And since I served as the commander tower, I can’t be excused from the responsibility of failure. But is Sakayanagi stronger than me? Fight her, and you’ll find out.”

“Ha- are you underestimating me?”

Ryuuен’s smile disappeared as he approached me.

“You, who have defeated even me, can’t be weaker than Sakayanagi.”

It seemed like he was trying to provoke me, deliberately saying such demeaning words towards her.

“Although I’m grateful for you trying to cheer me up after losing, but even if it’s me, I can’t possibly be lazy and not go all out during an exam, right?”

“Sorry, I don’t believe it at all. Rather than believe that you were serious during the exam, it’s more believable that you didn’t care about winning or losing from the start... it may also be because of the school arranging it to make Class A win to save face. That’s more believable to me.”

Although it wasn’t the correct answer, it was close to the mark.

Only Ryuuен had such a ridiculous comprehension ability in the whole school.

Because he had previously battled against me, he had absolute conviction on this.

“So...? What do you plan to do after your return, Ryuuен?”

“Don’t say I’ve returned without my permission. I intend to enjoy the holidays for just a bit longer.”

Ryuuен meant that he wouldn’t officially participate in the battles between the classes for a while.

“But... If I get tired of this, I’ll destroy Ichinose and Sakayanagi as a warm-up.”

“What an extreme change of heart!”

“Kukuku, indeed. I’m shocked myself. I didn’t expect to be able to get revenge on you so soon. I’m getting pumped up.”

“So that’s how it is.”

The snake was about to wake up from hibernation.

If that happens, neither Class B or Class A could ignore Ryuuен.

Although it might be exactly what Sakayanagi wanted, it wouldn’t be strange to see either class come out on top.

“I’d be grateful if you did that. If you’re able to destroy Ichinose and Sakayanagi, it’d be a great help. As it would allow us to accomplish our goal of reaching the upper classes without a hitch.”

Having the upper classes fight each other was essential for us in order to rise in the rankings.

“I thought you weren’t interested in the battles between classes.”

“It’s a little different now. My class will be ranked near the top next year, even if I’m not here next year.”

“Ah?”

“Even if I’m not here”. Ryuuuen seemed to be surprised by that.

“Maybe I’m being targeted right now from a distance. If that’s the case, it wouldn’t be strange if I suddenly dropped out, right?”

If Tsukishiro really intended to do this, some unavoidable situations will occur on my part.

This would be the case even if I took unyielding measures to try to defend against them.

Of course, I’m not going to make it any easier for my opponent.

“Relax. The only person who can get you expelled is me.”

Ryuuuen said in his characteristic confident style.

“But-”

Ryuuuen, who was about to speak, suddenly disappeared from my field of vision.

He attacked suddenly, going for my face without the slightest hesitation, his sharp fingertips poised at my eyeballs. I had no choice but to dodge.

“Aha!!”

Ryuuuen used the momentum to spin around and attempt to kick me with his right foot, but it was just a feint, and passed right over me.

The real attack was from his left leg, using the force of the spin to make it even more powerful.

I dodged it again, and distanced myself from Ryuuuen.

“Ha, you can even dodge like that after a surprise attack. How much of a monster are you!”

“And you still dared to attack me first.”

Although it was just me and him, there were still a lot of surveillance cameras around.

However, if the students in question didn't cause any problems, they'll turn a blind eye to these small things. This was what allowed Ryuuen to go ahead with his characteristic brazen behaviour.

"My instincts are telling me that I should eat you alive."

Even in hibernation, snakes eat their prey by instinct.

"Why aren't you attacking?"

"I wanted to avoid the risk of fighting with you here. Besides, it's not the right time yet."

"Haha. So this is the so-called calmness of the strong? You seem to be genuine about this, and it's making my skin crawl."

His eyes were shining like it had been before. No, this was even brighter.

This wasn't the Ryuuen who had been lurking under the water for the past few months.

"You've got a chance. Because of it, you'd better grow even stronger, Ryuuen."

Maybe he didn't like the fact that I said it in a very patronising way, so he punched the wall.

"Grow even stronger? Who are you, my teacher?"

"I'm telling the truth. You're willing to use any means necessary, even relying on despicable, criminal means in order to achieve victory. I don't have any problem with that, but try not to be so obvious about it."

"Ah?"

“I’ve heard from Ishizaki that you used laxatives. Drugging them in the Karaoke room was a good idea, but if the food and drinks were kept as evidence, it would have been over for you. That’s an act that will get you expelled without question. Even if what you did was ignored, peculiar behaviour during the exam will deepen the school’s distrust of you. Your only salvation was that Ichinose didn’t seem to want to complain about it.”

“Ichinose being a pushover was taken into consideration in my plans.”

“If that’s the case, it’s nothing more than a naive consideration. You’ll never surpass me like that.”

“...You really said it now.”

Ryuuen approached me once again.

But it wasn’t like before, as he didn’t seem to want to attack me.

Even if he was just suppressing his attacking intent, he wouldn’t be too hard to deal with anyway...

“You don’t have to listen to my advice. But-fighting me now is impossible.”

Would Ryuuen accept advice from his enemy? This could determine whether he had a certain ability or not. Ryuuen seemed to calm down and took his fist off the wall.

“I’ll accept your garbage advice now. But one day I’ll defeat you.”

“That’s not a bad motivation, Ryuuen. If I get expelled because of you, that wouldn’t be so bad.”

Although he was angry, Ryuuen listened to what I said.

And as a result, Ryuuen’s future strategies would become even more ingenious.

The competition we faced in the second year was now getting harder to imagine.

Would Ryuuken sweep Sakayanagi out of the way and ascend directly to Class A, or would Sakayanagi stop him?

Or would Ichinose come back even stronger in the future?

Faced with the three-pronged attack, how deep would Horikita plunge into the battlefield?

The battlefield would be a lot different than what it looked like during our first year, and it wouldn't be long until we were able to witness it first hand.

Part 5

That was what happened before the situation in the toilet.

Glancing sideways at the leaving Kanzaki, Ryuuuen said this.

“Return to battle. Although I flashily defeated Class B as an opponent, there are still places to reflect on.”

Ryuuuen admitted this. In order to defeat Ayanojouji, he needed to admit what needed to be admitted.

“How admirable. And I was thinking about what kind of dirty method you’ll use next. Are you going to fight fairly like Kanzaki told you to?”

“Ha! Who said I would do that?”

“Huh?”

“Although exploiting Ichinose’s naivety was a good move, it left them too many opportunities to take advantage of it. That’s why that small fry dare confront me.”

“...So that’s what you mean.”

It wasn’t the use of his despicable methods that needed reflection on.

Instead, it was how he gave the game away by being not as careful as he should have been.

“Next time, I’ll destroy them even more perfectly and beautifully.”

No matter what kind of statement Kanzaki put out, Ryuuuen would not act blindly during this period.

If he really had hidden his fangs, Ryuuuen would immediately know.

“You’ve grown this year, Ryuuen. Establishing a relationship with you early on really was a good decision. It seems like I even have to consider the possibility of Sakayanagi being defeated by you.”

Hashimoto carefully observed Class B as he approached.

In order to succeed, he had to graduate from Class A no matter what.

Part 6

Thanks to Cinnamon for TLC'ing this part.

It became noon and it started to rain heavily as if someone had up-ended a bucket full of water. The precipitation exceeded 30mm.

I don't know why I didn't want to return to the dormitories, but I decided to stay in Keyaki mall by myself.

It was convenient for almost anything and everything to be located on campus. This meant that even if it started raining heavily, I would have no problem getting back to the dorms because students were allowed to borrow an umbrella temporarily.

As long as it was returned before the specified time, it was free. This led to many students using this service.

There were some students who went out in the morning and didn't bring an umbrella. This was done to reduce the amount of things they had to carry.

That being said, today was slightly different.

Since it was raining this hard, an umbrella wouldn't have made a difference. You would've still gotten wet.

"It shows no signs of stopping today."

As predicted by the weather forecast, it would rain from about noon till tomorrow morning.

My phone occasionally vibrated due to the Ayanokouji group.

They discussed various topics, ranging from the rain to other causal topics.

"What should I do?"

I didn't feel like joining the conversation, so I'll just leave it alone. This way, the messages won't be displayed as "read".

I blankly stared at the screen as I loosely paid attention to the conversation in the group chat.

And as if I suddenly remembered something, I repeatedly stared at the rain outside the window to pass the time.

I'm not productive at all, wasting time like this.

But doing this occasionally wasn't so bad.

I did not return to the café.

Instead, I randomly sat on a bench to kill time.

That being said, I couldn't just continue doing this for hours.

After listening to the rain for 20, 30 minutes, I decided to head back.

I picked up my student ID and rented an umbrella from the machine.

Even if I borrowed an umbrella, my lower body, especially below my knees, would still be soaked by the rain. However, it was better than nothing.

I initially decided to head straight to the dormitory from here, but after taking one step out of the exit, I spotted a familiar student. Ichinose, amid this torrential rain. She was not holding an umbrella.

It seemed like she had stayed in Keyaki mall ever since our conversation.

There was no sign of her hanging out with her friends, and she was alone.

She must have stayed and thought about a lot of things after parting with us.

"She's been sorting out her thoughts ever since, huh."

However, judging from her appearance, it didn't seem like she was very successful.

If she headed back without an umbrella, there was no doubt that her whole body would get wet.

I maybe thought she was waiting for a friend with an umbrella, but that did not seem to be the case.

It might be an act of kindness to leave her alone... but I was a little worried considering that Class B has just suffered a complete defeat during the last exam.

I hurried back to borrow another umbrella.

As I returned a while later, I saw Ichinose walking forward in the rain, embracing the fact that she would be soaked.

Ichinose wasn't walking towards the direction of the dormitory, but instead walked in the opposite direction, towards the school.

Moreover, the raindrops bombarded her as she didn't have an umbrella.

Although I could just watch her walk away—

I still took the umbrellas, and chased after Ichinose.

Due to the rain being too heavy, she couldn't seem to hear my footsteps.

Even if I called out to her with my normal voice, she wouldn't be able to hear me.

Ichinose continued to walk along the path towards the school. The school was within our line of sight.

In the pouring rain like this, there would be no one around.

Ichinose stood still and started looking at the sky, minding her own business.

It seemed like instead of avoiding the rain, she wanted to be drenched by it.

What were you feeling? What were you thinking about?

It wouldn't be difficult to guess.

Although I didn't mind letting her stay in the rain for as long as she wanted, she would definitely catch a cold if she stayed any longer.

And if she caught a cold, she would become even more mentally fragile.

That would be somewhat cruel to Ichinose in her current condition.

"You'll catch a cold if you keep standing in a place like this~"

Raising my voice slightly, I greeted Ichinose as I approached her.

"... Ayanokouji-kun."

As she didn't expect anyone to be nearby, Ichinose was a little surprised, but then she glanced at my direction.

"... Yeah."

She whispered softly, but didn't move an inch.

She looked up into the sky once again, without fear of getting soaked.

"You should go back first. I...would like to be soaked a little bit by the rain."

Ichinose said to me, when I was close enough to hear her soft voice.

"I see."

It didn't seem right, using a "little bit" to describe the heavy rain.

If I left her alone, Ichinose might stay in this rain for an hour or two.





Even if I tried to persuade her, she wouldn't listen while in this condition.

So, to make her listen, it seemed like I would have to use slightly tougher means.

There was a particular method that worked on Ichinose in situations like this.

I lowered my umbrella, closing it.

And in an instant, the rain seeped into my body.

"Aya-ayanokouji-kun?"

"I thought I'd join you."

Ichinose couldn't ignore my peculiar actions.

"Why...?"

"Occasionally, I enjoy standing in the rain and being soaked for no reason."

This formed a clear contrast to Ichinose, who had a reason for wanting to get soaked.

Though I had two umbrellas, the two of us were absolutely soaked.

This was quite the strange experience.

"Won't you catch a cold?"

"I can say the same to you."

"I don't mind. Or rather, it would be good if I caught a small one."

So that's the case. Standing in the rain and getting soaked would indeed be the best way to catch one.

“Then maybe I’ll do the same.”

Of course, my answer would leave her confused. After all, she herself wouldn’t say anything like “let’s catch a cold together!” or something.

“No way, Ayanokouji-kun. You should go back. After all, you have an umbrella.”

“It won’t make much of a difference anymore.”

Everything under my clothes was already soaked, and it had penetrated my body.

“Oh...honestly!”

“Sorry about that.”

If Ichinose didn’t go back, I wouldn’t go back as well. Ichinose seems to have succumbed to my threat.

“...I get it now. Let’s head back.”

“If so-’

I wanted to pass the umbrella to her, but I didn’t in the end.

“We’re already wet, so what would it matter if we use that!”

“Haha, true.”

It would take a few minutes to get back to the dormitory.

It wouldn’t make much of a difference if we used an umbrella or not.

As we got soaked by the rain, we took our first steps.

Although I was fine with staying silent while we went back, Ichinose sighed soon after.

“Ahh, I’m always showing you my weak sides... I’m so lame...”

“Your weak sides? Maybe that’s true.”

A while back when Sakayanagi was playing with Ichinose, she had once lost herself as well.

“In front of others, I thought I could be more decisive and capable, so why is this happening?”

“People can only show their weak sides to the people they trust. That’s what I think anyway.”

At the very least, you don’t want to show any weaknesses to the people you hated.

Even if it were a lie, they still have to act strong. Only when they were alone would their weaknesses come forth.

“That was conceited of me, forget what I said.”

“No... I think it’s true. I think you’re a trustworthy person. So that’s why I always end up letting you hear my complaints. But... why does it feel like you’re always by my side when I’m depressed?”

“Well, those are all coincidences.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“There is no need to apologize. Besides, I don’t think this is bad. But if the other students knew about this, they might get angry.”

Ichinose was a very popular girl in this school year.

If ordinary boys hear this, they will definitely be envious.

“If it’s okay, you can complain to me all you want.”

“That—”

With a look of anxiety, Ichinose shook her head from side to side.

“No... I’m not okay with showing my weakness like that, it’s way too lame.”

Although it was slowly getting warmer, the temperature was still low.

In the godforsaken heavy rain devoid of any people, we finally reached the dormitory.

We were about to step into the lobby, but once again, Ichinose stopped moving.

“I think you’d better go back first yourself, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“What are you going to do, Ichinose?”

“I want to stay here for a bit, I... I don’t want to go back to my room yet.”

Ichinose refused to go back and said that.

This time however, there was a lot of willpower behind her refusal.

“Even so, it’ll be better if you just went back.”

Having been continuously soaked by the rain, it might have distracted her from what she was feeling.

But the rain was just that, a distraction. It wouldn’t solve the fundamental problem.

I didn’t want to yield to Ichinose’s resistance.

“Even so... I don’t want to go back... at least not right now.”

“Really? Then I’ll stay here as well.”

Ichinose seemed to be surprised and confused by my unyielding attitude.

“If I’m alone in my room, thinking, I’ll just get depressed... So I don’t want to go back.”

Ichinose would not go any further, even if we had continued to stay in the rain.

If that’s the case, then I’ll have to use another method to get her moving.

“You want to come to my room then?”

“Eh?”

Receiving an unexpected response, Ichinose attentively stared into my eyes.

“If you have someone to talk to, then you won’t be so depressed.”

“But...I’m all wet...”

“Well, I’m just as wet as you are. If you don’t want to come up, then I’ll stay with you here, for as many hours as it will take.”

“You’re unexpectedly stubborn.”

“Perhaps.”

And so we dragged our wet bodies into the dormitory.

It was a relief that nobody was in the lobby at that time.

And just like that, we took the elevator, and went up to my room on the fourth floor.

“Please come in.”

“Are you sure?”

“Uh-huh.”

“...Sorry, thank you.”

I let Ichinose in my room and made her sit down.

Sitting on the cold floor would only make your body colder, though.

And wearing wet clothes wasn't good for the body either.

I turned on the heat function of the air conditioner so that Ichinose would not get any colder.

Then I took out a towel from the cabinet and handed it to her.

"How about we talk about it?"

"Talk... about what?"

"Talk about what you're thinking about, and what you're worrying about, and everything related to that."

"That... But... But I... I can't!"

Ichinose refused, seemingly confused.

"I've always been relying on you recently, Ayanokouji-kun. I've received more help than anyone else. If I say this audaciously... No, I can't say it, it's too unsightly."

Ichinose Homani was just a weak little girl

And yet she had always maintained her composure as a leader.

That was an ability a leader had to have.

That composure was necessary to make the others feel that following their leadership was okay.

The person leading had to show this to the people they were leading.

"Ayanokouji-san, you already understand me very well."

“Yeah, I’m very aware of your situation. But that’s only limited to you as a person. I’m not aware of your troubles as Class B’s leader.”

“You’re even going out of your way to do this...”

Ichinose covered her face with the towel, unable to be honest with herself.

It’s as if she’s refusing to let me read her expression.

“You can’t trust me?”

“Eh?”

Ichinose responded, still covering her face.

“If that’s the case, then you don’t have to force yourself to speak. Rather, It’s a mistake to let others hear it at all.”

“No... That’s not it. I probably trust Ayanokouji-kun more than anyone else now...”

As to whether that was a lie or the truth, it didn’t matter here.

Because whichever it was, I had intended to follow up with my next sentence anyway.

“That’s an honor, but how can you say that so easily? You don’t know if I’m just taking advantage of your openness. Although it might just be a rumour, you told Sakayanagi about your past... right?”

That event should still be fresh in her memory.

The crime she committed during middle school, and how she wanted to keep it a secret.

Although she shoplifted for the sake of her little sister, she still told this to Class A’s Sakayanagi, her enemy.

Although this was something that was hard to talk about, even to your very best friend, she ended up telling it to her enemy anyway, even if she was manipulated to.

Even for a good person, this was rather excessive.

“When you don’t exactly know what your relationship is with the other person, you normally wouldn’t spill your own secrets.”

Of course, if there was a reason for your actions, then it would be another story.

But what Ichinose did was meaningless.

No, she knew she would regret it, but still did it anyway.

“What will you do if the same thing happens again?”

“Well, even for me, I don’t want to see it happening again.”

With that said, Ichinose touched her bangs which were glossy from being wet.

“I see. That’s good. Now that you’ve become more aware of your situation, I won’t discuss the topic further.”

“Ah, no. I definitely... won’t suffer a crisis again for the same reasons as before. But Ayanokouji-kun is different.”

“I’m not your classmate. I’m still your enemy, and that won’t change, right?”

“I don’t want to use that word so easily.”

“Even if you don’t want to say it, it’s the truth.”

“...But...”

Unable to accept it, Ichinose rephrased her sentence.

“Although you’re not an ally… You’re a trustworthy person.”

Through conveying it like this, the word “enemy” had been removed.

The water I prepared before started boiling.

“I only have coffee, milk coffee, and hot cocoa.”

“Then… I’ll have the cocoa.”

I nodded to Ichinose, who responded with a smile, and poured the cocoa into the cup.

Drinking hot drinks could warm up your body.

Soon, the rain subsided, and the sunset glow began to pierce through the clouds.

Ichinose looked at this scenery for a little bit, then turned to me with a faint smile.

After a while, Ichinose slowly started to talk about her feelings.

“When I was assigned to Class B and met my classmates, I was confident in victory. People say I might have been too conceited, but I was blessed with excellent companions. That feeling hasn’t changed.”

As if she were confirming it again, Ichinose said this.

“Yet, the only miscalculation was me as the leader. If I took better action, Class B would definitely have more points than now.”

“I don’t think so. I always considered you as an extraordinary person.”

Shaking her head, she refused my praise.

“After speaking with Horikita-san today, I really felt that she has grown a lot as a person this year. The same is true for Sakayanagi-san and Ryuuuen-kun. No matter which class it is, their leader is getting stronger.”

Unlike those who were constantly showing growth, Ichinose wasn't able to see her own growth in the past year.

Because of that feeling, she had lost confidence in herself.

As she felt like she was losing herself and her self-confidence, she also had the impression that the others were leaving her behind.

“Will... Will I be able to win in the future?”

“Will you be able to win in the future, huh.”

“If I said that I wanted to hear your opinions, would you answer me honestly?”

“If that's what you want, I guess I could.”

My answer wasn't necessarily right.

However, Ichinose wanted an answer now.

But this was not something that can be clearly answered now.

The future had not yet been determined, and there were endless numbers of possibilities.

I know that Ichinose wasn't the type of student to give up so easily here.

“We're about to be in our 2nd years soon. That is to say, the new year is coming.”

“Yeah...”

“Throughout the year, no matter what, you'll have to fight together with your classmates. During then, you might experience happiness, sadness, and sometimes hardships as well, but even so, you must never stop advancing.”

Ichinose Honami has done her role as Class B's leader to the best of her abilities up to now.

The only thing Ichinose Honami can do as the leader of Class B right now, was to recklessly continue to live her life as she has done up until now.

She needed to trust in her comrades, and fight until the end. That was the only option she had. This was the weapon that only Class B was allowed.

“And then... will this...be my answer...after a year, I wonder?...”

She was talking about herself one year later.

Surely she must be feeling extremely uneasy.

“I’m afraid. I’m afraid to find out... what you will tell me in a year....”

Starting off at Class B wasn’t bad in the Advanced Nurturing High School.

Ichinose spent a year with her classmates, and protected that position.

Surrounded by many companions, her school life had been smooth sailing.

However, if you weren’t paying attention, even for just a moment, you might find that the gap between the classes behind was closing.

Defeat had finally caught up to Ichinose, and it was staring into her eyes.

“I-”

“I understand. It’s hard to accept that as an answer.”

Ichinose turned her gaze away.

I couldn’t answer her question regarding whether she would win in the future. No, there was no need to answer that.

Judging from the current situation, a large gap between the classes in terms of combat ability was growing.

If you objectively analyse the current situation, the class at the bottom next year would probably be Class B.

That was what made Ichinose feel so uneasy.

It wasn't the cold but instead the fear that was penetrating her body and made her tremble slightly.

"What should I do... What can I do..."

She looked so weak. Ichinose certainly would not allow any other students to see her like this.

Especially her classmates.

It's a simple task to say tender words to the Ichinose who had opened her heart out to me. It also wouldn't be much harder to whisper gentle and sweet words, delivering them right through the gap in her heart.

It might even be possible for me to touch her skin hidden beneath her wet clothes.

I moved a little, as Ichinose reacted excessively and lifted her head to look at me.

I moved to Ichinose's side and sat down, maintaining my position, and tightly caught her gaze, which looked like it wanted to escape.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun...?"

I stretched out my right hand and touched Ichinose's wet hair, then I lightly stroked her cheek.

There was a cold and soft sensation.

Next was the faint, enveloping warmth, which spread from my fingertips.

Then, I moved my thumb, and gently caressed her lips

By doing that, her body's trembling lessened and soon her trembling lips had also calmed down.

Under normal conditions, this kind of action would be rejected by anyone and they will try to run. However, Ichinose didn't run away.

"It's so strange... You really are a mysterious person... Ayanokouji-kun..."

"Perhaps."

After ending the conversation, I stared at Ichinose. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Now, Ichinose, will you meet up with me again next year on this day?"

"...What do you mean?"

She did not try to escape the touch of my palm, as she stared at me with her moist eyes.

"“I meant what I said. I want to meet you again next year. No one else, just us.”

This may sound like some kind of confession.

But, this would end now. I gently moved my hand away from Ichinose's cheek, stood up, and distanced myself from Ichinose.

"In the coming year, don't feel trapped by confusion and uncertainty, just keep moving forward. Then, talk with me again next year. Can you promise me this?"

"That..."

She hesitated for a moment.

"But what if...I at that time... our classes...."

"It doesn't matter. I just want to see the Ichinose a year later."

Ichinose closed her eyes and nodded slightly.

“I will convey to you then what I wanted to tell you now, that’s a promise.”

“Yes. Thank you... Ayanokouji-kun.”

Some kind of brightness had started to return to her eyes, devoid of energy.

“I will also promise this. I will fight with all my strength and overtake Class A this year.”

Ichinose let out the brightest smile she had all this time.

We made a promise to meet again one year later.

If both of us survived, then this promise would be fulfilled.

Class B, led by Ichinose Honami.

What would happen to them in the future?

There were a lot of factors I’m pessimistic about, but the future wasn’t set in stone.

However... If she does fall during the second year, then I will be the one to finish her off.*

TL note: *Original Japanese used is “Kaishaku”, it refers to the act of beheading someone who has committed seppuku, to make them die more quickly and without pain.

Chapter 4: From a Brother to a Sister

Intro

The second day, 31st of March.

For me, this was a special day that had finally arrived.

That's right, it was the day when the elder Horikita embarked on his next journey.

We agreed to meet at noon. I was early, as usual, and reached the main entrance of the school.

He seemed to have kept his word and hadn't told anyone else that he was leaving then. There was no one around, except for me.

My eyes were drawn towards the figures of the students who were headed to Keyaki Mall as I quietly waited for his arrival.

A year ago, I came to this school through this very entrance.

Although you might hang out near here occasionally, this was not a place people went to often.

If it was a club activity or a special exam, you could take the bus that passes through here. Still, if you wanted to walk out of the entrance, it had to be because you graduated, or you were expelled.

Since you couldn't repeat a year, one of those two situations would inevitably occur within the 3 years.

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot recently.”

It was almost the start of the second year.

I reflected on my own change in attitude, and it was like I turned into a different person.

Just 20 minutes before the agreed time, Horikita’s brother finally arrived.

After confirming it was me, the elder Horikita lightly looked at the area around me. It was obvious what he was looking for.

“Unfortunately, your sister isn’t here yet.”

“That seems to be the case.”

The time now was 11:40 AM.

It wasn’t too late. But considering that there wasn’t much time left, she should really have arrived earlier.

I thought about the talk with Ichinose yesterday.

I remembered what Horikita looked like as she did what she needed to during then.

Was there something going on?

“I’ll call her.”

I suggested this. If it was me who was calling her, the elder Horikita would agree to it.

Although, that was what I thought...

“That’s alright, there’s no need.”

The elder Horikita gently stopped me with his hand, stopping me from doing so.

“If she wasn’t feeling well, she would have contacted me in advance.”

“She might just be oversleeping.”

Although that was unlikely, I still mentioned that possibility.

“If that’s the case, there’s no need to wake her up.”

He was saying that if she had overslept on such a momentous occasion, then she wouldn’t be worth acknowledging.

Even though it was his last day, his attitude was the same as ever.

“Oh well! There shouldn’t be a problem. After all, there’s still time.”

She might be nervously staying in her room until the last moment, because of the fact that it was her brother that she was going to meet.

“Let’s not talk about that for the time being. I didn’t expect you to come so early.”

“I thought that you would come early as well.”

We agreed to meet at noon.

There was more than enough time before the bus departed.

But for their final farewell, I expected the Horikita siblings to have a long talk here.

And so unsurprisingly, the elder Horikita came 20 minutes early.

What both of us did not expect was that the younger Horikita, who should have been the central character here, had not arrived yet.

Anyways, since she hadn’t arrived yet, we could only talk about things relating to both of us.

It was just a waste of time if nothing was said, and if we just waited for the time to pass.

After thinking a bit, I mentioned something that I started to care about recently.

“Sorry. If only I could have done more for you when you were on the student council.”

The elder Horikita had discussed with me how to stop Nagumo from doing whatever he wanted.

However, at that time, due to my wish to live a peaceful life, I did not agree to his request.

Although he introduced me to Vice President Kiriyama, our relationship ended there.

As a result, Kiriyama still had no plan to act to this day.

“That was my responsibility. It was my fault to impose it all on you, so don’t mind it.”

For the elder Horikita, this school was now a thing of the past.

What the school would look like later, Horikita did not need to care.

“But even so, I’ll give you this last piece of advice. I’ve always adopted an assured attitude towards the rules of the school. Although it’s a meritocracy, the lower-ranked classes still have a chance for victory. It’s by no means an easy fight for any class.”

“I don’t think that’s very reasonable considering the fact you’ve stayed in Class A for three whole years.”

“Yet, I think most of the students haven’t noticed the essence of that fact. Of course, many things can be improved on the school’s side. But you just need to look at the past to understand that no matter if it was the unmanned

island test or the end of year exam, there is always an opportunity for the lower classes to beat the upper classes.”

Competence was needed not only in written exams, but also in special exams.

In the unmanned island test, as long as we were united, defeating Class A and B wasn’t difficult.

The same was true at the end of year exam. Although luck was a factor, it was also proof that a lower class might take wins.

“Luck largely determines victory or defeat for the immature first years in the lower class to defeat the upper class. But... it’s also difficult for the upper classes to accept that. That’s one of the elements that’s irritating.”

If the school was too considerate for the lower levels, the upper levels would be dissatisfied.

Without mentioning the method of using 20 million private points to move up, the system at the school was based on the classes fighting as a whole in order to move up the rankings, and as such, was a structure that didn’t ignore the students with low abilities.

No matter which class, there were outstanding students, as well as students on a lower level than them.

Nagumo, who had experienced a year of these examinations, came up with an idea.

That was to create a system that favoured the powerful, allowing people to with their own personal strength.

The strong would keep climbing, while the weak would keep falling.

“Perhaps what Nagumo wants to do isn’t necessarily wrong.”

There would be people who would be dissatisfied by it, but there would also be a lot of students who would approve.

Most of the current 2nd years would agree with it.

Of course, not everyone actually agreed from the heart.

Driven by their surrounding trends, the number of students who agreed because they had no other choice would not be small.

If every person had strong abilities, then all the classes would be engaged in fierce competition.

“Is there a big gap between the 2nd years? I mean in terms of class points.”

“There is. Nagumo’s Class A had 1491 points in March, Class B had 889, Class C had 280, and Class D had 76 points.”

Considering there was only one year left, Class A was already in a stable situation.

And so under those circumstances, Nagumo was bold enough to go forward with a proposal to help the lower classes.

With only 76 points to their name, Class D’s situation would be impossible to reverse.

“There are a lot of people who agree with him. If they can’t win with the whole class, people who want to go to Class A can only hope for a system that would allow them to win with their own power.”

“That might be the case. But Nagumo’s approach would leave many people misfortunate.”

If you become too powerful and individualistic, your classmates would become overly suspicious towards you.

And then everyone around you would turn into enemies.

The elder Horikita, no, Horikita Manabu still believed that the cooperation within the system known as a class was still necessary.

This was the type of system that had been selected after clearly considering what the future would hold.

“Isn’t it the same with the current system? The three classes outside of Class A are all unfortunate.”

What Nagumo’s ideal system would be, we could only imagine.

If the system of personal victory was implemented and successfully established, it may be beneficial for classes that didn’t have 40 students in them any more.

“Exactly. So it’s like-“

As soon as I started speaking, the elder Horikita cut in.

“Using the collective private points of Class B and below, and use them to gamble on who gets the right to move up to Class A.”

As he had the same thoughts as I did, I nodded.

If we ignore the expelled students, there were 120 students from Class B to D.

If they pool up their personal points, they would easily exceed 20 million points.

It was even possible to reach 40 or even 60 million private points.

Of course, not everyone would agree to participate in that gamble.

Although I don’t know how the system had changed now, we were able to cash in these private points at graduation until recently.

Even if you were in Class D, as long as you had enough cash in hand after graduating, there would exist some students who didn’t care anymore.

If there really were people with money who met the conditions, it would be better for them to choose participation.

Anyway, if the class's victory couldn't be achieved, gambling with the points as a last resort wasn't a bad thing.

It would increase the number of students getting into Class A.

For the academic year that had the largest gap between Class A and the classes below, this was realistically the last chance to achieve that dream.

"Didn't that happen in your year?"

"It would be a bit deceptive if I say that this idea didn't arise. But it didn't happen. Because Class A and B were constantly competing, Class C and D didn't gain enough points."

I thought about the time I came into contact with the 3rd year Class Ds just after I enrolled, when they were in an awkward position in terms of points.

If a class lost continuously, it would get harder and harder to gain personal points. It wasn't good at all to spend several months with 0 personal points.

"If it's only to this extent, it won't have that much of an impact. However, if Nagumo's plans mean that even his own Class A will be affected by, his classmates will also be at risk."

This way, students who lacked strength in Class A had the risk of falling behind. This was the obvious risk.

In Class A, if only Nagumo was within the safe range, then the meritocracy wouldn't be supported by his own classmates.

All classes should be treated fairly, whether it was Class A or Class D.

"Although I don't know what he intends to do, it's a decision that requires courage."

"That bastard is bored with what it takes to win as it is now. That's probably the reason for all this. Joining the student council was probably just to kill some time."

Noone would have the right to express any dissatisfaction towards him and his ability which was the foundation for him gaining support.

“A class is a community with a shared destiny. I don’t think this system should be broken.”

“So you don’t agree with Nagumo’s approach.”

Although he did not nod in response, the elder Horikita accepted what I said just like that.

Although I understood what he wanted to say, neither side could be considered correct. However...

“I plan to observe what Nagumo wants to do. If he really plans to change the entire grade, no, the entire school into a meritocracy, I’ll have to witness it first before making any judgements.”

I decided to tell him about my future plans without hiding it.

“So that’s it, huh. You’re advancing to a higher level than me.”

“You flatter me.”

It just meant that I had no intention to stop Nagumo, as well as having no means to stop it.

It wouldn’t be so bad if I merely observed what Nagumo would do to this school.

After all, the elder Horikita’s efforts in defending against Nagumo’s attacks in his final year had already cut deep in his body.

“I’m not the person you think I am.”

“No, I’m sorry, but I don’t think so.”

Facing my modesty, the elder Horikita strongly rejected it.

“In any case, it seems like your evaluation of me won’t drop.”

“If my evaluation would drop, it would already have done so.”

Speaking of this, the elder Horikita hadn’t changed his evaluation of me for about a year now.

No matter what he knew and what he didn’t, his evaluation didn’t change.

“I can’t seem to understand. What part of my body, what essential factor of it that allowed me to gain your approval.”

Why did he think I was different from other students?

The elder Horikita had data, which was my joke-like score from my entrance exam, as well as the brief confrontation we had when I tried to intervene to save his sister.

In addition to those encounters, my running speed had been revealed to this man when I ran against him in the relay race.

But in reality, he didn’t know the true extent of my academics and athletics.

“I think that using my own perception and intuition, I can figure out the skill of my opponent to some extent.”

Rather than say this was specific, this was more of an abstract way of expressing it.

It was amazing that I could be judged to this extent through that method.

“Relying on what you call perception, what do I look like? I want to hear your answer, as a parting gift.”

Because this was interesting to me, I decided to ask him.

In fact, I wanted to find out how similar his evaluation of me was to my own self-evaluation.

The elder Horikita probably would answer honestly.

“Yes. In my eyes...”

After a pause, Horikita recalled what he thought of me during the previous year.

“You have greatly surpassed my prediction based on my experience in life so far. There are no flaws in your strategies. Aside from your strategic ingenuity, you are not someone I can beat in terms of physical strength. Of all the opponents I faced, you are that one person I don’t want to fight.”

Another exaggerated evaluation. If this were just his perceptual evaluation of me, then it would be truer.

“So you’re saying that you concede defeat to me?”

“That is a different matter. Even facing a perfect opponent, there are still chances to win.

I felt relieved after hearing the elder Horikita’s response.

“Not to mention that the students compete along with their classes. No matter how outstanding the individual is, there must be a limit.

“Yes. This is the exact reason I find it interesting.”

“Ayanokouji. What kind of environment did you grow up in? These abilities are certainly not inherently possessed. Even if you were educated thoroughly by your family, it’s not an easy task to reach that territory.”

“Didn’t you grow up in an unordinary family environment as well?

An elite capable of even being president of the student council should be able to understand how the climb upwards worked.

“No matter what it was, nothing would be given to you, just like that. There was also a period of time when I was distressed, because I was making no

progress. However, I've made unremitting efforts to overcome all of this. No matter if it's from childhood to now, or from now to the future. “

He stood on top of all of his accumulated efforts. That was what the elder Horikita was saying.

“Based on your theory, I should've put in more effort than how much you've put in.

“...Yes.”

To beat a hardworking person, more effort was needed.

Although this was not all, it was still an answer.

Horikita took out his phone and showed me the screen which displayed a phone number.

Then he switched the screen to show another number.

“Remember these two numbers. One is mine, and the other is Tachibana's. If you have any problems after you graduate, you can always talk to us. If you can't remember these numbers, you can save it now, but it has to be deleted later.”

Contact with people outside the school was prohibited. If I noted the number down carelessly, it would only hurt me.

I nodded slightly to indicate that there was no problem, and saved the 11-digit number in my brain.

Although it was impossible for me to imagine a day where those numbers were needed, I wouldn't lose anything just by memorizing them.

“I haven't asked you yet, where do you plan to go afterwards?”

Because he told me Tachibana's number, I now knew that they would keep in touch after graduation.

“About that-“

Horikita, who was about to speak, stopped after confirming the time on his phone.

“I’ll tell you about it after you graduate, it’s almost time.”

It was almost noon.

In other words, it was the appointed time to meet the younger Horikita.

However, Horikita was nowhere to be seen. Even if the elder Horikita’s expression was the same as usual, I felt a little lonely.

“I’ll contact her.”

I don’t think that that person would go against her feelings and not show up now.

If she hadn’t overslept, it is more realistic to think that she was involved in some sort of incident.

“No, that still isn’t necessary.”

Even if an incident did occur, the elder Horikita had already prepared in the case that she didn’t show up.

Although I understood that he did not hate his sister from the events that had happened up until now, but this was a bit...

“There’s no need to be so stubborn, there’s no harm if you sometimes be the one to initiate contact.”

“I’m afraid that temporarily showing emotion could hinder my sister’s growth. It’s fine if she was late because she was caught in some sort of accident, but if she decided that she would experience growth by not seeing me here, then that’s even better. If that’s the case, my behaviour here will only be an obstacle.

“Just by avoiding you, she’ll grow? Is this what you think your sister believes?”

“Suzune will decide on that.”

This was not something that an outsider could make thoughtless remarks about. The elder Horikita said that, allusively.

“I haven’t seen you indulge her at all.”

“I was just judging on what situation in which I should indulge her.”

I think that this was the right situation for him to do so.

A minute had passed after reaching noon.

I thought that he would immediately head towards the main gate, but he did not start walking.

Although it didn’t seem like he indulged her by doing so, this could be considered something like that.

“I also have something to confirm with you. I also want you to answer me, as a parting gift.

The elder Horikita looked at me and said that.

I nodded my head, going along with the very last time he was going to show this side of his.

“It’s fine if you can’t answer this fully.”

After this exchange happened, perhaps the elder Horikita would finally head towards the main entrance.

“Why do you hide your abilities?”

Although I wasn’t surprised, this really was a question that got straight to the point.

“I simply just don’t like attracting attention to myself.”

“Even if you truly want to conceal your true self, is this something you can stick by?”

“How do I say this, I haven’t thought of that.”

I wanted to enter this school and live a normal student’s life.

But having been asked this question, I had a bit of doubt creep up on me.

“I decided to live the life of a normal high school student that you can find anywhere. I had to solve some problems by myself to keep that life a reality.

“Do you plan to continue doing this in the future?”

“It’s hard to say. There’s been an increase in things that attracted my attention. I won’t have to get serious for most of these things, but it’s still more than before.”

To be honest, there were still many parts I wasn’t sure about, so I bluntly told him what I was feeling now.

Hearing that, what kind of answer would the elder Horikita have?

“What I accomplished at the school, and what I couldn’t. I’ve been thinking about those things recently.”

With that said, the elder Horikita looked in the direction of the school for a while.

“Have I completely shown my strength, did I still have room to grow, those kinds of things.”

In other words, he lived in almost completely opposite circumstances to mine.

It was for this reason that he climbed to the position of student council president.

“Do you really think that continuing like this will have any meaning in the future?”

“If you look at it from my perspective, wanting to live a comfortable life, I’d say that has meaning.”

“Maybe so. But don’t you want to leave something here while at this school? If that’s the case, then I think the question “Do you really think that continuing like this will have any meaning in the future?” is something you should think about carefully.

“Leave something behind... that’s something that only someone that stands out as much as you can do.”

I denied the possibility, but the elder Horikita did not agree with me.

“If you can’t imprint your legacy at the school itself, you just need to do it to the students. Let the student known as Ayanokouji Kiyotaka be carved into the minds of the students, and they will not forget your existence.”

Carve my existence into someone’s mind. I’ve never thought of doing such a thing.

“I’m very grateful to you for helping my sister to grow. You have hidden your great power, and throughout the year, I have come to fully understand that. You are not a man who would stop at just this level. And that’s why... don’t disappoint me.”

This was a strong piece of encouragement from the former president of the student council of the Advanced Nurturing highschool.

“If you are truly going to pursue yourself despite the restrictions, then in these three years, you will be an existence that will be remembered by others.”

“Becoming an unforgettable existence? It’s still possible for me to be expelled during the second and third years.”

“Even if you were involved in some number of incidents these three years and face the fate of dropping out, you will still remain in the memory of others. As long as there are students looking back at the three years and thinking that “The existence of Ayanokouji Kiyotaka is truly great,” I think it can already be considered a success.”

The elder Horikita said it once more, and I felt his words slowly sinking into my heart.

“I understand....yeah. I will think about this more carefully.”

That was the best answer I can give right now.

“That’s alright. The answer to this question is not something I have to reach, it is something you, Ayanokouji, have to figure out yourself.”

No matter if it was about issues of the student council led by Nagumo, the younger Horikita, or the school itself.

The final decision was mine.

This world was full of ingredients which would allow growth. Wherever it is, there are always reminders to improve yourself.

This was also the case with the elder Horikita. Even if I spent my school life silently, there would undoubtedly be something I left behind.

I wanted memories.

Random memories which could make me feel happy.

At the beginning, I was satisfied with what I was. So in the past year, I’ve tried my best to live a quiet life.

But this might not be the correct answer. There had to be a meaning for me to come to this school. And so because of this.

“For our final moments, I spoke about a lot of weird stuff. Sorry.”

“No, I think these are the most meaningful words an underclassman has spoken to me.”

You leaving, it made me feel a bit lonely.

I swallowed this sentence as soon as it reached my lips.

“Ahh... It seems like we’ve both seen a side of each other we hadn’t before.”

We both understood the distance between us, allowing us to talk to each other.

Moreover, some things can be understood even if they were not expressed in words.

“It’s almost time to go.”

The elder Horkita was probably saying that he didn’t think the younger Horikita would show up after 12:10.

He then reluctantly looked towards the school, in the direction of the first year’s dormitory.

The sister who should have arrived didn’t. Noone expected it to be like this.

Was that your answer? Horikita. I couldn’t help but ask that.

I admit that the relationship between those two siblings was indeed a bit different.

However, you had suffered for many years in order to break this relationship.

And now it was almost time for the final answer to be revealed.

I reached into my pocket and grabbed my phone. I'll use forceful methods if I had to, if it meant getting her here.

Even if it was just for a moment, even if it was just a glance, as long as this can serve as food for Horikita's psyche, then being forceful...no-it would only be counterproductive.

It might even create a rift between this relationship between siblings that had just begun to heal.

It didn't matter if I wanted the meeting to happen or not, in the end, it was based on the thoughts and feelings of those two people.

It wasn't something that an outsider should interfere with.

"I'm really sorry. My sister is still causing you trouble at the very end."

As if he saw through my feelings, the elder Horikita quietly apologized.

"It's not like I've lost anything from this."

As he turned around, the man who was at the forefront of the school for 3 years prepared to leave.

"I can say that these three years, I have continuously walked at the forefront of the school itself."

This was his conclusion. The elder Horikita's final words after reviewing his past 3 years.

"Halfway through, I've lost a lot of classmates. Other students in other classes have the same experiences."

The elder Horikita didn't show joy in graduating from Class A.

Even so, he was not pessimistic. Just a solemn reflection of past events.

"There were 24 dropouts before our graduation. There were 13 in our 3rd year alone."

I didn't know if that number was particularly large compared to previous years.

In Nagumo's 2nd year, there should be 17 dropouts in the winter semester.

"In your first year, only 3 have dropped out so far."

It wasn't difficult to imagine that as the school years passed, the situation would become more and more serious.

"Of course, students who cannot complete a task will be expelled."

"True. The students who get left behind are the ones with low-level abilities. However, sometimes, an excellent student gets left behind as well."

In order to protect someone, or being trapped by a more powerful opponent.

How an excellent student could get expelled wasn't hard to conceive.

"Now, I also have some doubts about how the school approaches this. But I'm still thankful towards the school."

Occasionally, fellow classmates would drop out unexpectedly, but the elder Horikita did not criticize the school's way of doing things.

"The students of this school are educated for the future of Japan. In a hundred people, not all of them will be able to adapt. The same is true for finding a university or finding a job in a company."

It was not only about passing or failing, but there could be various influences which decided whether a person was qualified.

"I've come to understand this concept. I can feel it from my skin, after leaving this place, I won't fail in any future selections due to any tactlessness or impulsiveness."

It seems like he had achieved this amount of growth. How many students in the same year have reached the same heights?

“Let’s call it a day here.”

The main entrance. Elder Horikita looked at the main entrance, which was a few meters in front of him. Then-for the last time, he looked back at me.

“Although this is a one-sided request, I’ll leave Suzune in your care.”

While saying this, elder Horikita stretched out his hands toward me.

“Can I shake your hand?”

“Sure.”

I shook the hand he held out.

Shaking hands was the act of gripping the other’s hand with my own hand.

The elder Horikita’s grip contained incredible power.

Afterwards, both hands naturally let go.

“Until we meet again, Ayanokouji.”

After leaving this farewell message for me, the elder Horikita headed towards the main entrance.

If he was going to leave now, then no one can do anything about it.

The shortest time would be 2 years until I could see the elder Horikita again, or if I took the path of dropping out.

But I will never see this man again.

“Brother——!”

A shout came from behind me.

As for whose voice it was, there was no doubt it was that person.

After hearing this voice, the elder Horikita stopped walking.

It seems at the very end, she was able to catch up.

Noon had passed, and the elder Horikita was a few steps away before leaving this place.

If she arrived even a minute late, she wouldn't have been able to see his face.

When elder Horikita turned around, he had a surprised expression which I've never seen before.

Was it his sister's arrival which surprised him?

This was, of course, a possibility.

Although that's what I thought, that didn't seem to be the case.

No, it should be said that's not the only reason.

I immediately found out the real reason the elder Horikita was surprised.

“You...”

Arriving after the appointed time, Horikita Suzune hurriedly stood to my side as she panted.

But right now, to Horikita Suzune, there was no difference between me and the background.

I was not in her field of vision.

She took a step towards her brother while catching her breath.

“I'm sorry, I'm late...!”

She apologized to her brother with her head down.

But why were you late?

That was the question everyone had on their mind.

“No-“

But this time, she did not need to answer that question.

Just once glance towards her would tell you the reason behind her lateness.

Confusion. No, pure amazement.

Because the Horikita I was looking at now was a lot different from the one I saw yesterday.

So that's what happened.

This was why right after she entered this school, the elder Horikita was able to immediately understand why she was unable to grow.

The elder Horikita stared blankly at the condition of Horikita.

I was the same.

I had fully understood on the day of her brother's farewell, Horikita came here, fully aware of her lateness.

The elder Horikita could never find fault with having such a sister.

“You've changed.”

The elder Horikita, who after seeing his sister felt relieved, said softly.

“I've...changed?”

“No-let me correct myself. You've returned back to your own self, Suzune.”

This wasn't a new beginning, but instead a return to one's roots.

“One year, No... many years have passed.”

As Horikita adjusted her breathing, she slowly answered her brother’s questions.

“What couldn’t I return to my past self earlier... I’ve always felt regret over that.”

With one step, Horikita closed the distance with her brother.

“What is the current you thinking about now?”

“What is it... honestly, I’d be lying if I didn’t say my heart was all over the place right now.”

Horikita’s face was full of perplexment as she stumbled over her words.

The elder Horikita looked at her gently while waiting for her to sort her words out.

“But, the only thing I can say for certain is this. The old me...always, always just followed your shadow, but I’m no longer that person anymore.”

Horikita Suzune had only thought about her brother’s affairs, and therefore had only lived for her brother so far.

It was all about learning more and getting more athletic to gain approval from her brother.

“Then I ask you this, to you who has finally stopped chasing after me. How will you live in the future?”

The brother raised this question.

Horikita got her breathing under control and chose her words carefully.

“I’ll no longer chase the backs of others, so I’ll have to find my own path.”

The Horikita now had just got rid of her confusion.

She had just become able to see her surroundings as they were.

Even so, she wouldn't just stop there.

“And then-“

Walk on her own path.

What seemed like a simple task here was actually extremely difficult.

But just by letting him see this, it was already the perfect farewell present for the elder Horikita.

However, Horikita didn't seem like she's going to be done with just that.

“After that, for my classmates, I'll walk ahead of them.”

Becoming a role model for the people around you, guiding them to success.

That was an important element to becoming a leader.

“And in order to find my own way, I will learn together with my companions at this school.”

When I met Horikita a year ago, I didn't expect her to grow to this extent.

A bit better than ordinary people, a little arrogant top student. We were just neighbours who sat next to each other.

For better or worse, it was her own personal strength that made that impression.

“That's it. You've finally... returned to the past. This is the past you that I remember, lurking in the corners of my memories.”

Only the elder Horikita had seen this before, unlike me.

He was someone that knew and believed in the potential of his sister more than anyone else.

The elder Horikita put down his luggage and walked towards his sister.

The emotional distance between them was finally realized, but they were about to be separated.

The siblings have reached the distance where if you'd just extend your hand, you could reach the other.

“Do you know the biggest reason I pushed you away?”

“...I don’t.”

Perhaps Horikita didn't know what her brother was thinking now.

She had just been freed from her chains known as the past.

It was like forcibly breaking open a locked treasure chest.

Meaning that she had not yet found the ‘key’ to the answer.

Why did the elder Horikita always refuse his sister?

Why did he push her away with such a severe expression?

“I've always considered the affairs concerning you to be very important.”

“!?”

As if telling her what that ‘key’ was, the elder Horikita gave her his final gift.

“And, when you were still a child, I sensed great potential in you. Although not yet mature, I saw an unpolished diamond. I was looking forward to seeing that rough stone getting polished, gaining a power surpassing me.”

The elder Horikita took the last step.

The distance already reached the point where you just needed to raise your arm to touch the other.

“However, you were trapped in an illusion. You decided that you were inferior to me, and gave up because you thought it was impossible to surpass me. And you chose to abandon the space for your own personal development. I just can’t forgive such a thing.”

She just wanted to pursue her brother’s shadow, and be on the same level as him.

That wasn’t a bad thing.

It could even be considered to be a grand goal.

But in other words, her goal is to be on the same level as her brother. Basically, that would be the endgame.

The sister who wanted to be on the same level as her brother, and the brother who wanted his sister to surpass him.

This was the reason for the huge rift between the siblings.

“You must become even stronger, and even kinder than everyone else.”

The brother hugged his sister gently.

As the elder brother, the Horikita that had done all he could while standing, hugged her tightly.

Horikita’s *short hair* fluttered in the wind.

“Brother——”

“You’re all good. I’m sure of that now.”

I can’t say anything aloud.

This has turned into a place where words were forbidden.

“There’s something that I’ve kept quiet about in the past few years, so I need to apologize to you.”

“Apologize?”

Not knowing what it was, Horikita asked, while still hugging her brother.

“So far, our relationship hasn’t been the best, and one of the reasons was because of me.”

“What, does that mean...?”

Horikita asked in a low voice.

“In the past, I said I liked your long hair. That was a lie that I told on purpose.”

“Eh? Is, is that so!?”

Horikita, who didn’t know about this, spoke in a surprised tone.

“Back then, you, who liked keeping your hair short, listened to my opinion, lost your character, and kept your hair long. I did that in order to confirm it.”

In other words, Horikita decided to keep her hair long in order to match her brother’s preferences.

So when they met again at this school, the elder Horikita immediately understood.

That Horikita Suzune hasn’t changed at all.

Facing the younger sister only chasing after her brother’s silhouette, the elder Horikita welcomed her with disappointment.

There was even not a need to confirm whether her academic or athletic ability was good enough.

“-Excuse me for lying.”

“...That was excessive, brother.”

“I won’t make any excuses.”





I suppose the elder Horikita intentionally did not reveal this lie up until now.

He sensed it, and so he firmly believed that one day, his sister would incur a change.

“I’ll forgive you for lying. Because that lie made me what I am now.”

Horikita also recognized this fact, so she laughed and forgave him.

The elder Horikita gently placed his hands on his sister’s shoulder, and looked straight at her face.

And Horikita spared no effort as she showed her smile to her brother.

After seeing that smiling face, the elder Horikita also let loose a smile, as if he were taking off a mask.

He wasn’t a person that never smiled.

But it’s also the first time I’ve seen him smile so tenderly.

This smile, I’ll never see it again.

Having one year.

If I could spend 1 more year on this same campus as him,

Then I would become even closer to the man named Horikita Manabu.

And I might even incur some change because of it.

This really was a pity.

“Suzune, 2 years later, I’ll be waiting for you outside the main entrance. Let me see you all grown up then.”

“Yeah. I will do my best...until the very end.”

The obstructions to Horikita’s growth have already been removed.

From now on, Horikita would turn towards the front and never look back.

“Ayanokouji, I look forward to when we meet again.”

The elder Horikita and I had the same feelings about that.

“Likewise.”

Despite knowing that would never happen, I strongly agreed with what the elder Horikita was feeling.

“It’s almost time.”

It was almost half-past twelve.

If you listened closely, you could hear the bus approaching.

The two slowly distanced themselves reluctantly.

“We’ll meet later.”

The elder Horikita crossed the main entrance, leaving that as his last words.

And so a man walked into the distance.

Horikita stared straight at his back, constantly watching, cherishing every last moment.

This scene was as if Horikita Manabu and his sister was leaving me a roads sign.

Part 1

Even though the elder Horikita had disappeared from our sight, we still looked at that direction for some time.

But we couldn't just stay immersed within this downhearted atmosphere.

So I used my words to get rid of the resolute unbudging state of Horikita.

“So you’re alone now.”

“...Yeah.”

Although it wasn’t the last time they’ll see each other, for the next 2 years, she won’t be able to hear his voice, let alone see his figure.

But Horikita’s face tightened, and a severe expression appeared.

“Thank you, Ayanokouji-san... you’ve really helped me a lot today.”

“Really? I feel like I’m just getting in the way of you two.”

“That’s not the case. If you haven’t talked with my brother, I wouldn’t have been able to catch up. Thank you very much.”

Horikita expressed her gratitude to me who really shouldn’t have been here.

But her line of sight didn’t reach me, and she looked away.

“And this was the day my brother embarked on his journey. It would have been sad if no one but me came to see him off...”

Although this was her brother’s decision, it would indeed feel a bit lonely.

There should have been more people seeing him off originally.

The fact he didn’t do that must be because he was trying to make it easier for his sister.

In order to make it easier for Horikita to come and talk to him, he decided to send away the other people.

This was probably all part of the elder Horikita's calculations.

"Your brother and I have a sort of relationship together, so I just wanted to talk to him again."

Although I wasn't too close to him at the start, I now wanted more opportunities to talk with him more, but it's too late for that now.

The two of us walked back to the dormitory.

"About your hair, you really decided to cut it, huh."

Considering how she was acting normal yesterday, as well as her lateness today, it's not hard to believe that she suddenly resolutely decided to cut her hair this morning. It must've been a last-minute choice.

"I've always liked this hairstyle. But it feels a little weird."

Even so, if she just randomly cut it, ruining the wonderful stage her brother prepared for her was not a good thing.

If you wanted to dress up nicely to see him off, there was a risk of arriving late.

But in the end, the gamble paid off.

"But, wouldn't it be better to have just talked to me first? If you were afraid of not seeing your brother, you could've used me to stall and increase the chances of seeing him."

As long as I knew that she would come, I would definitely help.

If it meant talking more to stall the time...

"Would you help me if I asked for your assistance?"

“Today, no matter what, I’ll help you.”

“I wasn’t sure… is what I’d like to say, but I was planning to ask for your help back then.”

Horikita replied in this way, but when I looked at my cell phone, there was no record of anything.

“Because I was too anxious back then, I left my phone in the dormitory before leaving to cut my hair, but when I finally realized I didn’t have it on me, my hair was already being cut. Really! My thought process is too slow.”

In other words, she felt helpless at that time. Rather than returning to the dormitory to retrieve her phone, she decided to run straight to the main entrance.

“Way too stupid.”

Horikita said as she laughed at herself.

“It also tells me that the firm resolution you had this morning was extremely important to you, Horikita.”

It was a bit funny, imagining what Horikita looked like as she rushed into the shop right after they opened.

But it was because Horikita always acted according to plan, it was understandable that making simple mistakes like that would shake her up.

“Cutting my hair was a way to differentiate myself.”

“What your brother liked, did you think about it then?”

“Of course. I wanted to go back to becoming the old me, and it coincided with wanting to catch up to my brother, that’s all. In another sense, it was the best way to convey my feelings.”

So this strategy was just all a coincidence.

Because I was used to looking at her long hair for a year now, I had strong feelings about this change.

“How does it feel, returning to yourself after all these years?”

“Even if you asked me that, I have no idea how to express it. Sure, I liked this short hair when I was a kid, but I’ve been used to having long hair for so long. My feelings now are quite complex, to tell the truth.”

The short hair that she liked, and the long hair that she’d come to accept.

The past and the present self. No matter which, they were still both Horikita Suzune.

“Now I feel, no matter which version of myself, I can accept it.”

As she said that, Horikita touched her short hair with her fingertips.

“So I want to think about this from the start. The me right now should have something I haven’t seen before. For the next two years, should I leave it to grow, or should I not? If I do leave it to grow, then it’ll take around 2 years for it to grow to the length that it was before...just in time for when we graduate.”

Both her past and present self have been accepted by Horikita.

“What I can understand now, is that it has nothing to do with how long my hair is, as I’m already able to straightforwardly face my brother already.”

I looked forward to how this short-haired Horikita would develop in the future.

In Horikita Manabu’s final moments at the school, he left his sister with many assets. Before, I’d always thought that I needed to help Horikita for her to grow, but it seems like I’ve judged wrong at the end.

“Are you still feeling unwell?”

To be honest, an hour-no, even if you gave me a day, I wouldn't be able to say what I wanted. There was so much I wanted to say these past years, that I wanted to say, but I couldn't, that it could be piled up as high as a mountain.

"There... there's no helping that.

Horikita nodded, accepting that.

"Besides, the wall obstructing my brother and I had already been removed. I just need to complete these next two years, and then I can talk to him as much as I want, right?"

"That's true. After all, he said he'll be waiting for you when you graduate."

After graduation, she should be free to get into touch with the outside world.

And by then, she would be able to meet her brother again, and speak without any limits.

"It's been a rewarding day today, but let's not be too greedy, or it might come to bite us."

Her attitude changed too quickly.

That's right, she seemed to have switched over again on the surface.

And in her mind right now, she was probably doing everything she could to pretend to be calm, wanting to switch over to that state.

But switching attitudes just like that wasn't that simple.

"But- it's fine if it's just this."

Horikita, who stopped and did not turn around, said this while standing still.

Her face wasn't facing me.

No, it was more accurate to say that she couldn't face me.

“What is it?”

Although I understood within, I pretended to ask anyway.

If it was the usual calm and collected Horikita, she would have noticed that I was playing dumb.

But, today's Horikita couldn't see through my facade.

“I... I want to walk around a bit before going back.”

She had an expression that basically said she secretly wanted me to go back to myself without her first.

“Walk around?”

I asked her where she wanted to go, but she couldn't answer.

“No, I want to go, take a walk or something.”

There was a slight trembling as she vaguely answered.

“Should I come with you?”

“There's no need.”

As she spoke those vague words, Horikita stepped away from me.

Not towards the Keyaki mall, or the convenience store.

She was trying to find a place where she could be alone.

If she walked to the dormitory with me, it would probably be too late.

I caught up with Horikita in this state.

“Why... are you following me?”

Horikita didn't look back as she whispered that at me.

"Yeah, I wonder why."

"If there's no reason, don't follow me."

Despite the rejection from her, I wasn't planning on going back.

Because during this one year, she's done some undesirable things to me many times.

"Then let me explain why. It's because I wanted to tease you."

"...What are you saying, I don't understand."

"Oh, so let me tell you then."

"You really don't need to."

"No, I insist."

I opened my mouth slowly, in order to break that resolute defence of hers.

"When you're sad, you shouldn't suppress those feelings. Wouldn't it be better to just cry?"

I only said that one sentence.

"...You, didn't you hear what I said?"

"I heard. Aren't you happy you were able to reconcile with your brother?"

"Yes. That's why I'm satisfied. Where, where can you see any sadness in me?"

"There's no way you're satisfied. It's true that you finally can talk to each other after 2 years, but humans aren't creatures that can be so easily satisfied.

The girl who dreamed of that day had no choice but to endure 2 more years.

Although it wasn't like she wouldn't have any happy feelings, this couldn't be just it.

"I'm... satisfied. I'm satisfied."

"If that's the case, would you mind turning this way to face me?"

Horikita still had her back to me.

She didn't listen to my request, and shook her head from left to right.

"I refuse. Why must I do such a thing?"

"Yeah. I wonder why."

Faced with Horikita who was walking fast and trying to escape, I said that to her from behind.

"It doesn't matter if you want to cry."

After 2 years she reunited with her brother, only to be rejected.

Fighting alone with a high fever on an uninhabited island.

Becoming the object of hatred because of the Class Vote.

But even at those times, Horikita did not cry.

"I, I..."

She stopped walking forward.

After working so, so hard, she finally was able to communicate her feelings with her brother.

If tomorrow came, then they would certainly return to talking and laughing with each other.

However, the elder Horikita had already passed through this gate, starting a new journey.

The next meeting they'll have would be in 2 years.

“Don’t... Don’t want...”

Horikita’s voice started to tremble slowly.

During these 2 long years, Horiikta would have no choice than to fight, here at this very school.

“But, isn’t there no other way...!”

Within the unyielding Horikita’s eyes, something that was held back for so long finally flowed out

Now, she thought about her brother that had just left.

“But——!”

“I finally...finally realized the errors of my ways...!”

Horikita collapsed, and fell to her knees.

Both hands covered her face, trying to hold back the tears that kept flowing out.

“Yet I’ve separated from my brother again...!”

If it was possible, Horikita would definitely want to walk out of that entrance together with her brother.

The sister that solemnly saw her brother off silently.

“Yeah. You’ll be alone now.”

“Alone...Alone...!”



The loudly weeping girl was like a child.

Letting the tears flow out, but even so, Horikita wanted to endure.

If it weren't for the school, Horikita would follow her brother to the ends of the earth.

They could see each other, and talk to each other whenever they wanted.

"Now, you just need to cry as much as you want. After that, you'll need to show your brother in the future how much you've grown in. From now on, nothing is restricting your growth."

There was no need to worry. There were still 2 years left, and during then, Horikita will definitely grow tremendously.

Her brother had to be looking forward to it.

"So that's it....Manabu."

My voice, which could no longer reach him, was sucked into the blue sky which ushered in the spring.

Part 2

Shortly after pouring out her feelings, Horikita stopped crying.

However, because she had not yet recovered her strength, she was still sitting on the ground. I stood by her, quietly waiting for time to pass.

It was extremely fortunate that there was no one nearby, so no one else witnessed this scene.

That's great."

"What's great about that. You seeing me like this, it's extremely humiliating to me..."

Originally, I planned on comforting her a little, but that wouldn't be so simple.

"Well, maybe so."

That's why she wanted to stay alone before. If I wasn't here, then nobody would see her crying.

"Since you've already seen it, I'll just face forward."

"Face forward?"

"...You seeing me like this is a great thing. That's what I've decided."

Horikita felt relieved from the bottom of her heart and let out a sigh. This was not an expression that looked like she wanted other students to see it unnecessarily.

"So I'm going to share this scene with Keisei and the others then."

I took out my phone and pointed my camera at her.

"Do you want me to kill you?"

After seeing the bright red eyes that were glaring at me, I immediately put my phone away.

“I’m just kidding.”

“Seeing that you made such a boring joke, I seem to need to teach you what TPO is.”

TL note: TPO states for “time, place, occasion.”

Seeing how she can still talk this much, there shouldn’t be a problem now.

“...This feels like, last year, a similar situation occurred.”

“Maybe it did.”

Although the location was different, I remembered a certain night when we had a conversation between the two of us. Horikita, who had just reunited with her brother, had sunk into a state of loss. Today’s situation was clearly the opposite, but there was an unexplainable sense of Deja Vu.

“I wonder why I always make blunders when I’m with you. I even sit next to you.”

She was saying that since the beginning of school, we had some sort of incredible predetermined relationship. It seems like no matter if that was the case, Horikita wasn’t too happy with it.

“Why not let me see you when you make blunders?”

Horikita lamented the unfairness of her fate.

“A blunder. Didn’t you see it already? I lost against Sakayanagi in our chess match.”

“That’s not a blunder, that’s just simple defeat.”.

It seemed like this wasn’t acceptable to her.

“Well, you should look forward to it after we become 2nd-year students.”

“It seems like that’s the only choice. I’ll carefully add it to my list of events I’m looking forward to in the future.”

It seemed that no matter what, she wanted to get revenge on me for seeing her cry today. But even so, it was still extremely shocking, thinking about how Horikita cut her hair short.

“If they saw you, everyone would be surprised.”

There would be students who wanted to slowly change their image, but they wouldn’t go as far as doing this.

“They can be as surprised as they want, I’m fine with it.”

Horikita said the opinions of other people didn’t matter, and there was no need to pay attention to it. Sudo will probably immediately be the first to talk about this. There were only a few days of the spring break left, and rumours would probably spread during this time... No, if there were witnesses already, it may have already spread.

“Talking about this might be a bit eh, but do you still remember the battle we decided on yesterday?”

“Of course.”

“About my request for you if I win, I’ve thought about it.”

“Hey... I thought you would bring this up later. To try to attack me mentally.”

“No, I didn’t think about it too much, I simply just hadn’t thought about it before.”

Horikita urged me to quickly tell her what I wanted, even though she was a little suspicious about it.

“If I win, you will join the student council.”

“... We’ve talked about this matter before.”

Previously, I had already asked Horikita if she was interested in joining the student council. Even though I had called the elder Horikita during then, he allowed me to make my own decisions. But in the end, she ended up refusing.

“Mhm. Will you accept my request?”

“Although I’m not interested in joining the student council....Fine. As long as I win, there’ll be no problem.”

Horikita said that if she won there would be no problems, and agreed on it.

“But I won’t guarantee that I’ll be allowed to join the student council, okay?”

“Don’t worry. Nagumo is the type to welcome anyone in.”

He was very different from Horikita Manabu, who rejected the overwhelming majority of applicants. In addition, since Suzune was Manabu’s sister, there is no way Nagumo would flat out refuse.

“Can you tell me why you want me to join the Student Council.”

“That’s a secret. I’ll wait until you lose.”

“This is making me uncomfortable, would it even matter if you told me now?”

“You’re thinking about what will happen when you lose again?”

“...Of course not. Because I’ll definitely win, I just wanted to ask in advance. And besides, you won’t tell me because you know you’ll lose.”

Deciding on the outcome of the battle, I didn’t tell the significance behind my reasoning.

“Your brother has been concerned about the matter of Nagumo. That’s why I’m doing it.”

“So you’re saying you want me to monitor the student council president?”

“Exactly.”

“So brother requested you to do this.”

Horikita looked at me with a bit of discontent.

“Because his relationship with you back then wasn’t so good, so he was forced to request it from me.”

If their relationship was good, he would have told Horikita this from the beginning.

“Don’t act modest. My brother paid the most attention to you out of anyone in this school. If it weren’t for that, he wouldn’t have called you here today when he set off on his new journey. Really... why is it always you?”

Horikita stood up slowly, complaining about this.

“I better not think about this. I’ll try to think about something else.”

If she didn’t do that, her body would be overwhelmed, so Horikita cast it to the corners of her mind.

“Horikita, there’s one last thing I wanted to confirm with you.”

“What else do you want, don’t tell me you’re going to say something strange again?”

“It’s about Kushida. Let me briefly explain my thoughts and the current situation.”

Hearing this kind of statement she didn’t know anything about, Horikita frowned, her face flabbergasted, eyebrows knit.

“Current situation?”

In order to prevent Kushida from going out of control, I signed a contract with her. The contents of the contract said that I had to give her half of the personal points I received each month to protect myself from her. That way, I’ll be able to remove myself as one of her targets.”

“Are...you stupid? Recklessly signing such a contract?”

“I did it to gain her trust.”

“Even so, this is way too stupid, half of your points every month is way too much.”

“Because I wouldn’t be able to change Kushida’s feelings if I hadn’t done so. That being said, because you exposed her in public, the trust is gone.”

Rather than say she was dissatisfied with me, she’d probably reentered a state of suspicion again.

“Really... I’m even starting to doubt whether you’re actually powerful or not.”

Although I understood she was in no mood to speak, this topic wasn’t over yet.

“And so, why did you tell me this?”

“Because I believe that signing this contract will not affect me in the future.”

“So repeatedly giving away half your points won’t affect you?”

“Because if Kushida drops out of school, the risk would be reduced to 0.”

Hearing what I just said, Horikita’s hand froze. Then she looked at me, her eyes still slightly red.

“Just then, you just calmly said something extremely serious. Is that a joke?”

“I was planning to get Kushida expelled before. No, even now, I think it’d be best for her to be expelled.”

“You’re not...joking?”

“Yeah. This summer, I was thinking I would eliminate Kushida.”

In reality, it wasn’t like there were no opportunities to get rid of her.

“But——Since you told me about it, that means that the situation has changed, right?”

“Mhm, I wanted to leave the decision to you.”

I hadn’t decided yet, and instead left the decision to Horikita. That’s why I told her about it now.

“Are you not clear with this. I don’t plan to expel Kushida. Actually, I don’t plan to expel any classmate that negligently.”

It seems that this ideal of hers was getting increasingly set in stone.

“But I don’t intend to have naive thoughts like Hirata-kun does. There are indeed classmates that stand on the dividing line of being sacrificed. Of course, future contributions might allow for these people to be replaced by someone else.”

In other words, she would make the decision on who will get expelled if something like the Class Vote happened again.

“What if Kushida contributed the least?”

“Then, of course, she will be the candidate for being expelled.”

It seems that she wasn’t lying.

“But the possibility of her falling to the bottom of the class is very low.”

“I know that. Because from what can be seen, Kushida is contributing a lot.”

She was capable academically and physically, and she also stood in the position as a necessary figure in the class. Although she took a certain amount of damage after Yamauchi’s dropout, the effect was not fatal on her.

“I believe that I can leave this to you, that’s why I told you about this. However, as you grow and become the core of our class, Kushida will become a troublesome existence.”

Knowing about the past Kushida, I couldn’t just erase it from my memory.

“So you want to get rid of her in advance?”

“Yeah, that’s what I want. After all, she won’t be naive enough to cooperate just because by simply persuading her to.

“I can’t deny that as well. I’ve already understood that half-heartedly trying to persuade and talk to her is meaningless..”

Knowing that, she still intended to accept Kushida? Before, I would think that she was being naive, but not anymore.

“In that case, then I have nothing more to say.”

“You!... Were you planning to set Kushida up during the Class Vote?”

“That would only make a hash of things. Although she assisted Yamauchi, our classmates still trusted her a lot.”

“That, that is true. There’s no indication that you’re going to move as well...but since you’ve told me, it’s safe to say that I have total control over the matter of Kushida, right?”

“Mhm. I promise to not do anything.”

I'll have to leave it to Horikita to decide what choices should be made in the future.

"The reason for you telling me this, is it because you've already overcome that obstacle?"

"Unfortunately, I'm not that optimistic. I'm still in the process of figuring out how to get rid of Kushida."

"Yes, but why?"

After being asked by Horikita, I had no choice but to consider the reasons.

"Haven't thought about it?"

"Yeah... What I'm doing now is not efficient."

If the future was taken into consideration, silently expelling Kushida would definitely be the correct decision. However, I didn't do it. Instead, I left the decision to Horikita. The reason for this was...

"I want to see how you're going to overcome that obstacle....I guess."

I wasn't confident with the answer I racked my brain to produce, but there was no other reason.

"Maybe."

"I thought so. Being sceptical of what you say seems to be better."

Horikita, who had fully recovered, took a step forward.

"I'm heading back, how about you?"

"I want to stay here for a while."

Horikita simply said goodbye and went in the direction of the dormitory. Perhaps she'll remember what happened today and cry during the middle of the night. But for the time being, this wouldn't be a problem.

I thought about yesterday's conversation with Ichinose, the existence of Sakayanagi, and the growth of Ryuen and Horikita.

I looked forward to it, a confrontation between the four classes.

After another year passed, how would it change?

There was a large number of things that could make them grow.

The words left to me by Horikita Manabu still remained in my heart.

Becoming a student remembered by other students.

“What a terrible parting gift...”

The things I could do to remain in the other students' memories. That would be to assist other students, and allow them to grow.

Then let these students who had grown compete against each other, and aim towards a higher position as the goal.

As I imagined myself in a scene standing in that position... that's right, you can say it would make my heart beat faster.

I've always felt that this was interesting.

Involuntarily analysing the strength of other classes and having it pop up in my mind.

The results that could be seen after 1 year. Regardless of which class, they were all seeking growth. The weakness of the strong. it created feelings of excitement within me. But on the other hand, I felt my heart rapidly cooling down.

“What I seek is to live peacefully day by day...that was originally the case.”

Today was the first time I noticed there was a filter around/installed in my heart/mind. The existence known as my heart had indeed grown beyond

expectations during the past year. No, it's still growing now.

I have to confirm it myself. I asked myself. But it doesn't work. As if my own convictions didn't connect with myself.

My own superficiality was being shredded to pieces and coming off, or was that all?

I can't help but sense a black substance, something similar to unease.

Will I——

Will I still be at this school the same time next year?——

The pitch black darkness I couldn't quite describe——Wrapped around me

Chapter 5: Matsushita's Suspicions

Intro

On April 3rd, as the spring break was coming to an end, I, Chiaki Matsushita, decided on something.

“Sure enough, this interests me.”

Starting from the end of year exam up to now, this feeling had been stuck in my heart.

That was caused by the existence of a classmate named Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

Recently, I started to pay close attention to him. Still, if I told anyone else about it, they would probably say it was love, or a crush or something.

This was definitely not the case.

I could declare right here that it was definitely not love or something similar.

Instead, I started to be vigilant towards Ayanokouji-kun.

If I said that to any of my classmates, they'd probably tilt their heads in confusion.

But I'm already in the process of using my own method to obtain the answer.

To let you understand what I was feeling, first, I'll need to introduce myself and talk about what kind of person I am.

I was born in a moderately wealthy family, and my parents were very kind to me and brought me up in an environment with no restrictions on my freedom.

They would buy whatever I desired, and in return, I also achieved outstanding results in school and tuition classes.

We established an excellent relationship with each other, as I respected their excellence, and they respected mine.

Moreover, I was blessed with an attractive appearance, although me saying that isn't too good.

If someone else knew about all this, they'd probably be envious.

Growing up, experiencing various romantic relationships, and eventually marrying a financially capable man.

Although my life might not be the best, it would be considered a very lucky one.

Also, I had many outlooks for my future life.

Although I had considered various options, I reckoned working as a flight attendant at an international airline or in a major company wouldn't be so bad.

However, since I managed to enter this school, I had to aim higher.

Studying abroad in a prestigious university, then working at an embassy, and then in the UN...I could gradually see that happening.

My life was going smoothly, and there was already a paved road ahead for a life without failure.

However, my first miscalculation was after I entered this school. Only if I graduated from Class A would I be able to have my desired future higher education and employment opportunities.

In other words, graduating from Class B or below would have no value.

Of course, I was pretty confident in my own abilities to secure the path towards my desired future.

But... graduating from Class B or below would prove to be an obstacle.

And it would be very likely that I would be labelled as “a student who has failed to graduate from Class A”, a label which would be a headache to deal with.

The large difference between the advantages and disadvantages of its impact in the future was a negative for me, who sought stability.

The next miscalculation was not being assigned to Class A. Instead, I’ve been assigned to Class D. This meant that I carried a very heavy disadvantage with me.

I wasn’t very worried when I first entered the school. However, it was that negligence which led to my downfall.

Within a month, our class points got depleted, and we immediately sank to the bottom of the rankings.

“Thinking about this calmly... there was still a chance back then...?”

Yes. Although we were initially placed in Class D, the starting point was the same for all classes.

If we had understood the situation during the first month, then we should’ve been able to rise to the upper classes.

Although it may be a terrible start, after one year, the class points have also increased.

There was a time where we even reached Class C. It was still possible to aim for the upper classes...

“No, that’s impossible.”

Even though I'd realized it from the beginning, the difference in base ability between the classes was even larger than I'd imagined. Sooner or later, the gap would inevitably widen.

It just so happened this year went so well. The gap in the abilities of my class compared to other classes was too large. If that fact didn't change, the chances of reaching Class A were very close to 0.

Although I didn't want to keep repeating this, I was confident that I was one of the top students in this grade.

If we looked at it from the bigger picture, I should be within the top 10% of the year. Despite that, I didn't make a name for myself in Class D. Instead, I was somewhere near the middle of the hierarchy, only because I decided to hide my strength.

Of course, I wouldn't hold the class back when it was important, but I didn't like to stand out too much. In addition, my friend group consisted of people with considerably low abilities.

Half of the students in Class D belonged to the bottom 10~20% of this academic year.

If I carelessly showed my true abilities in that environment, others might start to feel jealous. I might also be excessively relied on, which would lead to all kinds of annoyances. This was something I wanted to avoid.

Moreover, even if I suddenly went all out for the class, our situation wouldn't change by much. For better or worse, I was just an excellent student, but not a genius.

Besides, I wasn't the type to act like someone who would take the initiative in things.

Only that...

Although I wasn't expecting to reap what I didn't sow, I still really wanted to graduate from Class A.

If that was possible, I wanted to follow an easy route which led to a stable future.

In order to accomplish that, I needed to make all the students of Class D work twice as hard...

Looking back at the past year, I already reckoned it would be impossible, and half given up.

Indeed, there were some talented students in my class.

Like Horikita-san, Hirata-kun, and Kushida-san. There were also smart students like Yukimura-kun and Mii-chan.

But this was not enough. In fact, most of the students were holding us back. If you added it up, our class would still be in a negative state.

if there were just 2 or 3 more students on a similar level to the ones I mentioned earlier...how frustrating!

Yes——That was correct.

I was tormented by that thought until Ayanokouji-kun appeared right in front of my eyes.

Although this was just a one-sided conjecture, I suspected that Ayanokouji-kun might be the same type of person as me.

I've always felt, from the beginning that he just wanted a life that belonged to himself, which was the reason he entered this school.

Even compared to me, he did not have as much of a desire for success, and he didn't care for the categorizations of Class A or Class D.

But despite that, he held great power.

If my guess was right...

Including me, Class D would have 2 more cards to play.

If that's the case, depending on how active we were, it would determine whether if it was possible to aim for the upper classes.

Recently, these thoughts have been circling around my mind.

Why did I think he was that type of person?

Rather than say it was based on evidence, there were some things about him which stuck out.

Sometimes, Karuizawa-san would try to catch Ayanokouji-kun's gaze, as well as there being a slight distance between them.

At first, I thought I was overthinking it, but right after, she suddenly broke up with Hirata-kun, which confirmed my suspicions.

She was attracted to Ayanokouji-kun.

Karuizawa-san, who thought dating a good man was a sign of high status, chose Ayanokouji-kun.

Why? Was it because he was handsome? No, I don't think it's that simple.

If that was the case, it would've been more convenient for Karuizawa-san to maintain her relationship with Hirata-kun, who was more popular.

So—— was it because Ayanokouji-kun had enough *strength* to make up for his lack of popularity?

That was the conclusion I reached.

If that's the case, various things would astonishingly start to fall into place.

Ayanokouji-kun had a sort of relationship with the class leader Horikita-san, as well as one with Hirata-san. There was no doubt that both students thought highly of him. In addition to that, he also seemed to be close to Ichinose-san.

And previously, during the sports festival, there was his intense race against the student council president Horikita, now that I think of it, it was indeed strange.

In addition to that, Sakayanagi-san organized the entirety of Class A in order to give him protection points.

We thought he was randomly selected for Yamauchi-kun to be expelled, but after that when he took on the role of the commander tower and participated in the competition like that, calling it a coincidence to explain it would be way too lazy.

With so many of these pieces connected, the mysterious existence of Ayanokouji-kun should have been understood by everyone.

However, most students were not aware of this.

But that's understandable because he basically never showed his true power in public. Although being able to run fast is an outstanding ability, with just this ability alone, only in primary school would he be able to climb up the hierarchy of the class.

For high school students...No, as you moved towards adulthood, communication skills would become more and more important.

Most students who held a high status often had both outstanding abilities and communication skills.

Lacking one of those skills would change completely change the impression you made on others.

He was just a student who ran really fast but had a weak presence. That's the impression that many people had of Ayanokouji-kun.

If he also had good social skills, Ayanokouji-kun would be in a relatively higher position in the class.

Although it depended on his personality, he could've been, along with Hirata-san, one of the twin jewels of the class.

But this was nothing more than a hypothetical situation, or rather, complete nonsense.

It was like saying that if Sudo-kun is smart, or easy to get along with, or if Yukimura-kun had high athletic ability, those were things that could only happen in another dimension.

The highest priority for our class was “scholastic ability”, followed by “physical ability.”

It was very likely that Ayanokouji-kun met both of these requirements.

Moreover, Ayanokouji-kun’s abilities in those two categories might have even surpassed Hirata-kun’s, a buried treasure waiting to be dug out.

Of course, this thought was based a little on what I wanted him to be.

If he really was like that, then he would become a significant force which would be able to improve the class.

In reality, even if he was on the same level as me, I wouldn’t complain.

The reason I became attentive of Ayanokouji-kun was because of his influence over the end of year exam.

There was a question I wasn’t able to solve during the mental arithmetic event, but Ayanokouji-kun answered it correctly.

This was one of the decisive hits which I’ve received that gave me confidence in this.

I want to understand the mystery behind his strength.

And if his strength is true — there’s no reason not to make use of it.

Both his scholastic ability and physical ability were similar to mine, I was sure about that point.

Judging how he had been living behind the scenes for a year, he may not be persuaded by ordinary methods.

However, I had confidence in my ability to assess others, and my ability in psychological warfare. Because of this, I had the upper hand.

Make him think that I wanted to get in touch with him due to curiosity, draw out his true nature, and then make him cooperate.

And it will act as a signal to our counterattack next year.

“... Just kidding.”

The thought of rising to Class A was appealing. But the reason I’m acting now wasn’t only because of that. Boredom was a factor as well.

I wasn’t not just looking for stability, following along the tracks of life, I wanted to experience the thrill of life as well. I want to pursue this mysterious factor which other students did not have. This was the main reason I want to establish contact with Ayanokouji-kun.

I changed my outfit, as I was meeting up with my friends at Keyaki mall today.

These days, I would focus on the disorderly crowd, in search of Ayanokouji-kun’s figure.

However, the possibility of an accidental encounter with him on school grounds was considerably low.

I didn’t see him at all during the first half of this spring break, a waste of time.

I wanted to get clues.

Curiosity and desire drove my gaze through these days without my permission.

Part 1

“Matsushita-san! Here~”

“Morning~”

11 o’clock

I met with Shinohara-san and Sato-san, the usual group.

During the spring break, we idly met up every day, to chat happily about various innocent topics.

Although I didn’t hate this, I did feel a little bored. I’ve been acting as a good student for the past year already, and I was seeking excitement.

As a result, I decided to bring up a more interesting topic with them.

“Shinohara-san, have you made any progress with Ike-kun?”

I intended to get rid of this boredom by poking her a little.

“Wait, ehhh!? Nonono, with him!?”

Shinohara-san hurriedly denied it, but this couldn’t conceal that she was shaken.

Sato’s gaze had a surprised “you really want to start this topic?” expression, mixed with a bit of excitement, was also very interesting.

It was evident that Shinohara-san and Ike-kun had gotten closer in the past few months, as rumours like this had already spread.

Although they tried to hide it, the school was a tiny place.

If a couple went on a date, they would be easily seen by others.

“I just thought that it was about time you told us, right?”

“I, I told you that it was impossible... Look, it’s Ike we’re talking about-? He’s the model for a typical loser!”

The words Shinohara-san used when denying this were indeed true. Just by looking at his attributes, he belonged in the lower ranks.

He was short, struggled academically, and he lacked communication skills. From my point of view, he was a person with an endless number of flaws. However, love couldn’t be measured from those factors.

There was always a possibility that a person would be attracted to a useless man, it was like unexpectedly finding yourself in the middle of a traffic accident.

And considering the status of Shinohara-san in the class, they might even be suitable for each other, and they’re not quite as different as she said.

“This isn’t so good, you like him, but he knows nothing about this.”

Sato-san’s eyes brightened at the fact we were talking about love, smiling towards Shinohara-san.

“Like I said, It’s not like that.”

“There’s no need to deny it, I just wanted to hear your true thoughts on this, right?”

Facing Shinohara, who wasn’t willing to admit it, I then used Sato-san to egg her on.

“Yeah, I’m also super interested! Tell us, tell us!!”

At times like this, it was convenient to get Satou-san to do what I wanted just by giving her simple hints. She wasn’t the type of person to think deeply. Needless to say, this had a negative effect on her academic ability.

Although it was a very harsh evaluation, I didn’t necessarily hate her.

Both Shinohara-san and Sato-san were close friends, and they were indispensable girl friends.

If they ever felt troubled, I would help them out and listen to them.

Of course, if they had the same ability to match me, then it would be even better.

Shinohara-san, who was completely unaware of what I was thinking, started to talk about her relationship with Ike-kun.

“Recently, I’ve always been arguing with him about stupid things. So honestly, there really isn’t much progress.”

Shinohara-san shook her head, sighing.

However, she never said that there was absolutely no development.

“After all, you both have personalities that aren’t so straightforward——If the same thing were to happen again, there’s going to be a change.”

Although they were a good match, there was always conflict between them regarding weird things.

I feel that as long as they turned past that, the relationship between the both of them would immediately be better.

“Enough about me, what about you, Matsushita-san? Do you like anyone?”

“Me?”

Shinohara-san asked such a question, just as I expected.

It would be more accurate to say that I led her to ask me this.

“You told us before that if you were to date anyone, it would be a senior.”

Looking as though having just remembered something, Sato-san jumped in on Shinohara-san’s question. No matter who was the subject of the

conversation, as long as it was about relationships, it would be welcome. Girls were like that.

“Yeah. However——If he meets a certain condition, it’s fine even if he isn’t a senior.

Controlling what both of them would be thinking, and slowly leading the conversation into the direction I wanted. However, it’s not as hard as it might look. This happens commonly in everyday life. It was just about whether we realized it or not.

“Ohh——, so you’ve changed your mind?”

Sato-san, obviously wouldn’t let go of this topic, as it was her first time hearing about it.

“My standards haven’t lowered or anything. Both his appearance and personality should be first-class. And... his family background as well. I also want his parents to have received a high level of education and accomplishment.”

No matter how great their child’s achievements are, as long as their parents failed to live up to it, then they didn’t meet my standards.

“Someone who has a good family background... could it be someone like Koenji-kun, or the sort?”

Shinohara-san asked, dubiously.

“Ehh~? Although his looks are certainly not bad, isn’t he a little...?”

After hearing Koenji-kun’s name, Sato-san became a little hesitant. Koenji-kun’s evaluation within the class is considerably low. The reason was very simple, mainly because of his strange existence which is a nuisance to the class. However, you could say that there’s a big difference between his status within the class and outside of it.

From the perspectives of outsiders, Koenji-kun’s evaluation would be flawless, no matter if we were talking about his appearance or his

background. He also had a very gentlemanly side. So it's not surprising that girls across the school years are interested in him. In terms of academic ability, even though he didn't take it seriously, you could still see the depths of his true power. You could say that he was a very rare person who met all my previously listed conditions. I think that Koenji-kun is ranked first within our class, if we're talking about just ability.

However, other things are also clear when it comes to him.

He was not the type of person who could be persuaded to take action by other people.

A weirdo beyond imagination.

Since the beginning, I knew that trying to talk to him was useless, and futile.

In this case, compared to Sudo-kun and Ike-kun, he was even... No...you could say that he was the biggest burden to the class.

“Koenji-kun, not a chance. Speaking about this, I don't consider him a human anymore.”

After hearing my evaluation of him, the two burst into laughter.

“If he gets serious, he will definitely surpass Hirata-kun in popularity, but I know that he definitely won't get serious.”

This was my evaluation.

Shinohara-san and Sato-san wholeheartedly agreed with me.

He was the rare specimen who taught me that even if someone had just one flaw, their evaluation could go from 100 to 0 points.

Starting from the relationship between Ike-kun and Shinohara-san, to my ideal man, I proceeded to the next stage.

“Speaking of which, Sato-san, what about you and Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Eh...? Why, why ask me about this?”

After being asked an unexpected question, Sato-san stiffened.

Shinohara-san, who looked as if she had just remembered something, turned her gaze at Sato-san. During the winter break, Sato-san told us something. At that time, she told us about her love for Ayanokouji-kun, and wondering whether she should confess to him. Back then, just like with Ike-kun and Shinohara-san right now, I planned to just enjoy watching them progress, while supporting from a distance.

“It’s... it’s not like...”

Wanting to deny it, Sato-san then hesitated.

And when I noticed, Satou-san had come to an abrupt stop when talking about Ayanokouji-kun.

Of course, with regards to what this meant, Shinohara-san and I did not approach this topic, knowing clearly what it meant.

He probably rejected her, or had a change of heart. In short, as long as Sato-san didn’t intend to speak, we had to be careful to not talk about this topic.

However, if I wanted to know more about Ayanokouji-kun, this wasn’t something I could avoid.

“Can... Can you two keep this a secret?”

She spoke.

Shinohara-san and I, sure that we were going to hear something extremely interesting, each patted one of her shoulders.

“Of course!”

Part 2

And just like that, we moved to a cafe to listen to Sato-san's troubles.

We also then took preparations to allow her to express her worries freely.

This preparation between us girls was necessary to allow the other party to think it over.

Unlike boys, who rush directly to the solution, we girls start by seeking affirmation.

This wasn't a bad way to approach situations.

"Actually... I.... I've already confessed to Ayanokouji-kun..."

After hearing this, I, along with Shinohara-san, almost spit out the tea we were drinking.

"Eh? Eh?! Re, really? Since when?!"

Shinohara-san, who thought she was ahead in terms of relationships with boys, couldn't help asking.

Although I already assumed something had happened between them, I never thought that they would have made so much progress.

But on the other hand, the outcome of that was clear.

If the two of them were dating, she would've definitely told us.

Even if she was too shy to tell us, I would've definitely noticed.

Since that was not the case, that meant...

"I was rejected."

From the looks of it, it had been some time since she was rejected. I couldn't sense any signs of anxiety, or any wavering in her words.

That should be the result of crying many times, as right now, she looked like she wanted to just move on.

If that was the case——she probably confessed during the winter break.

However, this could have been because we pushed her to confess prematurely. If that was the case, we truly have let her down.

“Seriously! Ayanokouji-kun, is he stupid!?”

A confession from a girl, especially from a girl as impeccably good looking as Sato-san.

Shinohara-san seemed to be shocked and furious by the fact Sato-san had been rejected.

“Why? Why were you rejected?”

“... It was simply a problem with his emotions. He said he didn’t like me, and couldn’t date me.

Shinohara-san placed a hand on her forehead, incredulous.

“Is that because he has someone he already likes? Maybe its someone like Horikita-san.”

When I tried to confirm this with Sato-san, she shook her head.

Whenever Ayanokouji-kun was mentioned, Horikita-san’s shadow was always lurking.

But recently, his existence had become more and more prevalent in the class.

There were rumours that Ayanokouji-kun and Horikita-san were keeping close contact. Those kinds of rumours had been circulating for a while now.

However, because there was no evidence, people eventually stopped talking about it.

“He said the same applies to Horikita-san and Kushida-san.”

Unsurprisingly, the two of them did not seem to be that close.

“Nonononono, wha-?”

Ignoring Horikita-san’s name, Shinohara-san was shocked to hear that Kushida-san was mentioned.

“So we can confirm that, he’s a blockhead with no interest in love at all... This creeps me out...”

I could understand how she came to that conclusion. However, Sato-san did not seem to agree.

“If he isn’t attracted by cute girls... then that means he already has someone he likes, right?”

I said this while looking directly at Sato-san, but she averted her gaze and nodded.

Towards the person you liked, you paid attention to them more than anyone else.

The person who best perceived Ayanokouji-kun should be Sato-san.

“I’m guessing that Ayanokouji-kun... likes Karuizawa-san.”

Sato-san said this while looking away.

“You’re joking, what? Is this true? Hu-huh? Seriously? Karuizawa-san?!”

Shinohara-san and I exchanged glances once again.

If someone unsuspecting heard about this, they would definitely think that this would be an extremely unexpected pair.

I pretended to be shocked. However, deep down, I had already accepted that as a fact.

This was because my guess was entirely identical to Sato-san's.

"Yes. In fact... Karuizawa-san probably likes Ayanokouji-kun too... That's what I think."

"Could it be that Karuizawa-san's breakup with Hirata-kun is related to all this?"

Regarding my question, Sato-san, who wasn't entirely sure herself, nodded.

This meant that she personally thought so too.

"From dating Hirata-kun to Ayanokouji-kun? This-, sorry, but I can't understand it."

I don't think this was something that Shinohara-san, who picked Ike-kun, could say.

"It's not that unexpected. I... I also think that Ayanokouji-kun is better."

"You still like him...?"

"I really want to forget about this, but no matter what I do, I just can't look away from him..."

She realized this after she found herself looking at Ayanokouji-kun day after day.

Although I felt a little sorry for Sato-san, her words were a good reference for me.

"Speaking of which... I keep hearing Ayanokouji's name recently."

Shinohara-san could not help but raise such a question.

“Like when he became our class’s commanding tower. Ah, also when Sayakanagi-san gave him the protection point.”

Sato-san, was thinking the same thing, also brought up the fact that Ayanokouji-kun was in the centre for these situations.

“I really can’t seem to understand. Why does it have to be Ayanokouji-kun? Although according to Horikita-san’s statement, it may all have been a coincidence.”

I also found that to be hard to believe.

However, even if I had a conversation with these two, I doubt that we could come to a conclusion.

“Well, now that I think about it, it’s a really clever strategy. Just by giving him protection points, he would automatically be chosen as the sacrifice in situations similar to the end of year exam. If this was Sakayanagi-san’s intention from the beginning, then it makes sense.”

I gave an explanation that made sense to an extent and changed the topic.

“Ahh, so that’s the case...!”

If Sakayanagi-san chose Ike-kun over Ayanokouji kun, it would definitely be much easier to win.

Of course, there was the possibility that she wanted to face someone unexpected, and as a result, chose Ayanokouji-kun.

Anyways, for now, it’s better to leave this matter aside.

Karuizawa-san liked Ayanokouji-kun, and Ayanokouji-kun liked Karuizawa-san.

Just by learning that, I could say that I had gained a lot of information today.

Using this as a way to break through, I should now be able to consider ways to approach him.

“I thought that Karuizawa-san’s standards for a man were the same as mine.”

“So you’re saying, Ayanokouji-kun, is really strong?”

“He can only run fast, right?”

“But, rather than saying he is smart, don’t you feel like he knows everything?”

Sato-san asked us.

“Nope, I don’t feel that.”

Shinohara-san immediately denied it, but I decided to side with Sato-san.

“Indeed, he’s doesn’t seem like the other weird boys, he gives off a reliable impression.”

Since Shinohara-san did not agree with Sato-san, I decided to take her side.

“Yeah, yeah!”

Sato-san, who was supposedly rejected, was still very happy when she heard Ayanokouji-kun being praised. Happy enough that her eyes were sparkling.

It seemed that she still liked Ayanokouji-kun.

“Isn’t that just because he doesn’t like to talk?”

“Ike-kun is the complete opposite, he doesn’t stop talking.”

“Right, right, even if I tell him to calm down, he still continues talking.

Although Shinohara-san said she's dissatisfied with him, it didn't look that way.

“So, I——”

Just as Sato-san was about to start speaking again, my gaze caught the figure of Ayanokouji-kun.

They were too absorbed into the conversation and didn't notice.

“Ah, sorry. Can I go make a call?”

After asking for their permission, they both agreed cheerfully.

“It might take quite long, so contact me if anything happens.”

After saying this, I pretended to make a call, while walking away.

Not long after, I saw Ayanokouji-kun's figure.

As they say, strike while the iron was hot.

While still in Sato-san and Shinohara-san's line of sight, I couldn't act hurriedly, so I followed Ayanokouji while pretending to be on my phone.

I felt a bit of unease about whether I would be able to follow someone while remaining unnoticed.

How much space needed to be between us for it to be considered safe, or unsafe.

If I was caught following him, he would definitely be alert, so I wanted to pretend that it was a coincidence.

If I miss the opportunity this spring break, I probably wouldn't see him until we start school as second-year students.

If I was able to get in touch with him early, of course, I would seize that opportunity.

Fortunately, there was no one around Ayanokouji-kun.

Just as I was about to greet Ayanokouji-kun... I immediately hid because I saw someone approaching him.

“That person seems to be... the new director!”

For some reason, that person seemed to be conversing with Ayanokouji-kun. What an interesting combination. Perhaps new information could be obtained by being here.

If their topic was about “strength”, being able to listen to their conversation wouldn’t be a bad result.

“His conversation with the new director is taking a while...”

It has already been 10 minutes. If they were just exchanging pleasantries, this would be considered too long.

Could it be that Ayanokouji-kun and the director were acquaintances? They seemed to be close, but Ayanokouji-kun was expressionless as usual.

“I don’t understand...”

Maybe they were acquainted, but it also seemed like this was the first time they met, talking about many things.

Just from their movements, there didn’t seem to be any history between them.

If I were to move a little closer, I should be able to hear the contents of their conversation. But that would be quite dangerous.

Although I could just pretend to be a passerby, that would leave me no way to hide myself, so it seems the best choice was just to stay here.

After observing them for a while... their long conversation abruptly came to an end.

From the looks of it, the director seemed to be going back to the adults at the pharmacy not too far from here.

What would Ayanokouji-kun do... He began to move.

As if nothing had happened, he started walking in a certain direction. I had hoped to gain some clues from his conversation with the director.

But it seemed like that was in vain... I've already given up on my original plan to talk with Ayanokouji-kun.





I should wait until I was better prepared before doing anything.

I'll follow him for a little longer, and if I don't find anything, then I'll return to where Shinohara-san and Satou-san was.

While catching up to Ayanokouji-kun who'd just turned the corner, I started thinking about my next move.

Part 3

On that day, I came to Keyaki mall alone.

As it was nearing the end of the spring break, and closer to the new semester, I planned to buy some new clothes and other related things.

That's what I originally planned to do, but the situation had changed.

The first abnormal change came from behind me.

Right after that, another change struck me from the front.

“Can I take a little bit of your time?”

This started from me deciding where I should shop, to suddenly conversing with four adults.

Three of them looked like construction workers from their clothes, holding a clipboard.

However, the other person was Tsukishiro, who wore a suit and was clapping as he approached me.

After I stopped walking, Tsukishiro looked back to the three people behind him.

“About the construction work, just follow the plan we established earlier.”

After Tsukishiro gave these instructions, the other adults walked away.

“Ayanokouji-kun, it seems like you’re enjoying the spring break, just like everyone else.”

I originally thought that he would speak to me mildly, but as he opened his mouth, sarcasm poured out.

“Do you have business with me, Acting Director Tsukishiro?”

“Oh no, it seems like I am not welcomed.”

Tsukishiro obviously knew that, but deliberately spoke a little louder. Although it was not loud enough for a passerby to hear, it was enough to show that it was deliberate.

“It’s because chatting with the director would attract unwanted attention. I think that a powerless student like me should lurk in the shadows.”

I want to find out what his intention was as soon as possible.

At the same time, I was also concerned about the situation with Matsushita-san, who was following me from behind.

“I’ll ask you again, what business do you have with me?”

Although, at this distance, she shouldn’t be able to hear the contents of the conversation. But it might still cause her to speculate on this needlessly.

“Regarding what my business is, I’ll tell you when I want to. You might find it hard to accept, but please try to endure. Do you mind?”

It’s impossible that Tsukishiro actually cared about my feelings.

It’s better to say that he deliberately wanted to stall our conversation, as this was a location where crowds came and went.

“I understand. Take your time.”

“Okay. Let’s start by talking about the weather.”

Clap. Tsukishiro clapped as he said this, but immediately squinted his eyes afterwards.

If this was done to see my reaction, it seemed too superficial.

It wasn’t possible to affect me just by that.

“Just kidding. I have something to do right after so I’ll get straight to the point.”

Tsukishiro was quite clear about this.

It was very obvious that he deliberately tried to provoke me.

However, it looked like he indeed had something to say.

The school and the student. No matter what, their position cannot be reversed.

As long as I was still a student, I would not be able to rebel against him. Tsukishiro showed me this.

“How about this? Return to your father with this spring break being your last holiday.”

Tsukishiro didn’t care about the location in which we spoke, even though the contents of the conversation would be quite in depth.

However, even if this conversation was heard by the other students, it was not a problem for him.

Although it might be bad for me, it would not cause any harm to this man.

That being said——

“You must want to just ignore me and walk away. However, you’d better not. I have my position as director to withhold. If you treat me coldly, I will change my manner to correspond to that.”

As if he was reading my thoughts, Tsukishiro smiled.

“Unfortunately for you, I have no intention to drop out of this school voluntarily.”

“Do you dread going back to the White Room that much?”

“I’m enjoying my life here at this school, and I want to graduate from here as a normal student. There’s no other reason for my behaviour.”

“This truly is a good school. With the huge subsidies allocated by the government, they even built a shopping mall like this. Hundreds of millions of yen are spent here every year, used like water from a tap. But most of this country’s citizens are stupid, after roughly hearing that these funds were being used to educate children, and agreed rashly.”

Tsukishiro sighed, and ran his eyes over the interior of the Keyaki mall.

“Because of this, I have countless things I have to deal with. I’m the director of this school now, and that’s why I’m so busy.”

Tsukishiro had to act as a competent Chairman on the surface, so there were many things he had to do.

“Coming back to this- that girl following you, isn’t that Matsushita Chiaki from your class?

Tsukishiro said this quietly, as he maintained his gaze on me.

“Although it was only a moment, I saw her hiding behind the wall. It seems like you’re pretty popular.”

Although Tsukishiro’s gaze shouldn’t have been on me just then, he was still observing very carefully. That is to say, that even while he was talking to the other adults, he still paid attention to his surroundings.

“I didn’t expect you to memorise the names of the students in my class so quickly.”

“Since she’s your classmate, it’s nothing special.”

It seems like his way of attacking me was to shake my psyche up.

“I’m betting that this stems from the fact that she saw you give that answer in the mental arithmetic event. Aren’t you feeling more and more

restrained? You clearly want to spend your life at this school as an ordinary student, but it's getting harder and hard to do so now.”

It felt like he was trying to force the impression of hating school onto me.

“I can endure it, if your attacks are only on this level.”

“To be honest, I don’t care about what you do. Rather, I’m pretty annoyed at how I’m wasting precious time dealing with such things.”

“In that case, why don’t you just pack your bags and give up? Noone’s forcing you.”

“Because your father doesn’t allow it. If I disobey him, I can’t survive in this world. After all, I want to climb up the social ladder as well.”

Tsukishiro did not leave the conversation at that, and instead continued talking about the topic.

“Don’t look at me with such a surprised face. You wanted my excuse, so you got it, eh?”

“Well, that’s true.”

“I’ve seen what you achieved in the White Room. You truly are an extraordinary child. You’re just over 16 years old, but your ability is definitely abnormal. Even the adults around you can’t match you in mind, body or skill. You’re out of reach for them.”

Tsukishiro shortened the distance between us, and a kind smile appeared on his face.

“Anyway, you spent a year at this school without many problems. Why not just let it go? That’s the mature decision.”

He meant that I should take my memories of the past year and go back to the White Room like that.

“I’m still a child, after all. I don’t plan to let go of this so easily.”

“Heh, do you really think you can escape from me?”

“I plan to resist until the end.”

“There’s an old saying, about how the frog in the bottom of the well doesn’t know the ocean. You seem to have a tendency to overestimate yourself, so even though I gave you a chance, you fail to appreciate my kindness.”

Tsukishiro spread his arms lightly.

“Although I don’t know how it is at this school, you are definitely not Number 1. Among the students of the White Room after you, there have been several students who are equal, or even more powerful than you. You should understand that you’re just another mass-produced person.”

“If that’s the case, there’s no need to pay attention to me right?”

“If you were not the son of that man, that would be true. Your father really wants to bring you to a higher domain. Even if he looks like a cold person, that man is still your father. He firmly believes that you are an existence that can become a model, and lead the masses.

Tsukishiro did not conceal his dissatisfaction towards that man, but that was to show me the extent of his power and position right now.

“About the existence of the White Room, what do you think about it, Director?”

“What do I, think of it?”

“Your thoughts on whether the White Room’s existence is necessary or not.”

Since I was not going to bend my knee in this position, I wanted to make him tell me this.

“I am not obliged to answer.”

“After hearing your answer, my thoughts may change after this.”

“This is only my own opinion, but fine. If this is all it takes to change your mind, it’ll be too easy.”

Despite knowing that I was most probably lying, Tsukishiro still agreed.

“If you want to talk about that facility, it is necessary to understand its history. Did you know that the White Room was built 20 years ago?”

“Of course. After all, I am part of the fourth generation.”

“Yes. As you know, the White Room started from the first year of the first generation’s life, with new generations being formed annually. Each generation is educated under different leaders, and receives the corresponding education. Then, it is verified which group had the most effective education. Although only 19 generations have been nurtured due to last year’s interruption... Hundreds of children have been trained under the White Room’s education system.”

Children of different generations wouldn’t have seen each other. Although they were in the same facility, they did not know the appearance and names of anyone else.

“It seems like you’re quite knowledgeable about the White Room.”

“Just a bit, just a bit.”

Tsukishiro was a figure closely related to my father, this conversation made that obvious.

He must have said it in order to make me understand that.

Sometimes, it seemed as if he was a small, irrelevant person. But if you changed your perspective, you would see that he was an important person.

He could change himself accordingly, according to the situation.

It was for this reason that he was given the heavy responsibility to be a spy.

“All children can grow to a certain level. However, trying to exceed that level has never been possible. The evidence is in this facility, which has been operating for nearly 20 years, and not a single child has been able to reach the target. That’s true for everyone except you, but that was only 2 years ago.”

Just how much money had been invested into the White Room?

A few hundred million yen should not be enough.

It turned out that I was the only one who reached that target. I couldn’t help but feel that this project was a waste.

“How about the people who turned talented? What are these kids doing now?”

The part which I knew nothing about.

What were the people of my generation doing after having left, that was something I had no idea about.

Tsukishiro appeared to be a little surprised, but immediately understood.

“Sure enough, it’s impossible for you to know where the children who left the facility went. Those children grew up beautifully and contributed to society—if that had happened, that’s a thing to be grateful for. But so far, most of the children raised in that facility have their own problems, and so they cannot be put to good use. They will not last in that environment, their hearts have already been damaged.

Tsukishiro continued, adopting a helpless look.

]“Receiving a complete education straight from birth. If this can be achieved, Japan would experience growth the world has never seen before. However, this is not that simple. Under the influence of various mysterious factors, people’s growth varies greatly. It is impossible to cultivate success by using the same method on everyone. But even so, we have managed to produce tangible results. Let’s take the fifth and sixth generation as an example, among those who survived until the end, there are some with the

potential of producing great results. All that is left is to perfect the system, and after that, the White Room may be an indispensable asset in the future. Your father's plan is very stupid——And also very frightening.”

After Tsukishiro talked in a roundabout way, he finally came to a conclusion.

“In short, this is how I feel about the White Room. It's both stupid and frightening.

“Thank you for that long speech, I have benefited greatly from it.”

“The demonic fourth-generation. With all of the students dropping out due to its excessively harsh education, there turned out to be only one surviving, the student who managed to pass the final course easily. I also see you as a valuable sample. In order to not discredit that shining record, I think it'd be best for you to return home.”

Tsukishiro took out his phone, and handed it to me.

“Call your father now and say you want to drop out. This is the best method to protect your ego, and will also act as repayment to your father's love for you.”

“Acting Director Tsukishiro, what you've said contained no lies, you have made the truth perfectly clear.”

Whether if it was about the White Room, or about me.

And just like that, Tsukishiro let out a smile.

“My own depiction of you, Acting Director Tsukishiro, is that you're a man that hides his emotions by donning an iron mask. However, from today's conversation, I felt like you've taken off that mask.

In other words, he deliberately manipulates other people's impressions of him to give off a sense of authenticity to the contents of the conversation.

Therefore, his words were not credible. Instead, they were something like lies.

On the level of that man, there was no need to mix the truth with lies.

It should be easy for him to swear black was white, and swear white was black.

That is to say, even if his statement consisted of nothing but lies, he could say it in a way, so it sounded true.

“Seems like there is no way to gain your trust.”

“Sorry.”

“Good grief...”

“Acting Director Tsukishiro, isn’t it better to give up now? If you fail to force me to drop out, you will lose my father’s trust. Even if you only get reprimanded, I’d say it would be a wise choice to stop at this stage, or you may get humiliated.

“Thanks for your concern. However, those words are useless, because I will not fail.”

Although I did not know what was the truth in his words, Tsukishiro let out a scary smile.

“Moreover, I am an adult. I am not afraid of momentary failure, even if you, by chance, force me out of this school, it does not matter. I will just be sent to carry out another job. Humiliation is not that big of a deal anyway.”

“You helped my father because you were afraid of him, and yet you say you are not afraid of failure. Just which of those are your true thoughts?”

“Yes, which is it.”

Tsukishiro, who had been fighting for decades at the top.

The evaluation of his iron mask might actually need to be higher than what I originally thought.

Since he was sent in by that man, he was not a tactless and impulsive person. I knew that for a fact.

“If you can’t accept it, then it can’t be helped. We’ll fight instead.”

“Yes.”

Tsukishiro finally seemed to be satisfied, and distanced himself from me.

“It’s about time. It would be rude to make others wait.”

Maybe he was referring to the adults who left first.

“But since you don’t plan on dropping out yourself, from today onwards, your life at this school will be difficult.”

“Although I do want to live a peaceful school life, it seems like there’s no way, I will be conscious of this.”

Tsukishiro smiled, and just as he was about to leave, he made a proposal.

“Do you want to play a game, which would be advantageous for you?”

“A game?”

“When the next semester starts, I will make a child of the White Room enrol as a freshman.”

I was originally thinking about what he was going to say, in the end, what he said was unexpected.

“Is it fine for you to tell me something like this?”

“No problem at all. You should have thought of the possibility of that kind of thing happening anyway. Our intent was to give this child a final ultimatum, so if you discover this child’s identity, I will expel him.”

This was a decision I did not need to do myself.

I memorised what Tsukishiro said, but I did not intend to believe him at all.

“It seems like you don’t believe me. Do you think it’s possible for me to send four or five people here? This school isn’t so lax in its policies for me to send in multiple people, you’re thinking about this too much.”

“Whether you said it was one person or a hundred, I wouldn’t believe it at all.”

If he had the intention to send people here, that man would send as many as he liked.

I was clear that he was that sort of person.

“That might be true.”

“But, how can I win in this little game of yours?”

“There’s a total of 160 freshmen entering the school next year. If you can pick out the student from the White Room by the end of April, I’ll give up. How about it? I’ll make an exception and break the rules with that condition, eh?”

If this was true, it would indeed be considered an exception that broke the rules.

But if the troublesome Tsukishiro left, my burden would be reduced.

“There’s no way I can believe that.”

“You can be doubtful about it if you want, there’s not much harm.”

If we disregard possible damage to the mental state, it’s true that there was no risk in it.

There would be no loss if I’d just accept the challenge.

“I understand. I’ll play your little game, and I’ll accept your words on the surface. But you seem quite confident in the ability of the White Roomstudent. I’m also confident in one thing.”

“Eh? What thing?”

“The frog at the bottom of the well does not know the depths of the sea, but it knows the height of the sky.”

“So you’re saying... it is because of how much time you’ve spent in that small world known as the White Room, that you’re able to understand the depth of that place more than anyone else, is that what you mean?”

It was the education I received in the White Room that gave me this unwavering confidence.

No matter how many children were taught in the same way, no one could reach this level.

Whether if it was the third generation student of the previous year or the younger fifth generation student, this stood the same.

Facing Tsukishiro, who kept casting tentative glances at me, I continued.

“There are definitely people who are even more excellent than I am in this world. There are as many as 7 billion humans living on the planet, after all. But the White Room is different.”

In that world, there was no one better than me.

And with that confidence, I gave that answer.

“That pair of eyes- it’s exactly the same as your father’s. Those awful eyes containing the deep darkness. The depth in your eyes is the only thing those other excellent White Room students can’t imitate.”

It seemed like Tsukishiro understood that there was no point in continuing the conversation, so he turned around and started to walk away.

Part 4

After he left, I wandered around Keyaki mall for a while again.

Temporarily forgetting about the situation with Tsukishiro would be fine for now.

The problem was the Matsushita that was concealing her presence and hiding behind me over there.

Although I could just ignore her, it would be a problem if she spread the word about the situation between the Acting Director and me.

After confirming that Matsushita was still following me, I decided to wait for an opportunity.

Why was she following me? I needed to confirm the reason for that.

Although this was unlikely, I must also consider the possibility that she was working for Tsukishiro.

I don't know if she was following me from the start, or sometime after that.

From this point alone, I distinguished it clearly.

If there were other issues I needed to consider, it would be where I should talk to her.

It was spring break at the Keyaki mall, and it was still morning, the time with the most people.

If I spoke to her here, it would be too conspicuous.

As I planned how I would start the conversation, I decided to resolve this matter as soon as possible.

One thing to be grateful about is the fact that Matsushita was my classmate.

Even if our conversation was seen by others, it would be regarded as an ordinary talk between classmates.

Speeding up slightly, and turning the corner, I prepared to ambush Matsushita.

If she did not follow me here, I would use Kei to deal with this.

After about 10 seconds, Matsushita turned around the corner to catch up with me.

“Whoah!?”

It seemed like she did not expect me waiting for her here, letting out a surprised voice.

If she wasn't following me, she wouldn't have made such an overreaction.

“What business do you have with me?”

I asked that, while Matsushita placed her hand on her chest to calm down her intense heartbeat.

“What business, what do you mean?... Although that's what I'd like to say, it seems like I've been exposed.”

It seems like after seeing my attitude, she determined that using a random excuse in this situation wouldn't work.

But why did she follow me anyway?

That part was what truly mattered.

If she just wanted to greet me normally, there was no need for her to conceal herself and follow behind me.

“Well, there's a reason, so I followed you around, Ayanokouji-kun.”

After Matsushita confirmed that there was no one around, she admitted that she was tailing me.

My relationship with Matsushita was not very deep.

But if you observed Matsushita's behaviour, you would find that she was quite alert. This was probably because she didn't want her real thoughts to be seen through, which would also explain the reason she wanted to follow me.

"What do you think the reason I'm following you is?"

This wasn't just a simple question, it was obviously meant as a psychological attack."

It seemed she really did want to ask me something after this.

"I don't know, I don't understand this at all. When did you start following me?"

I would not tell her when I noticed that she was following me.

While answering her questions, I also asked her questions myself.

"Just now, right?"

"Just now?"

In order to prevent Matsushita san from asking extra questions to avoid answering me, I asked her another question.

If she was given the chance, she would definitely ask me "When did Ayanokouji-san notice?"

"When that... Oh right, when you were talking to Acting Director Tsukishiro."

Matsushita-san mixed in lies, but also admitted that she saw me talking to Acting Director Tsukishiro.

Shortly after, Matsushita-san slightly lowered the corner of her mouth. It seems that she noticed her mistake.

Actually, I've already set up a trap here, if she was curious about my relationship with Acting Director Tsukishiro, she would have no choice but to ask me a question about this.

"I saw you talking with Acting Director Tsukishiro, what actually happened?"

"It seems like Keyaki mall is about to undergo renovation, that's why he was asking students which facilities we would be happy with if built, and similar questions. He just chose to ask me by chance."

"Oh? I see..."

Matsushita-san, who claimed to have started following me during my conversation with Acting Director Tsukishiro, might've planned to use information from what happened before the conversation to her advantage. However, it had the opposite effect. Since she saw the workers following Acting Director Tsukishiro, she would most likely believe me.

"So, what's your question?"

I don't have any questions. There's just some things on my mind."

After saying this, Matsushita-san started to reveal the true reason for following me.

About the end of year exam... Ayanokouji-kun was the commanding tower, right?"

So that's it. Having heard this sentence, I understood the reason why Matsushita-san wanted to contact me.

"During the speed mental math event, the answer you gave me was exactly the same as the answer Koenji-kun gave."

It would be hard to say that this happened by chance.

“During junior high school, I did quite a lot of speed mental math, so I’m quite good at it.

“Me too, but you aren’t on the level of “quite good”, I think that you’re good enough to participate at the national level.”

As soon as I finished speaking, Matsushita-san immediately replied.

It seemed like she didn’t like the fact that I blocked her first move.

“That’s just an event that I’m relatively good at. To be honest, I’ve participated in national competitions before.”

“...Is that true?”

“Yes, It seems that the sudden appearance of an event I’m good at led to your misunderstanding.

‘But, shouldn’t you have mentioned this earlier?’

“That’s true, but do you know my personality? I’m not someone who can announce this in the middle of the class. Also, I was given a protection point by chance which led to me stepping up as the commanding tower. Not to mention, our opponent was Class A’s Sayakanagi-san. Even if I’m good at speed mental math, I don’t know how much I could help, so I felt uneasy.”

No self confidence equalled poor communication skills. That was the impression my classmates had on me.

“That.... might be true.”

Although she felt that it was indeed trustworthy, Matsushita didn’t want to accept it, and took it to the next step.

“I... I saw it. The scene of Ayanokouji-kun and Hirata-kun, talking together on a bench.”

She should be talking about the time when Hirata was alone during the Class Vote.

I didn't have eyes on my back, so I didn't know someone was watching.

However, there was no need to panic because of this.

Even if someone saw that scene at that time from a distance, it wasn't something that unexpected.

"Even though I stayed in the distance because I thought I would be discovered if I came any closer, I think I saw him crying."

Witnessing that scene and quickly processing what it meant, it seemed like she collected a certain amount of data.

Matsushita's intentions gradually became obvious.

Judging by her words and her actions, believing that she had nothing to do with Tsukishiro should be fine.

"Back then, during the second day, Hirata returned to class, so shouldn't this be more than just a pure coincidence?"

I thought she was an ordinary student, but she was unexpectedly acute.

It was worth nothing that she was telling these things to me.

It didn't seem like she was here because she couldn't keep those thoughts to herself.

Although it could be labeled as just pure curiosity...

From her subtle actions, you could see that this was just a pretence, so in other words, she had her own private reason for getting involved with this. Judging from Matsushita's words and actions today that were logical, this wouldn't be a sudden whim of hers. Instead, she would have planned this in advance to get into contact with me, and then bring up this topic. Maybe her

decision to take action today was because she saw me wandering around Keyaki mall by myself.

“National level speed mental arithmetic, plus your running speed, and on top of that, consoling Hirata during the Class Vote. By considering all these points... Ayanokouji-kun, are you holding back? In fact, whether it be academically or physically, you’re more capable than what you are showing, right?”

This was deliberate contact with me, who had a weak existence, and also trying to lead me to say certain things.

It seems she tried to contact me because she doubted my abilities.

This was completely different from the impression I got from Matsushita who had been my classmate for a year now.

I quickly came to a conclusion, deciding to address the main topic.

“Are you doing this because you want me to assist you in reaching Class A?”

“...So you admit it?”

It seemed like Matsushita-san felt a certain amount of dread after my straightforward confession.

“It does seem like I’m indeed holding back.”

“Why? Isn’t it good to achieve good grades at this school?”

Matsushita-san, who believed she had the upper hand, started to question and criticize me.

“It’s because I don’t like... attracting attention. If all of a sudden my grades randomly rose, then won’t I have to help teach the others? I’m not really good at doing that. The same goes for athletics.”

“So that’s how it is.”

Similar to Matsushita-san who hid her abilities. There were probably some parts of my excuse which was the same with her, resulting in her being able to understand very well. So she believed my words.

“Please make more contributions to the class in the future. If you do actually have the strength, I want you to use it. This is for leading our class to victory. If your strength is genuine and if you have what it takes to be a leader, I can vouch for you, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Her thoughts were similar to Horikita’s. If you had the strength, then use it honestly.

“I happen to think so too.”

“Eh?”

It seemed that she didn’t expect me to willingly cooperate with her, so Matsushita-san let out a surprised sound.

“But please do not expect too much from me. I have already exerted around 70-80% of my total strength. Even with all my strength, I don’t have the same academic and athletic ability as Hirata does.”

Henceforth, I intended to put my school life to the side.

Right now, I have to be accepted by Matsushita-san to a certain extent.

By telling her about how I hid my abilities, it gave her the impression that I had no more secrets.

Then, without even having to mention it to me, I noticed that Matsushita-san was also hiding her strength.

Of course, she would also feel as if she was in a dominant position in this psychological warfare, thinking that they had already calculated my provisional strength.

“Wait, just now, you said you were using 70-80% of your strength... Is that true?”

There should be nothing for Matsushita-san to reference in order to confirm that my strength was above Hirata-kun. However, I was asked, to confirm if it was true or not.

“Mhm.”

Even though I nodded my head to confirm, Matsushita-san didn’t seem to accept it.

“Then what about the situation with Karuizawa-san?”

“What do you mean?”

“...The fact that she broke up with Hirata-kun should have something to do with you.”

“Where did you hear of this?”

“That’s what I think personally... I think there has to be some sort of connection.”

It seemed that Matsushita-san had already done a pretty thorough investigation beforehand, and that’s why she couldn’t simply accept it.

The confidence in Matsushita-san’s expression suddenly disappeared.

“Why does Karuizawa-san think you’re so special... so much that it led to her breakup with Hirata-kun? Please tell me why.”

“The reason for that, huh...”

Since I was below Hirata in status, Karuizawa’s motives were hard to accept.

“Are you going to say that she doesn’t see you as someone special?”

“...I’m guessing that she does.”

Hearing what I said, Matsushita nodded gently as she accepted it.

“Sure enough, you, Ayanokouji-kun, need to be more-”

“No... How should I say this, I feel like you’re misunderstanding something.”

“Misunderstand? But I asked you because I’m extremely confident in this.”

“It’s true that my relationship with Karuizawa... isn’t ordinary.”

“That’s why I wanted to know about your true strength, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“No, that-”

“We got to this part already, so why don’t you just tell me anyway?”

“That’s not the case, how can I say this, it’s a bit difficult to put this into words.”

As I was stammering around, my gaze escaped and focused on a faraway place.

Facing Matsushita who still refused to let this go, I had to continue talking.

“It’s a bit hard to say. No, well, not really... Well, I feel like it’s simply from the influence of from how I conveyed to Karuizawa that I liked her. Instead of saying that I’m special to her, it’s better to say that she has a sort of strange awareness towards me.”

‘Eh...?’

“...Eh?”

The two of us looked at each other.

“Isn’t it because Karuizawa-san noticed your strength, and that’s why she thinks you’re special?”

“That should not be related at all.”

“But- I don’t think that it’s as simple as just conveying your good intentions that would make someone else think you’re special.”

I shortened the distance between Matsushita, and grabbed her shoulders.

It seemed like Matsushita didn’t expect that I would suddenly grab her, and couldn’t help but be dumbfounded.

I firmly caught her gaze and said this.

“Matsushita, I like you. Please date me.”

“What—!”

Matsushita’s brain probably panicked for a moment, but I quickly released my hands.

“If you were confessed to like this, no matter what the result was, could you ignore it?”

“It-it’s a joke, ah. So that’s how it is, so that’s how it...ah.”

If I let her experience it directly, I could make her understand what I said before without her knowing.

After being confessed to seriously by the opposite sex, as long as you were not extremely averse to them, you would be somewhat aware of them to a certain extent. This was obvious.

“I think her breaking up with Hirata was entirely a coincidence. And I only conveyed my feelings to her after they broke up anyway.”

Because I hadn’t confessed yet, Matsushita had no way to confirm the truthfulness of the sequence of things.

“... So that’s it, that’s the situation. I’m sorry I followed you.”

“I’ve got one request, my thing with Karuizawa-”

“I know. I won’t tell anyone, no matter what.”

It couldn’t be said that she accepted my response 100%.

But, this matter can be stopped for a while, as I’ve provided her with this much information.

After all, the thing between Kei and me, she couldn’t just casually talk about it with anyone.

If something related to this made me unhappy and refused to cooperate, it would only hurt Matsushita as well.

Epilogue: Youth is About to Bloom

Intro

The situation with Matsushita the other day, and before that, the problem with Horikita and Ichinose. As well as the establishment of a cooperative relationship with Chairman Sakayanagi, Chabashira-sensei and Mashima-sensei.

Also, the conversation with Acting Director Tsukishiro. Many things happened around me during the spring break.

First of all, I had to remain vigilant about Tsukishiro. Unlike other problems, ignoring him will only cause the situation to worsen. The next thing I know, I might be receiving a dropout notice.

Therefore, right now, the only thing I could do was to cooperate with the other teachers to try to respond to that.

That person said someone from the white room would be enrolling into this school. Although this is not something that was guaranteed to happen, the possibility was high.

Tsukishiro could not casually enter the corridors or classrooms at any time he wanted, so he could only attack me through indirect means, such as exams.

But students on the other hand, regardless of whether it was the corridors or classrooms, they could move freely.

At any time, they can set up an environment to come into contact with me, giving them an opportunity to expel me. Also, they are more beneficial as they could collect more information.

If what was said becomes a reality, this would be considered the biggest change that happened around me.

Next, there was Horikita and Matsushita, the so-called internal problems of the class. They questioned my true abilities and also wanted to learn more about my potential.

Although Horikita decided to compete against me one on one, there was nothing that needed to be done as of now. The same was true for Ichinose, it was also a matter for the future.

For now, I only have to care about next year's battles, and calmly do what needs to be done.

However, these were only the things that had happened around me.

As for my own changes, they were minimal.

Yes—that was until today.

The spring break was also nearing its end, with only two days remaining.

Before the students welcomed the upcoming battle, enjoying the final day of rest, I started to make a firm resolution for action as I sought a great change.

If you wanted to move forward, then you had to take advantage of it now.

It was just past 6 o'clock, and the sun had just begun to set. It was now the time when day switched to night.

Having said that, if that's possible, there's something I wanted to ask you all.

For example, if there was someone of the opposite sex you liked, how could you open up a path towards a confession?

If you were handsome or beautiful, then you could just cut all corners and confess right away.

As long as they replied to me, “I feel the same way!”, then it would be worthy of celebration.

However, not many people met such conditions. They had an inferiority complex when it came to their complexion, personality, and body shape.

Those three factors could serve as obstacles to the road to confession.

In short, using a “confession” as a gateway to love was not that simple of a matter.

Because of this, I would have to seriously let my imagination run wild, and think hard in order to raise the success rate of the confession.

Was the success rate 10% or 20%? Or could it be, say, 50%?

There will be times where it reached 80-90%, or the rate of the confession might even approach 100%, but we couldn’t be sure.

Even so, we still would feel uneasy.

Because we were afraid that if the confession failed, it would affect our relationship with the other tremendously.

Although the number of people who did not care about this and would just move forward was not small, but for high school students, school was all they had. They would generally be fearful of the possibility of their relationships that had been built within the small world known as school being destroyed.

So they would think ahead about what could be done to raise the success rate, by even 1%.

Then they began to put effort into increasing the success rate.

First of all, start with what you could, such as changing your hairstyle to the type the other person liked, dress nicely, or start working out. It was also possible adopt strategies such as eating a meal together or giving a present.

Using all means to increase the probability.

The probability might increase from 1% to 99%, but if it failed, the chances might reduce from 99% to 1%.

In order to understand the feelings of the other, you had to do your best.

That was the process before a confession.

Then——as for me, I had experienced it all the same.

Thinking and worrying like other men and women.

However, such things were not limited to love.

Generally speaking, all things had a sort of invisible probability, and that would change everyday according to various phenomena. Just like studying harder to enter high school or college, it would change the chances of being accepted.

And the degree to which how one understands this principle could greatly change the understanding of the situation.

Exams and confessions were only the middle stage. Even if you succeeded, it did not mark the end.

It would be better to say that more things will happen after that.

If you suffered a setback before graduation, it could lead to being expelled, and you might also break up due to unfaithfulness or violence.

This was how I thought about the future. A month later, half a year later, one year later.

Sometimes, unexpected things might happen, but I didn't like to act out suddenly.

What's more, those were related to those actions that I did.

Then, let's return to the main topic.

In fact, all the things I've done so far was to change a "certain probability".

Needless to say, this is obviously to increase the success rate.

As for what the success rate was, maybe it would be revealed today.

If my predictions were correct, it was about time for someone to contact me.

The phone I was holding started to ring

An 11 digit number appeared on my device's screen.

The number which was not registered on my phone belonged to Karuizawa Kei.

"It's me, I'm sorry for making you wait."

After she called multiple times, I finally picked it up.

30 minutes ago, I called Kei, but she didn't answer it. Now, she called back.

"Nevermind that, what's the matter?"

"You sound a little dissatisfied."

"Not really, it's not really dissatisfaction, it's more like I wanted to confirm something."

"Is it about me not contacting you after calling you out?"

On the day I met Hiyori, I called Kei, but in the end, I didn't tell her anything.

At that time, I only told her that I would contact her when I remembered.

In the end, I didn't contact her until the end of the spring break on purpose.

“So you still remember? What, are you deliberately trying to annoy me?”

“About the thing, can we meet up and talk about it?”

I said this and cut short the topic.

“Huh?”

“About the thing I told you I would tell you once I remembered, I’ve thought about it. Can you come over now?”

“Seriously...you sure know how to pick a good time....Well, it’s not impossible, but if we’re seen by others, I won’t be responsible.”

At this time, there were many people leaving and entering the dormitory.

The probability that Kei was seen coming to my room was very high.

“You don’t need to care about that.”

I told her it didn’t matter if she was seen, and asked her to come over.

“I know. Oh yeah, I’ve got something to do at 7 o’clock, so I don’t have much time.”

“I’ll try to be quick, it might take 10 to 20 minutes.”

“Then there’s no problem, I’ll see you later.”

After saying this, Kei hung up.

Now——let’s get started.

I’ve done my preparations. I looked around my room, which was tidier than before.

For once, I looked into the mirror.

Faced with my reflection having such a serious look, I immediately looked away.

Part 1

Kei, looking unhappy, was sitting in my room.

With her tidy appearance, it really did seem like she had plans afterwards.

“So, what is it?”

Kei looked at me, with an unhappy look, as I was silent.

After calling her out, I couldn’t stay quiet.

“What are you talking about?”

“No, what do you mean? Didn’t you say you remembered what you wanted to say?”

“Well, now that you mention it, that is true.”

“.....”

“.....”

Listening to my vague words, the look of dislike in Kei’s eyes intensified.

“That’s why I’m asking what you want?”

“Alright, you don’t have to be so hasty.”

“I just told you. 7 o’clock I’m eating out with my friends at Keyaki mall. Do you understand?”

“There is still plenty of time, it’s fine.”

“This is giving me a bad feeling, you know? You’re speaking nonsense.”

Towards me, who acted differently than usual, Kei started feeling a little suspicious.

“...Right, I’ve got something to tell you.”

Since I stayed silent, Kei started to complain.

“Something you need to tell me?”

To be honest, I didn’t know what Kei wanted to say, so I asked straightforwardly.

“Sato-san is suspicious about our relationship.”

Sato——We haven’t been in much contact recently, but she was a classmate who liked me.

“I thought she would hate me because I rejected her, so what do you mean?”

“She tried to get me to admit that I broke up with Hirata-kun to date you, in a roundabout way.”

That is to say that even if it wasn’t direct, her intentions for her words could be understood that way.

“Of course I denied it, but I’m not sure if she believed me.”

“I see. Something similar happened on my side too.”

“Huh? Something similar?”

“Matsushita also has various doubts about my relationship with you. Mainly about whether I was dating you.”

I reported the conversation from a few days ago, but after hearing it, Kei’s face turned pale.

“Eh? What? Are you lying? Is that true? Are you joking?”

I nodded to say I was not kidding, then explained the whole story.

The things I told her were about how Matsushita-san also hid her true abilities, about her observations which raised doubts about our relationship, and about her doubts regarding my true strength.

“Wa-wait. I can’t keep up with all this.”

Kei, who had a headache, placed her hand on her forehead.

“I feel like things are getting bad...what do you think?”

After understanding the situation, Kei asked me about my thoughts on it. No, she was seeking a solution.

Since this was partially related to why I called her over, it’s better to honestly tell her.

“I think it’s fine to leave it alone?”

“No, no, that’s not ok! Besides, there’s nothing between us at all!”

“So you’re saying that you dislike people thinking there’s a relationship between us while there’s obviously nothing there? Even if Matsushita spreads that rumour, why not just let her do it?”

“Huh? Saying whatever she wants... that kind of thing can’t be ignored. You should quickly go and talk to her, and say that there’s nothing between you and me.”

“Going to talk to Matsushita now would only be counterproductive.”

“You already knew this from the start. Why did you half-ass the lie?”

“No matter what I say, the situation won’t change. Isn’t Sato also dubious about my relationship with you? Then Matsushita, who is close to Sato, would have heard from Sato that my relationship with you was unusual sooner or later. No, the chance that she took action after she was told about the situation is high.”

It should be seen that she only came to contact me after she learned of the situation from students surrounding her.

“....That, although that is possible...”

After that, my contact with Kei was inevitable.

Even if I strongly denied it this time, next time, it would change their doubts into confidence.

If the other person knew that I was lying, they might spread the news.

In that case, drawing the enemy to your side during the early stage would be more beneficial for future actions.

But the thing Kei was upset about didn't seem to be about this.

“But... if someone said that I broke up with Hirata, well, to date you, then rumours would spread not just in the class, but in the whole school, which would be a huge pain, you know.”

“Why would it be a pain?”

“Because, if that rumour spread, it would really affect me.”

Kei relentlessly expressed her dissatisfaction, talking non-stop.

“Get it? No matter what gender you are, if you've got a scandal with the opposite sex, the chances someone approaching you would be a lot lower.”

Understood? Kei held her index finger in front of me.

“So, in other words, I'm hindering you from getting a new boyfriend?”

“...Exactly.”

From the third perspective, you could understand what she was saying. Just like how when it was revealed that Sudo liked Horikita, it made it harder to approach Horikita. Something like that.

“Do you really understand? Listen up?”

Kei continued, thinking that I still didn’t understand.

“You...are close with this Shiina?”

“Shiina? Ah, are you talking about Hiyori?”

“Hi....”

She was one of the people who I called by their first name.

Of course, I also called Kei, Haruka, and Airi by their first names.

She should know this first hand.

However, it seemed like Kei didn’t expect me to have this kind of relationship with someone outside of our class.

“We’re pretty close, after all, we both like reading books. What is it?”

After telling Kei that, her face changed colour.

“Eh...so you’ve got the same interests. Reading books....hmm...hmmm. That’s completely opposite to me.”

Indeed, Kei and Hiyori had completely different personalities. She knew that herself.

“And so?”

“...Nothing, it’s just... Argh, that’s enough! You’re making me forget what I wanted to say!”

Kei got angry, raised her arms, and looked away.

And then quickly started talking, wanting to keep her cool.

“If the rumour with me spread, then it would be harder for you to get closer to her, right?”

“I see, that’s a possibility.”

I admitted this, and then Kei stood up.

“I don’t care, whoever you want to get closer to is up to you.”

After saying this, Kei turned around.

“Although I’m sorry, this topic...we should stop now. I want to get to Keyaki mall earlier, because there might be boys from the other classes coming as well, and to quell these rumours, I need to be motivated. I don’t have the time to help you.”

“Motivated?”

“Because I’ve broken up with Hirata-kun, I want to find a new boyfriend. Got a problem?”

“No.”

“...Right? So now I have to go.”

It seemed like I overdid the teasing.

I stood up as well. Kei thought that I was going to see her off.

“No need.”

Facing the tone of strong rejection, I called out Kei’s name.

“Kei.”

“Seriously, now what?”

“If you don’t like it, then just ignore it.”

“Huh?”

After showing her surprise, she paid attention to what I was going to say next.

“Will you go out with me?”

“Eh?”

Kei frowned, not understanding, overflowing with doubt, she looked back at me.

“What are you talking about? Where are you going?”

(*TL note, in Japanese, “Date me” and “Come with me” mean the same thing.*)

It seemed like she understood that as where I wanted her to accompany me, so she asked that.

“I don’t mean that. I mean to ask you if you would go out with me?”

“No, I mean- you mean...I don’t...understand...”

There was no need to continue talking. I looked into Kei’s eyes, and Kei accepted it. I wouldn’t consider the situation where we weren’t actually that close now. But between the two of us now, it only took matching up our gazes to convey our feelings.

“Wait, eh, ha, ehhhh!? This, what kind of joke is this, it’s such a bad one...!?”

“This isn’t a joke.”

“Bu, but! Just now, you were hinting that you liked Shiina-san!”

“That was a joke.”

“But- these few days-“

“That’s only, well, I wanted to try to see if you were jealous, Kei.”

Calling Kei to the cafe, allowing her to witness the scene between Hiyori and me talking together.

There was no need to have done this.

But, this was a way to let her see that I wasn’t so used to romance yet.

‘If, if what you just said was a lie, then the relationship we have is over...if this is a false confession, and you’d like to admit it, this is your last chance...this, do you truly understand?’

With doubt within her heart, this wasn’t a question where she could just say yes or no to.

“Of course it’s not a joke, so let me hear your answer.”

“...e, e-e-e-e-e-even if you say that to me how am I supposed to...?!”

“I said it just now, if you don’t like me, you can ignore or reject me, or whatever.”

“Who said I’d ignore it! A-anyway, why?”

“What do you mean by why?”

“That, that is, me, so uh...something. Anyway, why was it today, uh...”

The previous question was unclear, so I could only answer the latter one.

“Why was it today, huh. I can’t give you a good reason for me to choose today to confess, I have a good reason for confessing. Because I wanted to prevent you from becoming someone else’s girlfriend.”

“So basically-you, like-me-right?”

The questions issued by Kei contained strong emotions that I had not seen before.

I wanted to, at this moment, or the previous moment, to strongly shake up myself, and then give a firm answer.

“That’s right, I like Karuizawa Kei.”

One of the major events in life was to confess.

The fleeting moment where you’d express your true emotions.

To Kei’s question, was my answer truly from the heart?

Originally, the act of confessing to someone, the only motives one had was love, an action that turned someone you liked into someone that belonged to you.

“Your answer?”

The baton in my hand had been handed to Kei, and the rest I had to do was to wait for her reply.

The chaotic Kei sorted out her feelings within her mind, and then she did her best to move her gaze back, as it had unconsciously wandered away.

“-Well, I’ll go out with you...then.”

“Can I interpret what you just said as that you like me?”

“You want me to say it!?”

Although I understood her confusion, it was an indispensable part of the confirmation.

Only after receiving a definite reply can the relationship between the two of us can truly change.

“Mhm, I want you to say it.”

I urged her like this, Kei, although she was surprised, did not outright reject it.

“....”

There was no third person listening in, nor was there a contract stamped between us.

It is only the two of us that know, it is a conversation between only the two of us, and it's between the two of us that we agreed to mutually help each other.

“Can you not answer?”

If she couldn't answer, then I had to propose what we should do, but.

“Wa-wait a second. Now, my emotions are all over the place...!”

Kei stretched out her open hands, to allow me to stop feeling anxious, waiting for a bit.

Looking at Kei, I decided to calmly wait for that moment to come.

After a bit, Kei looked at me, determination in her eyes.

“...Well, argh! That, how do I say it...”

Although she made up her mind, it still took some work to organize the words and speak them.

Due to me feeling that she was ineffably cute in that state, I didn't feel depressed even though I was waiting for this long for her answer.

“To you...basically, I...”

Although it was extremely hard to work up the courage to do so, Kei did not try to look away.

This might be proof of Kei's determination.

Karuizawa Kei's strength was that, once she had made up her mind, she would carry it out to the end, no matter what the situation.

“Li-like...huh...rather than say that...”

Kei’s voice became softer and softer, stammering, but persisting in revealing her feelings.

“I also... like... like...you. I don’t want to say it but...I-I admit! I admit it alright!”

I don’t know why she was angry, but even so, she still revealed her feelings of love.

I stretched out my arms and gently held Kei’s arms.

“W-wait!? D-don’t say you want to kiss!?”

Kei’s reaction was even stronger than when I told her I liked her.

Even if we kissed now, I don’t think Kei would object, but I did not want to do it now.

“I don’t plan to do that, at least for now.”

“For...for now...”

In other words, after that, the scene of us kissing would enter her vision.

Imagining that scene, Kei was motionless, as if she were frozen.

I embraced the Kei in that state.

This was proof that my relationship with Kei had taken a huge step forward.

“This should be fine, right?”

“-Well, if it’s only this....”

Even if I didn’t see Kei’s face, I understood.

The Kei right now, must be feeling confused, anxious, and happy.

Her face's expression had to be showing a feeling that was impossible to express with just a smile or other methods.

"Hey, haven't you grown a bit taller?"

"Maybe."

Before I came to this school, I measured 176cm tall. Growing during this year wasn't much of a deal.

The same was true for the other students.

People would grow.

They're also creatures that loved to learn.

This was instinct.

Just like learning how to ride a bike, or how to swim.

Just like learning how to use the chopsticks and how to drink from a straw.

I was also learning to fall in love through Kei.

This was something I had not learned in my life so far.

It was also something that couldn't be learned in the white room.

And it drove my inquiring mind.

Moreover, there was an important reason why I selected Kei.

This love was necessary for Karuizawa Kei's future growth.

Looking ahead to the next year, her relationship with me would be extremely important.

Kei's way of survival, as a parasite attached to a host, would someday fail.

To prevent this from happening, this stage was necessary.

I-

Me right now, what expression did I have?

Was I smiling?

Or was there a shy expression on my face?

Or was there a confused smile?

I didn't know.

The me now, did not know what expression I was wearing.

-No.

I actually knew.

The expression I had now.

I knew what I was thinking of now, and I also knew what I planned to do.

While learning, people would feel joy in the process.

Whether it was studying, athletics, or games, it was the same.

You felt happy when you made progress.

This was the same with love.

I still didn't understand love.

I didn't know what attachment was, and I didn't know what affection was.

And I didn't understand the relationship between men and women.

The embarrassment and happiness I felt waiting for the outcome, that kind of thing I was also not clear about.

In the near future, I would definitely learn the answers to those questions.

But nothing would change.

Merely learning, growing up, and moving forward.

In other words, Kei was like a textbook for me to the opposite sex.

And when I finished reading it- it's "purpose" would have been served.

Or-

Was a different future waiting for me?

Not leaving her side, becoming an irreplaceable existence for her.

I didn't know.

There was a part of me that hoped for that, and there was a part of me that understood that it wasn't possible.

So, let's pray.

Praying at the moment right now – holding an important person in my arms and smiling.

Praying, as a young student, swearing that I'll treasure her.

I gently embraced Kei, quietly praying.



Short Stories

The Second Chapter is about to Begin

On a certain day during spring vacation, with the second semester just around the corner.

Some cherry blossoms had already begun to bloom, welcoming the change from winter to spring.

“He-y!”

While I looked up at the cherry trees, a girl’s voice rang out to me.

“Here, here! Look here Ayanokouji-kun!”

It was a voice I’ve heard before, I thought when I suddenly was called by name. I soon realised who it was.

Ichinose was sitting under a cherry tree waving her hand at me.

“Did you go to school today?”

She was sitting there in her school uniform, right beneath the tree.

“Yes, I checked out the student council for a bit since the 2nd years said it probably will get busier now.”

“So you decided to do some flower viewing on your way back?”

“That’s it! I think I found the perfect spot.”

Looking right up at the sky and the cherry blossoms intertwined, she narrowed her eyes in a happy smile.

“I’ve never seen such small cherry flowers before. So they really do exist after all.”

This variety of cherries are called Omuro Ariake. Their small height, about 2m-4m, are one of their defining traits.

The school didn’t have those until last year so they must have been moved here from somewhere.

“How about it, Ayanokouji-kun? Want to sit?”

She prompted me to sit down beside her by tapping on the spot beside her. How should I put it, how she is able to carelessly call out to boys just like that is so like her and probably part of the reason she is so popular.

It wasn’t prohibited to move closer to the trees, but there was a warning sign that said we shouldn’t touch them without any reason to.

I didn’t have any excuses to refuse her so I sat down beside her.

“How about we watch them together?”

Thus I also looked straight up as she had.

“Oh-”

They may have been small, but at this range, they left a surprisingly strong impression.

From time to time, a sudden gust of wind would make the pretty cherry petals dance and scatter around. As if it was all but a dream.

“It’s nice to do some flower viewing from time to time, right?”

“Yeah.”

While we both looked up at the cherry blossoms, we talked together about the most casual of things.

The impending battle looming in the distance all but forgotten for just this moment.

By Reading Books

It was at the beginning of the spring vacation. I wore my casual clothes and headed for the Keyaki mall.

«Good day, Ayanokouji-kun»

And there, right in front of me was a student from another class right. I felt this was somewhat unusual as we went to the cafe.

«You are pretty early.»

«There's no way I can be late since I'm the one inviting after all.

Ayanokouji-kun, who was so intelligent and so mature, was as relaxed as always. I have become fond of him lately for that.

No, perhaps not in the terms of someone of the opposite sex, but it could be said it was him as a person perhaps...

That's why I end up wanting to meet him like this, whether it was a day off or not. I don't have much experience going out to play with friends during day offs in the first place.

The main reason is that I haven't managed to make any close friends, however.

That's exactly why I don't want to make them wait for me I think. Thinking that I would trouble him and disappoint him is what I wouldn't like. Even though I don't think of him as someone of the opposite sex, I end up doing it in the end. I become happy thinking that I'm the same as other girls experiencing the same thing as well. I wonder what this fluffy feeling I

can't quite define is? I'm looking forward to investigate this during our meeting.

«I am sorry for inviting you so suddenly.»

Even though I contacted him and, somewhat impatiently, said that he would be grateful if we could meet during early April, he didn't make a troubled face and I even made him change his schedule this sudden.

«I don't have anything planned during the spring vacation for that matter so don't worry about it. Well then—»

«The library finally got some new books yesterday.»

I wanted to speak so much that I failed to suppress my excitement and showed him my bag.

«So that's why I wanted us to share information as fast as possible.»

Before I knew it, we arrived at the cafe but since spring vacation just started, it was crowded.

«There are more people here than I thought.»

We managed to secure a seat by the window and close to the counter so we decided on that spot.

«We don't get many chances to meet like this during day offs so it feels so fresh to me.»

«You may be right about that.»

It was almost like a boy and a girl having a date together. No, it was precisely that but I will become more embarrassed by this train of thinking so I decided to stop.

«Well, let us begin... Do you want to look at the books I brought with me?»

I tried to overwrite she embarrassment by taking out a book I looked forward to show him. But then I remembered there was something I wanted to talk to him about.

My own class. It was just as important as me being his friend. Even if he ends up disliking me, it was something I had to do.

«Right, before we get excited talking about books, there is something I wanted to talk about, could I take some of your time?»

I brought up, looking directly at his eyes. His eyes looked as if he could see through anything, just as always. I felt that a day would come where we would fight against each other in the future. He would most likely be the most dangerous enemy my class will ever face. While looking him in the eyes, I became even more convinced of that.

Mind Games

I'm chasing Ayanokouji-kun with light steps pondering on where to take a break. And then when I arrived at that corner I had seen him disappear from, I met him. He was facing me.

«Wha!?»

I let out my surprised voice at this unexpected development.

Why. That was obvious, he had noticed that I was tailing him.

«Do you need something from me?»

«Me, what do you mean? ...is something I want to say, but it seems like you've seen through me already.»

He was inviting me so I can't feign ignorance as that would just feel like I'm conceding more goals. I'd better just acknowledge it.

«Yes, well you see, I was chasing after you.»

I may have sucked at this, but do people usually notice someone tailing them? Was I seen by him somewhere?

Just as I expected, Ayanokouji-kun in front of me is may not be normal. I became more wary of him.

Now that it has come to this, it's either sink or swim, let's make sure. As long as it's mind games, I don't think I will lose.

«Why do you think I followed after you?»

I'll try to lead him with questions to make him tell me to what degree he has noticed me.

«Who knows, I don't know where to start. More importantly, when did you begin tailing me?»

I wanted to pry some information from him, but he had managed to hand the ball over to me.

«It was just now maybe. So—»

«Just now?»

Ah, dang, he only throws such ambiguous questions. But I have to stay calm. Stay calm. If I let my rhythm get disturbed and say something incoherent, it will be my loss. I wonder if I should just say that I thought him and the chairman meeting as unusual and therefore followed after him? If I say I started to tail him at the cafe, he would most likely ask why.

«Who was it again... right, from when you talked to that new chairman I think?»

Since I've managed to keep some space between him and me, I will take the initiative and come back at you.

«So did something happen? You talked with the chairman, right?»

«It seems like 'e's planning to remodel Keyaki mall and saw me and asked for opinions. What facilities would make me happy etc. He asked me a few questions about that.»

«Ohhh, so that's what it was...»

Certainly, there were other adults there when they started conversing so it might just be a coincidence. It seems like there are no links between his true abilities and the Chairman after all.

«So, what about it?»

«It's not really related to that, you see. There is just something I found interesting.»

The thing with the Chairman wasn't important to me. It was whether Ayanokouji-kun was being serious or not, only that.

«You know, during the final special exam last semester... wasn't you the leader, right?»

Since I ended up meeting him like this, I'll throw every single information I know at him.

«During that flash arithmetic event, the answer you and Kouenji gave was the same.»

It wasn't a math problem that could be solved by chance.

«I did flash arithmetics during middle school so I'm relatively good at it.»

«I'm the same but, that level of yours can't be explained as being relatively good at it, right? That's probably at the national level, is what I think.»

«That was just because it was an event I'm good at. In fact, I've also participated in national competitions.»

Ayanokouji-kun easily admitted to it.

«...really?»

«Yeah. Since it was an event I'm good at, you may have misunderstood me I think.»

It seems plausible that there are persons who are only good at flash arithmetics. But unless you are pretty smart, you won't be able to solve problems just like that one. And the fact that he didn't reveal that he was good at it is a problem in itself.

«But you know, why didn't you just tell us that a bit earlier?»

«That's true. But, you know my personality, right? I'm not at the position where I can just take the initiative and tell the class about it. I became the leader since I had the protection point after all. What's more, our opponent was Sakayanagi from class A. Even if I said I was good at it, I was worried since I didn't know whether they would have believed me or not.»

...I had planned to corner him, but I can't get a grasp of him. He easily answered my questions like it was the natural thing to do. He didn't try to excuse himself in some flustered manner either. There are a lot of people that don't have confidence in themselves. They are unable to declare something since they are can't say what they want to. There is nothing in our conversation that is weird when comparing it to how he has been until now.

«That... Well, that may be so.»

Oh, no no! I can't seem to say what I was thinking in my head. Was it because he didn't lie? No, even if that was the case, there is still something suspicious thing going on. It may change if brought up the cases regarding Hirata-kun and Karuizawa-san. My pace may have been thrown into disorder, but I promised again from the bottom of my heart, yet again, that I would regain my strength for what to come next.

A Prediction of the Future

After the the end-of-term ceremony was concluded, all students went to their respective classrooms for some last explanations before I left the classroom at immediately.

That being said, with my impaired feet, I couldn't move as fast as other people. I eventually reached my goal and waited for that person who seemingly was delayed.

«What are you doing out here, Sakayanagi?»

Mashima, who attended the farewell ceremony for the 3rd years, puzzlingly asked me as he came closer.

«I've been waiting for you, Mashima-sensei»

«...For me?»

«Yes. You are about to meet Ayanokouji-kun and Chabashira-sensei in the reception room, am I correct?»

«What do you mean?»

Mashima-sensei wouldn't admit it, at least on the surface.

But I already know the finer details. From the time I gave Ayanokouji-kun my father's phone number, I expected this to happen.

«You must have gotten a message from Chairman Sakayanagi to meet Ayanokouji-kun. Chabashira-sensei should be present as well, I presume?»

«How do you know that?»

«I just know more about the situation than both you and Chabashira-sensei, that's all.»

«Even if that's true, your name wasn't mentioned.»

«That's because I'm taking part on the spur of the moment. Could you I accompany you?»

«I sadly don't have the permission to do so. It would become a problem were I to take you along.»

«I will just meet up with you later even if we went separately. So why don't we just go together in the first place? I believe It will save you some time as well.»

Even if I didn't get his permission to go together with him, I would visit the reception room alone.

In other words, the conclusion would be the same anyway.

«...Fine, since it looks like you already know about the circumstances.»

«Thank you very much.»

I turned around and took a step towards the reception room. He soon caught up to me.

«What in the world are we going to discuss at this meeting?»

«Something very, very interesting.»

I can predict some of the moves the Interim Chairman Tsukishiro may use in the future. I feel my boring days are getting more colourful just by imagining that. Following after Mashima, we walked into the reception room where Ayanokouji-kun is waiting.

To enjoy my time with him. And to enjoy what's about to come.

What Became Apparent to Me a Year After

It happened on that day right before the spring break was over.

I dragged myself to the Keyaki mall. Once I defeated Ichinose and managed to return our class back to Class C, I decided to fight with Ayanokouji again.

I have to think up a good strategy or else it won't work on that guy.

Which is why I seek someone who can become my hands and legs and move according to my will. No matter how insignificant they may be.

There should be several useful pawns in his class that could be easily swayed.

My class on the other hand, has for some reason too many of those who only have muscles for brain.

They are sorta excellent as foot soldiers, but they can't follow detailed instructions.

And what's more, my class still has a deeply rooted distrust towards me.

Right now, Ishizaki holds the position as the ruler of the class, but I'm getting bored of his acting skills.

A critical point for me to think over is when to take the reigns from him again.

«Good morning. Are you alone today?»

I sat down at a seat at the Keyaki Mall, waiting for Ibuki and Ishizaki to arrive, when a certain busybody called out to me.

It was Sakayanagi Arisu.

«I can say the same to you, what happened to those bodyguards of yours, Sakayanagi?»

I can't see Kamuro or Hashimoto here either, those servants of hers... no, maybe I should say familiars?

«Fufu. Even I go out alone sometimes. Congratulations on your comeback victory.»

«Same for you. You beat Suzune's class I hear.»

«4 wins, 3 losses. It was close of a result despite fighting with a lower class however.»

«But you won so they have just become stepping stones for you in the end.»

A lead of 500 points was too large to lose during a single year. You could safely assume it meant you were safe. Or at least, that's how lazy people normally thought.

«Empty words coming from you. You mean to say you plan to close the gap in 2 years...no, within this year. At least, you eyes do.»

«Kuku, who knows?»

«How about it? Care for a cup of tea we while discuss the next year together?»

«Together? I have nothing to talk about. And I'm not in the mood either, alright?»

«Oh, really? I was thinking of a little celebration for your comeback. My treat, of course.»

She's obviously looking down on me, but she's still watching my every steps. Making sure she doesn't miss anything.

If I show her even the slightest of strange movements, it would bring her joy beyond compare.

The battle between us has already begun.

Well, I can play with her anytime. We'll just try to read into what's hidden behind each other anyway.

I didn't have any intention of doing that today.

«Later.»

I stood up, looking for another place to go. Seeing me like that, she called out to me again.

«Your aura has certainly changed.»

«What?»

«A year ago, you would look at me with full enmity in your eyes. You surely don't look like that same person to me.»

I laughed making a sound saying 'as if'. The same smile appeared on her face.

So, she doesn't think I'm showering her with all my hostility now, is she? I thought while holding back my laughter.

«The fact that you still are directing it towards me hasn't changed. But it's obvious that the 'colour' has changed.»

It seems like what she tried to say wasn't what I had expected.

«I didn't think you were even worthy of being my opponent right after we entered school, but it's different now it seems.»

«That's stupid, Sakayanagi. Aren't you overestimating yourself a bit, huh? My principle is to win no matter what methods I have to use. I can kick you

down to the ground right here, right now if I wanted, you see? And just so you know, I won't show any mercy to you even if you cry.»

Since neither Hashimoto nor Kitou were here, she was just a weak girl who couldn't even beat a brat.

«As you say, I'd have no chance to win in a physical fight, but that doesn't mean you'd win either.»

«So you won't admit a loss from violence just because of your handicap, huh?»

«That's not the problem. Physical power is also a necessary factor to any fights. I'm just saying that exercising violence against me here wouldn't lead to your victory. A lot of people and surveillance cameras are watching us now after all. It won't just end with a suspension, if you raised a hand against me now. I, who can't move as I please, I may say. What a third party observer would deem a victory is also an important factor as well.»

«Logically that is. But what if I wanted to use force to claim my victory for my own satisfaction, what then?»

I took a step towards her and lightly raised a clenched fist in a somewhat threatening manner.

I think it would have been a bit cute to see her frightened by this, somewhat charming. But she didn't fret a single bit, only showing me that unpleasant smile of hers.

She's way too naive if she thought I wouldn't hit her for real. But that wasn't the reason it seems.

She didn't mind since being hit wasn't a loss, but instead a step leading to her victory. That's what her eyes told me.

«You do have intelligence, despite your appearances. I'm just relieved you also can calculate your gains and losses.»

Even if I punched her, she would end up brandishing her mark of the lowest scum onto me.

«I think you, as you are right now, have grown to be worthy of playing with, you know?»

You say I've grown during this year?

Lol....you say the most ridiculous things as you please.

«I haven't changed at all.»

«You sure about that? You've changed quite a bit as far as I can see.»

She was still persistent on that despite my denial.

Foolish ideas, I thought...

But, I might have changed a bit.

I thought I didn't have any room for growth after middle school.

I thought I had matured completely.

And everyone else was my playthings.

I had no empathy towards such things.

«The current you seems to have changed your view compared to how you were a year ago perhaps?»

Right... I've changed how I view things.

I decided this school wasn't much of anything once I took control over Class-C in April.

I was aware that Sakayanagi, who used Katsuragi as her plaything, was pretty smart, but other than that she wasn't worth taking notice of.

I only thought about how to stave off boredom by crushing Class B or Class D.

It's laughable now that I think about it.

But anyway, even I was surprised by how much motivation I had towards trying to pull up my class now.

«It seems to me that something big has happened that made you change this much.»

Her attitude and eyes were telling me she was testing me, but I didn't show her anything and just let it go.

«Fufu, I'm looking forward to— a new war this year too, okay?»

«You'll end up regretting it.»

I noticed the guys I'd been waiting for, then turned my back and walked away from Sakayanagi.

«Good morning, Ryuuen-san. That was Sakayanagi...right? Did something happen?»

Ishizaki was taking glances back while trying to catch up to me.

«Just some small talk.»

I'd have wasted time and energy trying to explain to these guys anyway.

Even idiots learn in their idiotic ways since he shut his mouth and didn't pursue the topic.

«Ah, by the way, we met Ayanokouji this morning. He also went to this Keyaki mall.»

«I see.»

At this time of day, the amount of places which could be used was limited.

Meeting up and talking with someone on the 2nd floor should be about it.

Well, I don't think that would end in just 10 to 20 minutes.

Going out this early must mean that the talk must be somewhat important after all.

I'll make these guys make the first moves for starters.

«Oh by the way, Ryuu-en-san. I suggested a plan to Ayanokouji, but he refused it though. To have him and you in the same class and aim for Class A together...»

«Are you an idiot? No way Ryuu-en will say that's a good idea even if you told him.»

Ibuki was disgusted by it, but what Ishizaki said shouldn't be overlooked.

It's true that if we joined forces for real, there would be no enemies left standing in our year.

«Well, that's impossible.»

«So it was impossible... yeah... sorry for my stupid suggestion.»

«And? Why did you call us today?»

«I wanted to talk about this 2nd year and what follows.»

«What follows?»

«It doesn't have anything to do with special exams, I will crush Class A this year.»

«... You're not joking, are you?»

«Sakayanagi won't show us any openings but if we let Class A steamroll their way, any chances we have will disappear. I'll drag them back with me and defeat them to smithereens, no matter how stubborn I have to be.»

But well, I need to make sure of the timing and such at least.

«What about Class B?»

«They'll just self-destruct if we leave them alone. They won't use any dirty tricks.»

In other words, they aren't worth paying any attention to.

«Oh yeah, we don't need to be aware of them, right.»

The only exception may be Kanzaki, but he isn't worthy of being my opponent at this stage.

Whether he only has the ability to bark or not will become apparent sooner or later.

«That's right, no need to pay them any attention, but—that's why we must go out and finish them. To crush them so that they never can rise again.»

And defeating all classes will send him a signal as well.

1

I was waiting for Ayanokouji to leave the café.

If he wasn't alone, I would have to wait for the next chance even though it was a bother.

«You heard from Ishizaki that I would be here?»

«Yeah, I came here searching for you, even wasting my time to greet you, you hear?»

I looked at his face which lacked any expressions making it hard to figure him out.

«You already do know my contact info I'm sure. Wouldn't it have been better to contact me then?»

«I thought it was better to speak up face to face to that dull face of yours.»

I don't know anything about how he feels, but that's why I can't evade meeting him straight on.

To conquer him, breaking through that mental iron wall of his is of utmost importance.

Anyway, there is something I must check with him.

«What did you mean by 'that'?»

Even though I asked vaguely, he immediately understood.

The thing I meant by 'that' was his message he made Hiyori tell me.

I'd won 5 to 2 against Ichinose and crushed her during the last special exam of the year

Her mental state as a leader had been shook thoroughly, the pressure to her classmates has continued, and some of her classmates couldn't join the exam due to stomachaches caused by me.

He knew about my methods and cheekily left a message for me: 'I'd would have easily managed over 5 wins with a better method'.

That move just made me want to talk to him whether he wanted it or not.

It was as if I was being forced to obediently listen to his preaching from some god's point of view.

«Just as I said. I'd have done better than you.»

«What methods I use is up to me alone.»

If I'd use any other methods and won 5 times, it would still just be another 5 wins to me.

No difference at all.

«That isn't definite. If you had to leave the school due to some blunder, I would be sad.»

Some blunder? No way I was going to lose against Ichinose.

I'd just follow this stupid joke of his.

«Kuku, what's up with this joke? Quite arrogant of you despite losing to Sakayanagi and getting demoted.»

The match between Ayanokouji and Sakayanagi's classes ended 4 to 3 with Sakayanagi leading her class to victory.

But of course, there is no way he's inferior to her.

Since the peculiarity of that exam meant that the Keeps was limited in what they could do.

No... if he'd been serious I'd bet he could win any exams.

Which means he wasn't serious or that someone interfered.

«It's true our class lost to hers. I have no excuse for that since I was the Keep. Whether Sakayanagi is superior to me or not is for you to find out later.»

«What the heck— you looking down on me?»

He easily acknowledged his loss, but that just irritated me even more.

I came closer and peeked at his eyes which lacked any colours.

«Someone who beat me once can never be inferior to her.»

«That's flattering of you, but what if I really didn't rest on my laurels during the exam?»

«Too bad, I don't believe it. You didn't want to fight from the beginning then rather than you getting serious and losing.... or that some kind of

accident occurred. That's a hell lotta easier to believe. I'd believe it if the school wanted to maintain some image and planned for Class A to win anyway.»

His strength isn't on the level of a 1st year high schooler.

I came to experience that during our fight in the first year with my own body.

I even want to know what kind of life he's led up until now to become this kind of monster.

«And? What are you going to do now after your comeback, Ryuuuen?»

«You don't get to decide whether I come back or not. I plan to enjoy this nice vacation for a bit longer.»

Now is the best time to make those various moves behind the stages.

«But... If I get bored of this vacation, I'll crush Ichinose and Sakayanagi to warm up.»

«That's a big change of heart.»

«Kukuku, certainly. I'm surprised too. I didn't think I'd get this excited over a chance to take my revenge on you.»

«I see.»

No matter what he replied, there was no use trying to read into his intent.

But what's clear is that Ayanokouji isn't an ally of Sakayanagi and Ichinose.

No, it may be that even Suzune isn't regarded as an ally by him either.

«I'm grateful for that. If you could crush Ichinose and Sakayanagi first, it would be the best I could hope for. I can smoothly aim upwards.»

«I thought you didn't care about your class at all?»

«It's a bit different now. That class will be in a good position by the same time next year. Even if I won't be there anymore.»

«What?»

Even if I won't be there anymore?

«I may be targeted from now on so it won't be a surprise if someone managed to expel me. Right?»

That's a stupid thing to worry about.

«Rest assured. If someone is expelling you, that will be me.»

I can't think of any others from any classes in any years who can expel him.

I laughed silently due to my own thoughts.

«But—»

I said to him and suddenly closed the distance between us.

Giving him no time for caution, as quick as I could, as fast, directly at him.

«Raaahhh!!»

I aimed for the space right in front of his eyes using my right foot with no hesitation.

But that was the opening move.

Even if you managed to deal with it, it wasn't that important.

It was just the first strike that came with any fight.

But if he managed to dodge it, that would be his downfall.

I proceeded to kick his head with all the power I could muster with my left foot.

But—

He calmly dodged the kick as if he'd known a second strike would come after the first.

He wasn't too early or too late.

With just the necessary movements.

I had thought of a third strike, but the movements he showed dampened my intent and tension released from my muscles.

«Hah, so even a surprise attack like this won't do anything. What kind of monster are you?»

No matter how this was repeated, he would easily defend against it.

Any fights using force, in other words, brawls, won't be able to defeat his intricacy.

I have to relentlessly strike at him using some unorthodox methods or strategy or else it won't work.

«Quite the showman you are.»

He must be telling me to be aware of my time and place, but that's why I did it.

The fact that a countless amount of cameras were installed here just made it clear I had to do it.

«My heart is howling at me; to devour you.»

If he was even a bit irritated by this surprise attack, I would gladly do it again.

«Not striking back?»

I tried provoking him, but he didn't move of course.

«I want to avoid any risks from fighting with you here. And it's not the right time for that.»

«Hah, the mercy of the strong? You saying it makes it seem so much real, this is getting exciting.»

My muscles began to tension again.

Maybe I shall strike him again now, I thought but...

«You have potential. That's why you should grow up properly, Ryuuen.»

My tension turned into anger once I heard those words. That wasn't the words used when dealing with an equal opponent, far from it.

Venting my frustration, I punched at those damn walls.

«Grow up properly, you say? When the fuck did you become my teacher?»

«I'm just telling you the truth. But don't let the carpet get so easily pulled from under you.»

«What?»

«It seems you did some dirty tricks using Ishizaki and the others. It wasn't a bad idea to use the karaoke to mix in those stuff, but if there were any traces left you would have been finished. You would have been expelled on the spot. Even if you managed to feign ignorance, if something strange had happened during the exam, the school would be suspicious of you, of course. The fact Ichinose didn't file a complaint was your only saving grace, Ryuuen.»

«I used her good-naturedness in my calculations.»

«If so that was naive of you. You will never be able to catch up to me at this rate.»

«...Look at you.»

He pinpointed out the naivety in my strategy.

«Whether you heed my warning is for you to decide. But—if you remain as you are now, a rematch isn't even on the table.»

So he's saying if I wanted to fight with him, I need to grow up?

I'd kill everyone who tries to advise or warn me but...

«I'll listen to your stupid advice since we're here right now. But I'll crush you sooner or later.»

Since he was the only exception I'd acknowledged, I'll take it as an adult for now.

«That's the spirit, Ryuuen. Having you crush and expel me doesn't sound too bad after all.»

2

«Having you crush and expel me doesn't sound too bad, eh?»

What an idiotic thing to say.

If you so desire it, I'll expel you.

I usually would have said that straight to him, but even such a bluff wouldn't work against him.

I've always challenged any opponent I've met without any fear until now.

Even an opponent such as Albert that I've lost to once would be devoured just like a snake and made obedient.

I have confidence that I can discover the winning move against any and all humans.

But he isn't in the same dimension as those.

Any physical attacks don't seem to work on him, not even mentioning psychologic ones.

And I don't even need to say this, but I've never seen someone with such a sharp mind before either.

«Makes me laugh when thinking of my old self.»

Someone absurd has slipped into class D.

But there is no need to panic.

What's important isn't who is winning right now.

If I'm the victor at the very moment we are graduating in two years, there's no problem at all.

It doesn't matter whether we are in class A or Class D or whatever.

Me and Ayanokouji. The hound or the bitch. Who is which? It's fine, I just need to win.

'No matter the methods' I have to use.

The Person Who Became Dear to Me

I finished changing my clothes and grabbed my phone, feeling a bit melancholic.

«Good grief... what is it now?»

I was preparing myself when I suddenly got a call.

An unknown 11-digits phone number that wasn't in my contact list.

I obviously knew who it was. It was Kiyotaka.

The scene of him and Hiyori-san on that date appeared before my eyes.

He's free to hang out with whoever, wherever he wants to, of course.

Since our relationship wasn't anything special after all.

But still...

«Ah, enough! Why do I have to feel so irritated and getting pushed around by someone like him!»

I stopped thinking too deeply about it, dispelled my feelings and prepared to take the call.

I planned to eat out with Ishikura-san and Sonoda-san today. I'm going to have fun today.

«It's me, sorry for calling you.»

I restrained my voice which was about to burst and calmed myself down.

«It's fine. What?»

«You sound like you have some complaints though.»

«Not really. Not complaining, just wanted to confirm something with you.»

«That I called you out recently and didn't get in touch with you later?»

If you understood that, so at least follow up, will you! Whoops, I should keep that to myself...

«You seem to understand then, what? Just wanted to harass me?»

«Could we meet up and talk about that?»

«Eh?»

«Remember the thing I said I would tell you if I remembered it? I just did. Could you come over?»

What's up with that?... You didn't contact me after that and now you want to talk with me? And in your room?

«Good grief... You always do it when it pleases you... I guess it's fine. I'm not taking any responsibilities if someone sees me, okay?»

It will become a problem if I were seen trying to enter a boy's room alone.

«Don't worry about that.»

I thought he would have some misgivings about that, but it seems I was wrong.

Well, if he says he isn't worried, then why should I?

«Got it. Ah, I have something planned by 7pm so I can't have you take too much time, okay?»

«It will be short. Probably around 10 to 20 minutes.»

«It's alright for me then. See you later.»

I ended the call and sighed.

I felt relieved the call didn't turn for the worse.

«Why does my heart have to be pushed around by a guy like him?»

I don't feel like being toying around by him either, but well, it can't be helped.

This is a shield to protect myself.

Yes, that's why it can't be helped.

«...It wouldn't be fair otherwise, right.»

1

I began to prepare myself before leaving for his room.

A meal is waiting for me after this. So let's be done with this quickly, that kind of feeling.

But it was so quiet when I arrived.

He was just looking at me, not delving into any important topics.

«So, what is it?»

Don't even tell me he has forgotten the matter after I came here?

His answer when I tried to cut through this awkwardness was...

«What do you mean?»

An evasive reply. I became a bit irritated by that.

«What do you mean? Didn't you just recall what you wanted to say?»

«Now that you say it, yes, I suppose that's true.»

«.....»

I thought he would start talking again, but he became quiet and the silence returned.

«Oh come on, what is it?»

«Well, you don't need to be so hasty.»

«I'm pretty sure I mentioned it, didn't I? I'm eating with my friends at 7PM at the Keyaki Mall. Understand?»

«There still a lot of time. It's going to be fine.»

«Hmm, you kinda give me the goosebumps, you know? The way you just go on and on about nonsense.»

He normally would keep things as short as necessary, precisely to the point.

That was my usual impression of him.

I thought his usual self was impressive, honestly.

How shall I say it? He was being so calm despite the fact we are the same age. Or rather cool. That part of him was somewhat attractive, so to say.

No, no. I have to be angry now. What up with praising him now?

«...Oh by the way. I have something I need to tell you, okay?»

I didn't like how he wasn't himself so I changed the topic.

«Something you need to tell me?»

«Satou-san is suspecting my relationship with you, you know?»

Even if he had the initiative, even I could influence it.

That's why I sometimes have to start the conversation myself. If not, something bad might occur.

«I thought she might begin to hate me after I rejected her. What suspicions?»

It would be easy to think she would dislike him after that. But his situation is totally different.

He seems like he would need an explanation about romance from A to Z just for him to understand as he's kind of distant, right?

Unlike any middle schoolers I know of.

That's what giving me so much stress right now.

«She thinks I might have broken up with Hirata to go out with you. She tried to ask me about it in a roundabout way.»

It was about a boy she liked so of course she would notice something.

And that—I really saw him differently from every other boy.

«I refuted it of course, but I'm not sure how much she believed me.»

I don't think she would forgive me if she knew we were meeting up with each other like this.

If we had changed positions, I would feel the same.

«I see. I had a similar conversation too.»

«What? Something similar?»

There shouldn't be anything similar to that as far as I know, except for Satou-san's case.

«Matsushita was a bit suspicious about you and me. Asked whether we were dating or not.»

Eh? Matsushita? By Matsushita you mean the one from our class?

My mind went into a panic from the sudden mention of her name.

«Wha? What? No way, right? Really? You're not joking?»

He nodded slightly and talked about the events leading to that but...

You mean, she started suspecting his real abilities during the special exam?

«W-wait a bit! I can't keep up with this!»

It was bad enough with Satou alone. And now even Matsushita?

I'm getting a headache...

«I think it's getting really bad, kinda... do you have something up your sleeve?»

It should still be possible to calm down the situation if I just apologised once or twice.

But what he replied back was...

«I think it's fine to ignore it?»

He chose the worst option with that composed expression of his.

«No, no, that's no good!— And our relationship... isn't anything special to begin with either!»

I was the one who had the most to lose if I ignored it!

«Do you dislike others thinking there may be something even when there's nothing there? Even if, let's say she spread a rumour, just let her say what she wants, right?»

«What? Just let her say what she wants?...There's no way I can do that. Tell it straight to her right now, that there is nothing between us!»

Whatever the truth may be, the important thing is how to convey that to the other person.

I want to avoid destroying the peace in my class at all costs.

Does he think it will be fine as long as he protects me with his body?

If he thinks so, he's wrong. Peace of mind is also important.

«It may have the opposite effect if I tried to explain it to Matsushita now.»

«You should have known that from the start, didn't you? Why make such a half-assed lie?»

«No matter how I explained it, it wouldn't change anything. Satou is suspecting there is something between us right? Since she is close to Matsushita, she will eventually tell her that our relationship isn't normal. No, the possibility that she made a move after being told is pretty high.»

«...You, may be right...»

Rumours of our relationship being spread far and wide, even if it was a lie, would be a total loss for me.

Or perhaps not. There would be a small saving grace. But just a small one, really.

If we truly were going out then, well, I mean, we aren't so...

«I mean... won't they think that I broke up with Hirata-kun to date you instead? I'm the one getting troubled if there's even the slightest chance it spreads to our class, no, our whole school, you know.»

«Why should that worry you?»

He wouldn't understand me no matter what.

«Listen here—. If such a rumour was out there, it would affect me from now on.»

What's going on inside this skull of this love-dead boy?

That's precisely why he didn't notice Satou's and my feelings for him.

«Okay? Being approached by the opposite sex is hard if there is some scent of some other person there, understood?»

I pointed my finger at him.

«So you are saying you want to find a new love and that I'm in the way?»

«...That's how it is.»

Honestly, I'm not thinking of getting a boyfriend now, but, that's just how it is.

I seemed to have gotten the message through so I proceeded forward.

I was beginning to think he was pretending dumb after all this.

But since we arrived at this topic, I once again recalled that scene.

Hiyori-san and him discussing happily at the cafe.

«Do you really understand? Right, care to listen?»

Since we ended up here, I have to confirm something.

He called me up saying he had something to discuss, yet made me look at that until the end.

There's no way I can leave without saying my piece of mind about that.

«You...are you close to this Shiina?»

«Shiina? Ah, you mean Hiyori?»

«Hiyo...»

He easily used her first name instead of her last.

Well... he's free to call other girls by their first names as he pleases, like me.

Everyone in that group he's so close to also uses their first name I hear.

But, Shiina-san is well, not like that... not that I care.

«We are certainly rather close. We both like to read books so our hobbies align. How about it?»

S-same hobbies... r-reading books? Isn't that like, the total opposite from me?...

«Heee? The same hobby? Reading books... heee....heee. So completely different from me?»

I slipped up, saying exactly what I thought.

«And?»

He nonchalantly faced me like he was asking why I wanted to hear about that in the first place.

«...No, I mean... Argh! I forgot what to say!»

I just didn't have anything else I'd wanted to say for that matter.

Anyway, I tried to squeeze out some words as if to compromise, still worrying.

«If the rumours about you and I were to spread, I mean, it would be harder for you to get closer to Shiina-san, right?»

There was some part of me that wanted him to deny it.

«I see. That's certainly a possibility.»

But he didn't deny it, instead he agreed with me in full honesty.

«Not that I care really. You're free to get close to whoever you want for that matter.»

I turned my back towards him as if trying to run away.

Hey, I can't do this anymore. My feelings I had tried to hold in was about to burst forth.

«Sorry but, could... we have leave this talk for later? I want to head for Keyaki mall a bit early. There may be some boys from other classes coming too. I'm going to chase away the rumours so I need to get into the mood. I don't have the time to deal with you.»

I wouldn't know what else I could have ended up saying to him if I were to stay here.

I don't know what these depressing feeling are. I just don't understand.

«Mood?»

«I'm looking for a new boyfriend since I broke up with Hirata-kun. Got a problem?»

It was just a gathering of girls eating together, but I wanted to put on the airs.

«Not at all.»

«...Right? That's why I'm leaving now.»

He stood up as if trying to chase after me.

«It's fine.»

Even if he were to see me out, it would just make me feel sick.

«Kei.»

He called me by my name.

Why does my heart have to skip just like that?

«What is it already?»

Why am I the only one being pushed here and there by his words and actions?

«It's just, if you don't like it, it's fine for you to keep looking another way.»

Why am I— the only one...who...

«What?»

«Will you go out with me?»

«Eh?»

I frowned and turned around, not sure I understood.

«What did you say? Or, what is it?»

He was listening to me when I said I didn't have time, right?

While I was thinking along those lines...

«That's not what I meant. I asked if, you wanted to go out with me.»

Me going out with him?

«No I mean— I don't really... under...stand...»

Going out?

Hmm...?

Eh, wait a bit. Wait a bit...?

The way he looked at me, that gaze and presence.

«W-ai, eh, wha, what!? What's up with that joke, that's bad taste even for you...!?»

«If it was a joke.»

Yes, if it was a joke, it wasn't something I'll ever forgive him for.

Swaying my heart right and left, left and right and saying this after all that.

«B-but—didn't you mention getting closer to Shiina-san just now!?»

«That was the joke.»

«But—the other day—»

Didn't you get intimate with Shiina-san recently...!

But Kiyotaka's next words drowned out what I was about to say.

«That was simply, well. I wanted to test whether you would became jealous or not, I suppose.»

Then... so there really isn't anything between him and Shiina-san?

In other words, he wanted to see my reaction to watching that?

So—well, Kiyotaka is, in other words, eh...

«If this is a joke, this is the last chance to take it back... You do know that, don't you?»

If that was his idea of teasing, it would be a huge shame and disgrace on my part.

Our relationship will most likely break apart at once.

I became unable to reply.

No, maybe I had wanted it to be a joke.

Since—if he was serious, that would mean, that I have to answer him too—

«Of course it's not a joke. May I hear your reply?»

It's not... a joke?

You mean... you were serious?

So, in other words, Kiyotaka came to like me?

My mind went blank for a second, then it began to overflow.

«...Y, y-y-y-y-y-you are asking that of me!?»

Something inside me broke out and I started panicking, making a quite the commotion.

«As I said earlier, you can look away, reject me, you can do what you wish to.»

«I didn't say I was going to ignore you! B-but, why!?»

«By 'why' you mean?»

«Well, that is, me... I mean... by the way, why today...?»

It was so abrupt. All the frustration built up until now was turned upside down in dramatical fashion.

«I wonder why. I'm not sure I can explain it very well, but there is one thing I can explain. I wanted to stop any other guy from getting you as their girlfriend.»

So my lie had taken form in a most unlikely way inside his heart?

«So you mean— You, you like... like... me?»

I tried putting it into words, trying to confirm it. There's no way I wasn't going to.

I wanted to hear his answer directly with my ears.

«Yes, I love Karuizawa Kei.»

I love Karuizawa Kei.

I love Karuizawa Kei.

I love Karuizawa Kei.

W-haaaaaaa!!

His voice was reverberating inside my brain like a ringing bell.

«You answer is?»

A-answer? What's an answer? What should I say back to someone who said they liked me?

'I love you too!' Do I have to say something that embarrassing!?

Eh, eh? If I answer him, wouldn't our relationship change here and there!?

I wanted to answer, but the panic, the agony, my head just shorted out.

No that's wrong. I, have to admit it. That I've loved Kiyotaka from way back.

But still, I'd had thought our relationship didn't change, wouldn't change. But I was wrong.

«—I-I'll let you go out... with me.»

I answered him as if confessing something.

But, he was somehow calm, didn't cry, didn't show a smile, just showing strong will.

«Can I take it as you also liking me?»

But he didn't seem satisfied or something, like he wanted something else.

«You want me to say it!?»

«Yes, I want you to.»

N-no way. Ah, I haven't even prepared for any confessions at all!

If I knew it would turn like this, I would have made some more effort and done something!

The only saving grace was that I was planning to go out to eat with some friends. I'm so glad for that...

Being dressed up like this, I mean.

But I have to answer him here.

As a boy and a girl. It was important to answer to the other person's feelings.

«...Well, you know? I mean, you know—....I, I lik...kinda... kinda, sorta...»

I was so trying to be cool, but the voice I managed was so low I doubt it was audible.

I didn't like that weakness of mine so I added some words as I continued.

«I also... like... fell for... It's frustrating but...I-I admit, I admit it!»

Indeed. I looked at his eyes and said it. He then reached out his hands and gently grabbed both of mine.

«W-wait!? D-don't say you wanted to kiss!?»

«No. I won't do that. Not yet.»

He won't do it yet!?

A-ahem. It's certainly too early, I mean. A kiss now, when my heart isn't calming down would be...right.

He quietly embraced me. His large body. I felt his powerful arms touching me.

«This should be fine, right?»

«—Well, if it's only this...»

As he held me in his arms, I thought he had grown a bit from before.

«Hey, haven't you gotten a bit taller?»

«I may have.»

From today, he and I started walking on the path of lovers together, unbelievably enough.

How far does this path of happiness stretch on?

Will this path go on forever?...

That's—

The Final Day

The last day of spring vacation. I met up with Chihiro-chan and Mako-chan and we went to the Keyaki mall together. It felt refreshing since it had been such a long vacation in which I'd often spent thinking alone.

«Honami-chan, are you feeling well? Are you okay?» Mako-chan asked. Since I was usually always accompanied by someone so seeing me shutting myself in my room so often and not seeing each other made her worry.

«No, everything is fine. Sorry for that, even when you invited me so many times. I was thinking about strategies for the second year, you could say. So I just wanted to think about how to proceed from now.»

«That's well and all but... Honami-chan, don't think too much by yourself, discuss it with us too, okay?» Chihiro, who had been following the conversation, continued.

The final term exams were already over so that was surely why they were so sensitive right now.

«Yes, I'm relying on you all so if something happens, I'll definitely talk to you.»

That was my true feelings. But it was also true that I didn't want to worry them unneccesarily.

Class 1-B was losing big thanks to me during the final exam. I was forced into making a big decision.

But that's precisely why I need to choose my words carefully. I could easily worry them by what I said and that would be a loss to me.

«Oh, don't worry, really. I'm hundred percent fine! Spring vacation had me fully charged!»

This spring break had given me new energy. A spring vacation unlike anything before. It was far more remarkable.

It was a bit different from the usual ones where I went out and played with my friends.

Even now, my chest felt hotter by thinking of Ayanokouji-kun and what had transpired on that day.

When I'd revealed my weakness in his room, something that had been weighting on me, just poof, disappeared.

I can still fight.

I felt I once again that I could fight with Sakayanagi-san, Ryuuuen-kun and Horikita-san and the others.

Of course, whether we could compete with them we wouldn't know until we try. But at least I avoided the worst case scenario: losing my will fight even before it happens.

This is without doubt, due to Ayanokouji-kun. I'm not sure I'd be here without him. A treasured friend... a very, a very important...

Somehow, the next words didn't appear to me.

How should I express it properly? There was a part of me that just refused to think about it.

That's because there is something I must not forget.

The fact that we are in different classes. It was an unchangeable fact that we couldn't mingle and meet with each other. Unlike last year where we could cooperate due to our class points being vastly different, the gap had closed.

As Horikita said face to face with me, we had become rivals competing with each other.

In other words, if we end up fighting, we shouldn't be affected by personal feelings.

What if, what if he and I were in the same class...

Then all my worries would disappear and I could fight without any hesitation.

«Stop stop. Don't think any further...!»

I shook my head with great vigor in order to calm down the feelings deep within me.

«W-what is it, Honami-chan?»

Mako-chan was surprised by my sudden headshake looked at my worriedly.

«Sorry, sorry. It's nothing.»

I tend to become too relaxed around my close friends no matter what.

I have to get myself together. It's the last day of spring vacation after all. My friends were looking forward to meet me so I should stop thinking about this anymore.

I should focus on the first period of our 2nd year for now.

I will have proper time to think about it once the situation has calmed down and I get some time.

We are still Class B, but we have almost no more leeway left.

I intend to follow through with the same goal I had ever since the entrance ceremony last year when we all stood line in line. Standing still is not an option.

—Tomorrow, a new war will come for Class 2-B.

The First Phone Call

The spring break was about to end as it was only a single day left.

And even the sun was beginning to set before I noticed it. It was soon bedtime.

I wonder what my classmates are feeling right as they spend this last evening of the break.

The same melancholy as when the weekend ends and Monday begins? Or maybe they are filled with hope for a new year?

If you ask me, I'd say something similar... I was more or less looking forward to going to school next morning.

There was of course a lot of difficulties around each corner.

I don't need to mention the bet with Horikita, but there was also the high possibility that the first grader from the White Room that Tsukishiro had mentioned had already blended themselves in. The list goes on. A pain in the butt, all of them.

But I'm generally spending my days living as a student at this school.

It's not a bad thing to spend your holidays as leisurely, but the things that makes me feel the most fulfilled are the stuff that's expected of students: studying and doing sports.

And above all else—

Something that has changed from last year.

At precisely 10PM in the evening, my phone rang.

I don't even need to confirm who it is.

Karuizawa Kei.

She was a classmate, and now someone who was more than a friend.

In other words, a call from someone belonging to the category I can describe as my 'girlfriend'.

Even though we'd been a couple for a few days already, we hadn't actually met or kept in touch with one another.

It was probably due to the fact that Kei still hadn't sorted out our relationship yet.

I hadn't contacted her on my end either and just waited for the spring break to end. But on the last day, meaning today, I received a message at noon saying she wanted to talk by phone at 10PM this evening.

And then, the time has come.

«... Ya-hoo!»

Immediately after receiving the call, I clumsily replied after a short pause.

«Ah.»

«Yikes, that's blunt.»

«Really? No, perhaps it was.»

If asked whether I believe it sounded like something a boyfriend would say, I'll definitely say no.

«I was waiting for your call.»

Does this sound boyfriend-like?

I believed it did so I tried saying it.

«Eeeeh!?»

From the other side, a large scream along with the sound of something being toppled over made its way through the phone.

«What happened? Are you alright?»

«I-I'm fine! I just tumbled and fell from by bed. Ow ow...»

Can that be called being 'fine'?

It seems like she'd calmed herself down after a deep breath after readjusting her position.

«Did you wait for me? For my call?»

«It's normal for a boyfriend to wait expectantly for a call from his lover, isn't it?»

«That's, well, true but... well, it sort of doesn't sound like anything you'd say at all.»

«I think that counts for both of us.»

We were facing each other for the first time. I as me. She as her.

At times doing something unexpected, other times saying something rash.

It was hard to control it all.

Thus, I decide not to think too much about it.

Am I saying this stuff naturally? What about my actions?

But even those are just the pleasures of love that I will be surrendering myself to.

«Hmm, yes. Perhaps. I still don't feel like it's real... we really are dating, aren't we?»

«Of course we are.»

«... Right, of course. I already knew that but... I thought that, if I asked you about your confession again, you would say that there never was a confession to begin with. That's why I was a bit late calling you, Kiyotaka.»

It seems that is the reason she never called me before now.

«You know, it would have been fine for you to call me too, don't you agree?»

«I kinda wanted to wait for that call of yours.»

It was a bit unfair and it was conveyed to her since she still looked a bit glum.

But the conversation soon shifted to the topics of everyday life.

«Ah, have you heard this? I just went out to eat with my friends and—»

It wasn't a meaningful conversation by any means, but to me it felt so novel and fresh.

Our relationship up until now had been that of the one who uses, and one who was being used. Not that of friends or lovers.

Our names or numbers weren't stored on either of our phones either. I was usually the one who contacted her, not her.

People would probably say it was a distorted relationship.

But still, that was certainly the only thing connecting both of us.

But that has been muted. Another world was spreading out before my eyes.

«Are you even listening to me?»

She noticed my lack of adequate replies and asked about it.

‘I hear you, I hear you’ was my answer, which satisfied her and she continued talking.

It was a conversation without any real topics.

It had no relation to me.

But still. It was small surprise to me that I thought it was a bit fun.

«And by the way, Kiyotaka. How do I say this, don’t you have anything to share too?»

She wasn’t satisfied by the fact that she was the only one bringing up any topics it seems, thus her request.

Even if you ask me of that, those kind of things are a bit too much for me. Or rather, I’m aware that I’m bad at this.

No, that’s precisely why I had to challenge myself.

«Let’s see...»

I wonder how long I talked for after that?

I’m a bit surprised at how much I talked about all this triffler stuff that I’d never done before.

It was stuff that other people wouldn’t find any interesting.

But Kei was listening, clearly enjoying herself no matter what.

Sometimes she laughed, sometimes she made some quip back at me.

And then the conversation shifted towards the unexpected.

As the sandman was about to unleash his drowsiness upon me, I checked the clock. It was soon 11PM.

Which means we must have talked for about an hour.

It wasn't a far stretch to say it had been the longest phone call we've done by far.

«We should probably end this call soon.»

It would be best to hang up soon, considering what's laying in store for tomorrow.

«That's, true.»

She also seemed to understand as she didn't oppose it.

«See you tomorrow. Good night, Kiyotaka.»

«Good night, Kei.»

We called it quits after calling each others' names.

«Well, then—». She said at last, but somehow she didn't end the call.

«What's up?»

«It's, I feel it's a bit hard for me to end it...»

She expressed her reasoning for it.

«...So, can you do it instead?»

«Understood.»

I tapped the button to end the call without hesitation.

«Well then, time to prepare myself before going to bed.»

That was my intention but...

Kei called me again even though we'd ended the call mere seconds ago.

Did she forget to tell me something?

«What's u——»

«You didn't even hesitate a bit, did you! Why!»

An ear-splitting scream.

I instinctly held my phone away from my ear, but I could still hear her loud and clear.

«Shouldn't you, you know, show some hesitation at least!?»

«...I mean, isn't that normal for ending a call?»

The flow of the conversation went like, we had to prepare for tomorrow so let's end the call. Both of us should have been on the same paper.

But Kei didn't seem to like how I ended the call it seems.

«B-but, we had so much fun, didn't we!»

«Yes. It's the first time I'd enjoyed myself like this.»

«Then, how do I say this, don't you feel a little bit sad to see it end as well?»

If she meant that she wanted to talk more and the time permits it, then sure.

«A bit.»

«No way I sense that from you!»

Not accepting my answer, she continued through grinded teeth.

It was good I didn't put my phone too close to my ear.

I seemed to have hit the nail right on the head as she went on nitpicking everything.

From where that good mood we had earlier had disappeared to, I don't like this, I don't like that, even our exciting conversation earlier.

So this is what they call a woman's heart.

In that case, I'd need some more time to analyse it.

«Huff, puff. ... Ah, I feel so refreshed.»

After venting all that and letting it all losse, she seemed to have regained control of her feelings.

«So... what should I do?»

«About what?»

«It's almost 11:15PM already, you know.»

«Ah...»

Ever since she tried to end the call, the clock never stopped and time continued to chug along.

«Maybe you should end it after all, Kei.»

«Maybe, so.»

Perhaps she was worried about when I was going to end the call, but she somehow objected to that.

«You should end it. Do it properly this time, okay?»

«...Properly?»

I just received an unexpected, unpleasant task.

«That's right. In a way that won't rub me the wrong way. Won't you fulfill this cute wish from your girlfriend?»

She said impishly as if she'd just mounted me and taken the initiative.

«A wish? Cute girlfriend?»

«What? You have some complaints?»

«No, not at all.»

I stood up and headed for my computer.

I might find some clues on the net.

«Just so you know, browsing or anything similar won't do you any good. I'm listening closely so I'll know if you do.»

She cornered me as if she'd read my moves.

She sure isn't some weak girl, I thought in admiration.

In that case the only option for me is to pave out a way with my own strength.

It's a trial for me who wished for this relationship to begin with.

«—Let's see.»

I'll start after a short pause. The reason why I ended the call. Some kind of theory that won't upset her.

«It's true I hanged up without hesitation. But, that wasn't because I thought lightly of you.»

What would be the best words to use in order to bring a call to an end?

I said what I thought out loud.

«It's a bit sad to end the conversation, true. But that just means we can see each other tomorrow. Don't you feel the same as well?»

«...Yes. I also want to see you, Kiyotaka...»

It has been some time since the confession.

Naturally, the desire to meet one another would get stronger the time had passed.

«That's why we should let the time flow. That's what I think. Taking our time and talk until late at night is fine for me as well. But then today will never end.

«Yes...»

«I want to see you. The reason I didn't hesitate ending the call is because of those feelings I think.»

«...I see, yes, that's why...»

«Do you follow me?»

«Well, yeah. I'll give you a pass for this time.»

She didn't seem that dissatisfied anymore. I could hear a soft, composed nod through the speaker.

«Since you find it difficult, I'll end the call for you. Fine with you?»

«Got it. We may not... get the chance to talk tomorrow at school but... I'm looking forward to it.»

«Indeed.»

Following the flow of the conversation, I pressed the button to end the call.

She didn't call me again, obviously.

Our relationship had changed, but Kei decided to keep it hidden for the time being.

Our chances to talk openly at school will be limited until it goes public.

But stealing glances at each other from time to time should be possible.

At last, the spring break announced its leave, with nothing left undone.

My new school life is starting tomorrow.

If only it could be calm and peaceful.

This wish of mine hasn't changed even now.

The best would be to leisurely ride down this riverbed in a small boat.

Whether it's academics, sports or love. There is no knowing where the current will start raging.

That's——the fun part of school life.

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