

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

ようこそ
実力
至上主義へ
の教室へ

ようこそ
じつりょく
しじょうしゆぎ
のきょうしつへ



CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE: VOLUME NINE

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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





「ちょ、何よ」

「前から良いと思ってたんだ、俺と付き合ってくれよ輕井沢。
新しい本命が誰か知らないが、まだチヨコを渡してないなら
想いを伝えてないつてことだ。そうだろう?」

今からでも遅くない、と強引なアピールをする。

「何言つてるわけ……こんな状況であたしがオッケーするども?」
「恋愛はどうなるか分からぬから面白いんだぜ?」

「……ごめんみんな！」



「みんなに黙つてたことを——
今から告白します」

——之瀬は教壇の前に立つと、Bクラスの生徒全員に向かって頭を下げる。
「な、何を謝ってるんだよ——之瀬。何も謝る必要な
んてないって。なあ?」

PROLOGUE:

THE MONOLOGUE OF ICHINOSE HONAMI

INTRODUCTION

I've never thought of myself as either a 'good person' or a 'bad person'.

I like to think I've managed to become an 'honest me', just like my mother wanted.

I had a comfortable life throughout both elementary school and middle school.

I had plenty of friends, both boys and girls.

I found sports rather difficult but I put in as much effort into it as I did my studies.

By the time I was a 3rd-year in middle school, I was even able to gain the title of student council president that I had longed for.

I was even offered a spot at a private high school on a scholarship.

A fun school life.

A happy private life.

But... I made a single mistake.

A mistake that could never be forgiven, a mistake I should never have made.

The angry face and tears that my mother, who had collapsed from illness, made at that moment.

The bitter face my little sister made after being hurt and left as nothing more than a shell of herself.

I could never forget.

Even now, I occasionally recall that moment.

My trembling fingers.

My trembling body.

A heart dyed black.

I wasted half of my 3rd year of middle school and I ended up becoming a shut-in for half a year.

But on a certain day, that ended.

When I learned about this school, I felt I needed to put an end to that.

In order to bring back the smiles of my mother and my little sister.

That's why I won't run from my own 'answer'.

I will face it head-on.

Yes, that's the oath I swore.

But-

At this school I enrolled at while embracing my dreams, I was confronted with a trial.

I found a letter and just froze up.

Around me, my classmates were turning towards me with curious looks.

I read the contents of the letter over and over.

And no matter how many times I read them over, the words did not change.

'Ichinose Honami is a criminal.'



PART 1

The girl had been feeling extremely nervous since long, long before the incident occurred.

In the student council room on a day off.

“1st year, Class B, Ichinose Honami, huh?”

“Yes.”

She squeezed her voice out from within her throat.

Ichinose Honami’s expression was rather tense when she faced Vice President Nagumo.

A special one-on-one interview.

“What did the student council president tell you?”

“That it’s still not time...”

Ichinose, who had wanted to join the student council, stood before the doors leading to the student council not long after enrolling.

However, President Horikita interviewed Ichinose and rejected her application to the student council.

Ichinose, who strongly desired a place on the council, felt disappointment at that but upon hearing of her circumstances, Vice President Nagumo had approached her.

There are three reasons behind that.

One is that she belongs to Class B, much like himself, rather than Class A.

Another is that her academic ability is nothing short of outstanding.

And the last reason is that she qualifies as an extremely good-looking person. Something Nagumo seeks in the opposite sex.

It's mainly because Ichinose met that last criteria. The first two are nothing more than a bonus.

The important thing is whether or not she's worth keeping at his side as his personal property.

"I hear you were on the student council, and student council president no less, during middle school?"

"Yes, that's why I wanted to join the student council here at this school as well."

Ichinose told the truth. And also a lie.

"I heard from your homeroom teacher, Hoshinomiya-sensei. Looks like your results on the entrance exams were also outstanding."

"Thank you very much."

She obediently accepted his praise.

But she couldn't look Nagumo in the eye.

"To be honest, you're quite something."

"But... President Horikita didn't acknowledge me..."

Ichinose, with a bitter smile, put herself down.

It was because she had expected she'd be able to join the student council.

Even so, a hint of a smile remained.

Because she felt that she wouldn't give him a good impression here by being depressed.

"It's because President Horikita's a strict person. In all likelihood, he already rejected you out of hand because you're not in Class A. That man puts a lot of emphasis on status."

"I see..."

That was a lie Nagumo told.

At first glance, Horikita Manabu looks like the sort of person who'd obsess over status like that. However, the truth is the exact opposite of that.

He assesses the person whether they're from Class D or Class A and he's the sort of person who'd evaluate talent.

But to Ichinose, who had been rejected, Nagumo's words sounded like truth.

“I wonder if I must get promoted to Class A in order to join the student council?”

“I don’t know about that. Even if you get promoted to Class A, President Horikita may or may not acknowledge you. In other words, Ichinose, you weren’t considered up to par from the very moment you enrolled here. No matter how much effort you put in now, President Horikita will never accept a student stuck with the label of Class B.”

At that cruel announcement, the remaining smile on Ichinose’s face vanished.

“B-but you’re in Class B are you not, Nagumo-senpai? And you’re still vice president so that means-”

Nagumo immediately extinguishes that fleeting hope of hers.

“In my case there were two reasons. One is that I joined the student council before President Horikita came to power. In other words, it was during the reign of the 3rd year student council president last year. But back then, Vice President Horikita alone objected to my student council appointment to the bitter end.”

Ichinose’s expression clouded up.

Seeing that, Nagumo felt joy in his heart.

He decided then that he would definitely get Ichinose appointed to the student council.

And that he would love her as if she were his own personal property.

“One more thing, I’m aware of just how talent I possess. I’m proud to say I’m someone who would’ve normally been assigned to Class A. That’s precisely why when I applied for the student council, I confessed the full truth behind my assignment to Class B. Without holding anything back.”

“Confessed...?”

“Yeah. I proved that when it comes to ability, I’m not inferior to Class A. That resulted in my current position.”

“The confession of the cause for that.....what was it for you, Nagumo-senpai?”

At those words, Nagumo internally smirked.

“Sorry but I have no intention of answering that. Right now, the one being questioned is you, Ichinose.”

“Me...?”

“I’m not quite convinced yet. Normally speaking, it would’ve been strange for you to not be in Class A. Your grades are outstanding, there’s nothing wrong with your interpersonal skills. And you were once student council president. Yet why Class B? There must be some reason for that.”

Ichinose could not hide her agitation, not when Nagumo’s cunningly pointing it out.

But this is merely something Nagumo hypothesized based on the information he obtained from Ichinose’s homeroom teacher, Hoshinomiya.

“Tell me what you think could be the reason. And if I deem you as a student worthy of Class A then I’ll take responsibility and accept you into the student council.”

“Is that... possible?”

“President Horikita’s authority is certainly absolute. But what happens to the council after Horikita-senpai graduates? If new 1st years aren’t allowed in then it would be impossible for the student council to train its successors. The one who’d be troubled by that would be the future student council president, me, right?”

“...I suppose so...”

“Someone who is unable to grab hold of this opportunity has no place in the student council.”

Ichinose had a secret she’s been harboring.

The memories of holing herself up inside her room for half a year during her 3rd year of middle school came flooding back.

“What I say here-”

“It won’t leave this room, of course. Your secret is our secret.”

Her past she had held onto without telling a soul. But, she needs to face her past.

It was precisely because she lost the trust of others that she needs to trust in others.

“I... I...”

Ichinose opened up about everything.

About her own ‘mistake’.

CHAPTER 1:

THE STUDENT COUNCIL PRESIDENT'S INTENTIONS

Early February, after the training camp ended and the return to the Advanced Nurturing High School. Sakayanagi Arisu from Class A of the 1st years was in the student council room.

Placing her favorite hat on the desk, she faced the student council president Nagumo Miyabi from Class A of the 2nd years.

“The student council room has become rather flashy. It's completely different from the way it used to be.”

To put it nicely, it's prim and proper.

To put it meanly, it's become an exceedingly formal room. Even the wallpapers have been changed and accessories that look like Nagumo's personal belongings have been moved here in bulk.

Rather than a student council room, it looked more like a room that exists for Nagumo's sake.

Renovations of that sort have been performed.

A place that exists almost as a sort of symbol of his might.

That's the impression Sakayanagi had of it.

“Did Horikita-senpai recommend you for the student council, by any chance?”

At the visit of Sakayanagi, who seemed entirely unrelated to the student council, Nagumo posed that question.

“Unfortunately, I’m not a fit for that role so I was not invited to do so.”

“He just doesn’t have a good eye for that sort of stuff.”

“Then perhaps you mean to say you’re different, new student council president?”

Nagumo laughed faintly.

“Of course I’d welcome you. But then you’d have to be my personal property though.”

Answering with that, Nagumo caressed the head of the stuffed rabbit near him.

Is it his? Or perhaps it’s from one of the girls around him?

Be his personal property. In other words, it means he has no interest in borrowing the talent of others. He makes decisions based on looks alone.

She could have overlooked it but Sakayanagi boldly chose to pursue that topic.

“What will I have to do in order to acquire your seal of approval, I wonder?”

“By showing me an appropriate amount of talent. That’s the only way. First off, it’s not too late to join the student council you know? Come over to my side, Sakayanagi.”

“I see.”

Sakayanagi smiled, but then immediately continued.

“Let’s not. I think it would be a problem for there to be two leaders in one organization. And most importantly, the senior students may be humiliated.”

“Two leaders, huh?”

It’s like Sakayanagi is saying that she’s equal to Nagumo if not superior to him despite only being a 1st year.

But even after hearing that, Nagumo did not grow angry. On the contrary, he relaxed his cheeks even more than before and laughed.

“Both you and Ryuuен. We’ve got a lot of interesting 1st years this year, don’t we?”

This school doesn’t have a single student considering making the student council their enemy.

Most would nestle up to it in an attempt to make it to Class A. Or they’d make sure to not attract its attention.

But both Sakayanagi here and Ryuuен would not think twice about making enemies out of anyone. And they’d show no mercy either.

“I can’t say that’s a wise lifestyle choice.”

There are students who’d praise that sort of student with enemies in all directions, but Nagumo isn’t one of them.

He’d rather acknowledge those who are willing to throw away their pride at times in order to make use of their power to accomplish a goal.

And with that, Nagumo’s phone which had been placed on top of the desk up until now, vibrated once. The vibrations continued a few times after that at short intervals.

“Is that fine?”

“I’m currently setting aside time for you. Don’t worry about it.”

“Popular people sure have it tough, don’t they? Surely you always get calls like this without fail?”

“If you understand that then why don’t we get down to business? If you don’t wish to join the student council then what business do you have with me to the point you’d have me clear out the room? I’m sorry but after this, another ‘1st year’ is going to be paying me a visit. They’ve already made an appointment with me so I can’t set aside much time for you.”

“Is that so? Then I suppose I’d best get on with it.”

Nagumo deliberately said it was a ‘1st year’ to Sakayanagi yet there was no change in her expression.

But Nagumo concluded that on the contrary, it meant that she’s interested.

“I came here today to ask you for a favor. It’s about a member of the student council, Ichinose Honami-san from Class B of the 1st years. I will be launching an attack against her shortly. It may get somewhat stormy once that happens.”

“I’ve heard that one before. So?”

Nagumo urged her to continue. This is something Nagumo heard from Sakayanagi during their previous meeting alone.

Of course, there aren’t that many people aware of this fact.

“She’s the only 1st year in the student council. In other words, you could say she’s slated to become the future student council president.”

“Assuming none of the other 1st years are accepted into the student council and there’s no outstanding talent among the incoming freshmen either, that is.”

“Yes, you are right.”

In other words, Ichinose’s loss is also the student council and Nagumo’s loss.

“As a ‘thank you’ for the other day, I thought to inform you of it in advance. In the worst case scenario, Ichinose Honami-san may be expelled so I must ask you to bear with it.”

Sakayanagi declared that without showing any fear of Nagumo.

“I don’t recall giving you permission to ‘go that far’, Sakayanagi.”

For the first time, Nagumo's smile vanished.

"Yes, you did say to merely bully Ichinose-san and no more, President. However, I was thinking I'd play rough with her for a bit."

"Honami is my personal property I plan on loving. I only gave you permission to weaken her a bit."

"I am well aware of it. But, there are always unforeseen factors in play."

Nagumo stared down Sakayanagi with a slightly sharp gaze.

Some may even describe it as a glare.

Sakayanagi coolly shrugged off that stare from Nagumo.

"So you... won't mind it if she does end up getting expelled?"

Nagumo slowly raised his elbow from the chair's armrest.

"You're a bold woman. Aren't you afraid of me?"

"It's just in my nature."

"Tell me something. You could've simply done what you wanted without asking me for my permission. But you still dutifully came here like this to ask for my permission. Should I assume this means you don't want to make an enemy out of me?"

Nagumo asked Sakayanagi that question, not fooled by words like respect.

"You may interpret it however you wish."

“Don’t hide it. I want your honest thoughts on it.”

Nagumo tried to uncover her true intentions, the flattery notwithstanding.

“The student council at this school appears to possess more power than I expected it to at first. If, in order to protect Ichinose-san, the student council... No, if President Nagumo makes a move then it will be troublesome for me as well.”

Sakayanagi too, wishes to avoid having Nagumo cover for Ichinose.

That was her response.

As though satisfied with that, Nagumo flashed a smile.

It was a roundabout way of saying so but it does mean she does not wish to make Nagumo her enemy.

“Looks like the information I gave you is proving useful.”

“Yes. Thanks to you, it appears I will be able to strike at Ichinose-san’s weak point. I will be putting that information to better use from this point onwards.”

“Very well, Sakayanagi. The student council too will turn a blind eye to your actions.”

“Shall I also assume the student council ‘too’ will turn a blind eye?”

There’s no way Sakayanagi would miss it in the pledge Nagumo made.

“...fuu. Ahh, there’s no duplicity in saying the student council ‘too’. What are you thinking of doing?”

“That’s for you to look forward to... I’ll leave it at that.”

There are no upsides to discussing her strategy here. That’s the decision Sakayanagi made.

The man in front of her, Nagumo, is someone who isn’t the least bit trustworthy. He’s simply going to throw away someone who could become an asset for the student council.

“By the way, I don’t get many chances to speak with you alone like this so there’s something else I’d like to ask you.”

“What?”

“The possibility of it happening is low but when the going gets tough, as a drastic measure... there’s no guarantee that there won’t be a student who wouldn’t resort to brute force. I’d like to hear your thoughts about that, President.”

Sakayanagi is confident she won’t lose to the resourceful type like Katsuragi, Ichinose or Horikita. But, violence is a different story. A cripple like Sakayanagi would stand no chance.

“You don’t fare so well against the type of person who’d resort to using brute force at the very last moment?”

“It’s not exactly my speciality.”

All the more so for Sakayanagi, who is physically handicapped.

“Unfortunately for you, I don’t particularly dislike the use of violence either. In the first place, fights breaking out between students is a normal occurrence. Unlike Horikita-senpai, I don’t plan to crack down on them either and... if it’s just a skirmish I plan on laughing it off.”

That declaration seemed to put Sakayanagi, weak against violence, at a disadvantage. But Sakayanagi was concerned about something else entirely.

“I see... Then of the fight that broke out between Class D and Class C of the 1st years a while back. If it were you, President Nagumo, would you have handed down a different sentence than the previous student council president?”

Sudou and Ishizaki’s group, which side threw the punch and which side was punched. That incident where they quarrelled over surveillance cameras and what not.

Even though Nagumo was not directly involved with that, there’s no way he wouldn’t have known of it given that he always sticks to Horikita Manabu.

“Let’s see... That incident which ended up getting the school involved. I can’t really give an innocent verdict on that but I won’t push them to the point of expulsion over it either. I’d end it by merely suspending the parties involved from school. Of course, I won’t demand their class points be deducted either.”

That’s the student council’s opinion of it at best, was what Nagumo added.

No matter how tolerant the student council is, if the school says ‘no’ then it’s a ‘no’.

Sakayanagi is most likely well aware of that fact too.

Even if they are far more powerful than your average student council, they are at the end of the day, still only students. One cannot afford to forget that.

“I see. I understand you are an extremely tolerant person.”

One must keep in mind that in the future, battles involving intimidation and violence will become a reality and to factor that into their calculations.

“If you’re so worried about that, I can prepare a 2nd year escort for you.”

The 2nd years will use force to subdue the 1st years.

The student council president made that offer.

“I am most grateful but that will be unnecessary. To fight with the pieces I hold in hand is my modus operandi.”

What Sakayanagi wanted to know was ‘how far she can take it until it’s no longer safe’.

It’s more than enough for her knowing that she has the right to counterattack after being attacked.

“Are you satisfied?”

“Yes, abundantly.”

Satisfied with her conversation with Nagumo, Sakayanagi slowly stood up while grabbing onto her cane.

“Oh, speaking of which-”

“You still have something for me?”

It can’t take much time. Paying no heed to those words from Nagumo, Sakayanagi continued.

“Our conversation is completely over but I happened to hear something interesting. About a student purchasing private points from 3rd years who are about to graduate, or something? A strategy which makes use of what the school collects prior to graduation and uses it as currency post-graduation. Truly a formidable... You could almost call it a surefire way to graduate from Class A.”

During the training camp a few days back. It’s a topic that came up during Kouenji and Nagumo’s conversation.

It’s information only the boys overheard but it wouldn’t be strange for one of the boys to have informed Sakayanagi. On the contrary, you could even say it’s something they’d definitely want to let Sakayanagi know of.

“I made sure he can’t use that strategy anymore. Besides, it’s not like Kōenji’s the only one who thought of that strategy. There are more than a few students who have thought to transfer the surplus private points that 3rd years nearing graduation possess.”

Nagumo sneered as though saying it’s something that’s already been done repeatedly in the past.

“That’s why the school announces that they’ll be collecting ‘private points leftover at graduation’ when you get to the 3rd year. It’s customary.”

“Is that so? The way we understand the rules, the private points are to be collected at graduation and therefore they are rendered worthless upon graduation. Which is why it wouldn’t be strange for a 3rd year to think of entrusting their private points to an underclassman they’re close with.”

Even dust that piles up will eventually become a mountain.

Just by acquiring private points from several people, a select few students will be able to collect a considerable amount.

It’s no wonder Nagumo realized Kōenji’s made his move at an early stage.

“Normally speaking, it’s information announced only to the 3rd years. I’ll just ignore how you, President, were able to obtain this information despite only being a 2nd year... and the reason you boldly declared this in front of a 1st year is because you intend on altering this limiting rule you just spoke of, is that it?”

“Kōenji seems to be the only one in possession of an amount greater than what the school permits after all. It’s a form of rule violation.”

By announcing it in front of boys from across all school years, it tipped the school off to a loophole in their rule. There’s a high possibility that they’ll be adding a rule to deter 3rd years from transferring their private points.

Normally speaking, no matter how wealthy the family you’re born into is, there’s still no guarantee that you’ll pay up after graduation.

However, Kōenji’s a special exception.

It's well known that Kōenji Rokusuke is in possession of a large amount of personal assets as a 1st year high school student on the Kōenji Conglomerate's official website.

Even though there's the possibility that he will renege on his promise, taking a risk is still well worth it.

"But being born into money, that is yet another 'ability'. Is he not allowed to make use of it?"

"Then does anticipating it and shutting it down also not count as an 'ability'?"

"Fufu. That is certainly true."

Sakayanagi laughed as though fascinated and tapped her cane lightly once.

"I never liked the school's rule that allows you to save up 20 million points to rise to Class A. If possible, I'd like to revise the system itself. Well, even supposing this system will no longer exist in the future, it still won't apply to you 1st years though."

As a measure this school took, Sakayanagi and the other 1st years have already been made aware of this rule.

Taking the possibility that there are students counting on saving up 20 million points into consideration, they cannot repeal it.

"But I've heard there hasn't been a single student so far able to save up 20 million points independently. I don't believe you need to worry about that rule if it's nothing more than a formality."

“It just means you can’t save up that much alone.”

“It is meaningless to save up as a class. There is the strategy of sending someone to an enemy class as a spy and there are students who fear that but it’s not very realistic. Even if one of the lower classes were to send their own to the upper classes, once they’re part of the privileged Class A they will just end up turning traitor.”

“That’s right. There’s no merit to be found in going out of your way to knock down a strong class. But you can’t rule out students with a strong sense of justice acting for the sake of their comrades.”

“I suppose you’re right. But surely the upper classes also won’t fork over information to a student who just joined them out of the blue. Besides, in the school’s exams, a minus that occurs because of you may come back to bite you. If you deliberately sabotage your class, you yourself will be expelled.”

Understanding that Sakayanagi has completely comprehended the system, Nagumo nodded in satisfaction.

“I’ll just give you this one warning. I don’t dislike that aggressive attitude of yours but you will flounder if you make enemies out of everyone at this stage, you know? Don’t you think it’s better to earn the trust of your surroundings first? It’s still not too late. Build trust.”

“And to use that trust as a weapon to ensure victory?”

“It’s the most efficient strategy.”

A betrayal from someone you're sure would never betray you. It'd be an attack that would be more than enough to cause critical damage.

"But if you say to build trust then perhaps you were too quick to throw away the trust you've taken care to establish, President? Like you said, don't you think it would be far more effective to use it at the very end?"

A declaration of war against the former student council president during the training camp. And the betrayal of that trust.

"I threw away the trust?"

In response to Sakayanagi's words, Nagumo gave that response while looking like he was holding back laughter.

"I definitely lost Horikita-senpai's trust and the trust of the students of 3rd year Class A. But nothing's changed in regards to the 2nd years and the other 3rd years. The 1st years will come to understand that right away too."

Nagumo's tough act and his conceit.

For a moment, that was what Sakayanagi thought but she immediately changed her mind. Even breaking the rules he established with Horikita Manabu had been something planned from the beginning.

It may be a consensus that the 2nd years had reached beforehand.

"Let me make a correction here, Sakayanagi. I acknowledge your talent. If you wish to join the student council at any point in the future, I will allow it."

“Thank you. That aside, I’m glad I came here today. I was able to learn the sort of person you are, President Nagumo. At the very least, I’m glad to know that you and I are more alike than I ever was with President Horikita.”

Politely bowing her head, Sakayanagi left the student council room. And when she did, Nagumo immediately followed her.

“You left your hat.”

“My, my. Thank you very much.”

After taking her hat back, Sakayanagi once again lowered her head.

“Please excuse me.”

“Sakayanagi, would you happen to know anything about Ayanokōji?”

Nagumo asked that unexpected question.

“Ayanokōji...? I am somewhat familiar with that name. He’s a 1st year, is he not?”

“I see, no, it’s nothing.”

If she doesn’t know then there’s no reason to talk about it, Nagumo tried to end the conversation with that.

“If necessary, I can investigate him for you though?”

Sakayanagi offered her assistance as though taking a bold step forward.

“No, I said something unnecessary. Forget it.”

“Is that so? Then excuse me.”

When Sakayanagi walked off, she ran into a lone female student. She's someone even Sakayanagi with her small social network is aware of: Kushida Kikyō from Class C of the 1st years.

“Hello, Sakayanagi-san.”

“A coincidence, is it not? Do you, by any chance, have business at the student council room?”

“Yeah. I was thinking I'd apply for the student council. Could it be you're the same, Sakayanagi-san?”

“Something along the lines of that. Please excuse me.”

“See you later~”

Sakayanagi felt somewhat doubtful that Kushida would want to join the student council at a time like this. Normally speaking, an honor student like her aiming for the student council wouldn't be out of place. But she wasn't convinced.

The girls are also well aware of Nagumo's actions during the special exam. It may be a different story for a senior student who knows Nagumo well but it wouldn't be strange for a 1st year to be suspicious of Nagumo's actions.

If she is aware of Ayanokōji Kiyotaka's true nature and is in cahoots with him then there's the possibility that she's been sent to investigate Nagumo.

But knowing Ayanokōji's personality, he won't carelessly get involved with Nagumo at this stage.

Kushida Kikyō.

There hasn't been a single bad rumor about her. She's nothing but benevolent.

"Fufu. It's exactly that sort of person who'd unexpectedly turn villainous though."

At the very least, Sakayanagi doesn't believe that she's purely good.

CHAPTER 2:

A CHANGING RELATIONSHIP

INTRODUCTION

The early morning for Class C started out with an unusual sight.

A circle seems to be forming around Karuizawa Kei and the girls who make up that circle appear to be excited to the point of causing a commotion.

“You’re rather late to school today, Ayanokōji-kun.”

Since there are only five minutes to go before the bell rings, my neighbor Horikita Suzune interjected with that.

“I overslept.”

Looking bored, Horikita gave a sigh. Then she continued speaking.

“You seem to be on good terms with Hirata-kun and Karuizawa-san. You knew, didn’t you?”

“There’s no way I’d know. It’s their private affair.”

She didn’t seem like she had cut things off with Hirata back during the training camp but it looks like she’s done it now.

Since they're a couple famous throughout the school, it made waves to an amazing extent.

If a third party were to hear of this, they would definitely be surprised.

But this would mean that on the surface, Kei and Hirata's connection has been severed. Of course, it doesn't necessarily mean Kei would lose command of the girls' group.

If there's an exception to that, it would be if someone from within the class stole Hirata's heart and became his true partner. Even then, I can't imagine Kei being ousted from her position.

Even if that girl attempts to slight Kei, Hirata would be the first one to put a stop to that. If not, the meaning behind Hirata going as far as to fake a relationship with Kei to save her would be rendered moot.

"So, which one of them dumped the other?"

I tried asking Horikita that. Because I don't know that myself either so there's nothing for Horikita to suspect.

"Looks like it's Karuizawa-san who did it."

"That's surprising. She seemed like the type to consider going out with a good man. A symbol of status."

"I suppose so. At the very least that's what I thought..."

For a moment, she looked at me suspiciously but then immediately averted her eyes. There's no possible way she could have acquired any information from my expression.

It's proof that Horikita herself has begun to understand that.

Still, Kei dumped Hirata, huh?

In the first place, it's a fake relationship started by Kei. It's not even about who dumped who. But in all likelihood, Hirata suggested doing that would be best for Kei.

If Hirata were to be the one doing the dumping, it would mean there's a problem with Kei and could have put Kei's status at risk.

In any case, judging from my surroundings, it's clear that their breakup came as a shock to Class C. But what made me think those girls are amazing was that they were boldly discussing that romantic affair.

“Ehh, ehh? Why did you break up with him even though you don't have a new boyfriend yet, Karuizawa-san!”

Shinohara's unrestrained voice reverberated. Despite chatting with each other, Ike and Sudō's group were clearly eavesdropping on that conversation.

“You see, I also thought I needed to step it up. It's easy to be spoiled by Yōsuke-kun but I wanted to think things through on my own.”

The catastrophe that befell this big couple would obviously have an impact on Class C but it would probably also end up having an impact on the other classes.

There's no doubt a battle would erupt between the girls over Hirata.

“I’m amazed they can even think about things like romance. Even tomorrow isn’t guaranteed at this school and they should know that situation too.”

“Isn’t it exactly because tomorrow isn’t guaranteed that they’re enjoying the present the best they can?”

“I have no reason to deny them that as long as they’re not robbing someone else of their future...”

On the other hand, as I wondered what’s going on with the other half of the hot topic Hirata Yōsuke, there he was with a gentle expression on his face while boxed in by both the boys and girls of the class.

Even though he got dumped by his girlfriend, there isn’t a smidgen of misery coming from Hirata. The best proof of that is that Ike and Sudō aren’t heading over there to tease him.

No, perhaps... I should say that they’ve already graduated from that sort of thing. They do seem interested in that conversation somewhat but there’s no sign of them engaging in malicious gossip.

On the contrary, Horikita and I are the ones engaging in a tasteless conversation. The special exams so far and the training camp. All of that’s making this immature bunch change bit by bit.

But of course, not everyone is maturing at the same rate.

“Yo, Hirata~ Heard you got dumped by Karuizawa~ Don’t mind it, don’t mind it!”

I thought they've become capable of reading the mood, but Yamauchi alone proved to be the exception.

Flippantly and happily approaching Hirata, he then struck Hirata's shoulder. Seeing that, Ike and Sudō felt uncomfortable and approached Yamauchi, flanking him from both sides and grabbing hold of him.

"Oi, what's the matter? Let's console Hirata together. Even the handsome ones get dumped!"

"This is in bad taste. Cut it out."

"Huh? Isn't this a rare sight seeing the handsome guy get dumped?"

When Sudō tried to hold Yamauchi back, he refused to listen and instead gave a refutation.

"Sorry about this, Hirata. I'll take him away immediately."

"It's ok, it's the truth after all."

It wouldn't be out of place for him to show displeasure but Hirata didn't seem to care in the slightest.

"Speaking of which... have you heard anything about Ichinose-san?"

Out of the blue, a topic regarding Class B came from Horikita.

"Recently, I've been hearing slander directed at her."

"Isn't it just a lie by someone jealous of her popularity? Or maybe the strategy of someone who wants to knock down Class B? What do the

slanders say?”

“...It’s something I’m hesitant to put to words.”

Saying that, she retrieved a note from under her desk rather than speak about it in detail.

She wrote something down on it and then showed me.

‘A history of violence’.

‘Engaged in compensated dating’.

‘Engaged in theft and robbery’.

‘A noted history of drug usage’.

These are things that even those delinquents over there haven’t done, not all of them.

“They sure spread quite the malicious rumors around.”

“She doesn’t seem like that sort of student to me though...”

“If it’s just spreading rumors, it won’t exactly count as a crime after all.”

“That’s not true. Regardless of the veracity, it’s defamation...it’s categorized that way when targeted towards a large number of people. It’s possible to sue.”

“If we’re talking about being out there in society then there’s no doubt about that.”

But high school is still high school. This is an isolated space filled with underaged students. It’s not like it’s being written on the internet too for the

whole world to see.

“So you’re saying it doesn’t count as a crime.”

Even if society cannot hand down punishment, it’s still possible for the school to hand down punishment at its discretion.

But it would be difficult to pinpoint the source of the rumors. The reason a variety of rumors were spread is so that if asked, they can simply say they heard it from someone else during day-to-day conversation and that’ll be the end of that.

The school won’t be able to investigate beyond that and in the end, it’ll peter out.

All it can do is to warn the perpetrators to not thoughtlessly spread rumors any more than that. After all, I’m certain that the plan to crush Ichinose has been gradually implemented over time.

There’s no doubt it’s Sakayanagi pulling the strings behind the scenes. But there’s still not very many people aware of this.

“What did Ichinose do in response?”

“I don’t know that much. It’s not like we’re close or anything. Besides, if I carelessly approach, suspicion may fall on us.”

“Well, it’s true that playing the role of the observer is the wisest thing to do.”

“But...I wonder if a tasteless strategy like this will work on Ichinose-san.”

“What do you mean?”

“No matter how malicious the slander may be, the amount of damage it can inflict is limited. Ichinose-san’s reputation throughout the school is something even I’m aware of. This sort of harassment is too miserable to be done out of envy like you said earlier.”

“Then you’re saying it’s a strategic mistake then?”

“That’s right, but as they say, you can’t have smoke without a fire.”

“So you’re saying Ichinose used to be a violent criminal or that she used to do drugs?”

“Even if not all of it’s true, perhaps at least one of it is?”

Of course, the possibility of it being true is extremely low. She added that after.

As Horikita said, there’s no evidence that all of it’s just a lie or that they’re all just rumors. And also the fact that Sakayanagi had been making remarks hinting at such could mean there’s some truth to it.

“Well... It’s not like we can come up with an answer just by thinking about it. More importantly, the current standing of the classes based on the results of the training camp has been released. Care to have a look?”

“Ehh, I’m not...”

“I know you’re not interested. But just keep it in mind.”

I flipped through the pages of the notebook she forcibly placed on my desk.

PART 1

Even though the cataclysm caused by Hirata and Kei in the morning has yet to die down, rumors of yet another love affair caused an incident in Class C.

“Excuse me.”

Nearing the end of school, some students are heading to their own clubs while others are heading back and in the midst of it all, an extremely unexpected person showed up.

“Is Yamauchi Haruki-kun here?”

The students still left in the classroom all turned simultaneously to face Yamauchi in surprise.

He was probably to head back to the dorm with Ike and play games because Yamauchi was opening up a strategy guide about some game at that moment.

“Ehh, that’s me but... you need something?”

Yamauchi usually gets excited when looking a cute girl but right now he seems scared out of his wits.

The leader of 1st year Class A, Sakayanagi, showed up and named Yamauchi.

“Would you mind giving me a few moments of your time?”

“O-of course I’m free...”

“...This isn’t quite the right place so I’ll be waiting for you in the corridor by the stairs.”

Perhaps the stares from the other students are making her uncomfortable, Sakayanagi disappeared out into the corridor with downcast eyes.

A silence fell upon Class C.

“No, no, no, no! This cannot be happening!”

The one who broke that silence was Ike, standing beside Yamauchi who had just been nominated. If Sudō were here, it would be even rowdier but he had already left for basketball practice.

The other students, including Yamauchi himself, could not wrap their heads around that absurdly bold entry and invitation.

Yamauchi then immediately grabbed his bag. Maybe he’s just acting on instinct.

“Sorry! I’ve got business to take care of!”

“Y-y-yeah...”

“Hold it, Yamauchi-kun.”

“W-what is it, Horikita?”

Currently, Yamauchi is making a beeline out of the classroom. And as though she were taking the wind out of his sails, Horikita blocked the entrance.

“Maybe she’s trying to do something to knock Class C down.”

“Huh? Why do you think that?”

“The very fact that you’re being asked out is abnormal in and of itself.”

Despite maintaining a serious expression from start to finish, what Horikita is saying is far too straightforward and pointed.

It’s on the level where an ordinary person would realize they’re being insulted.

But Yamauchi was rather positive about it on the contrary.

“Bumping into a transfer student with toast in her mouth on a street corner and falling in love... You ever heard about that sort of plot?”

“Eh? Toast...? Street corner?”

Unable to understand what he’s talking about, Horikita wrinkled her brow.

To be fair, if you’re only listening to Yamauchi’s remarks then it wouldn’t make any sense. But after seeing Yamauchi collide with Sakayanagi back at the training camp I can tell he’s talking about that incident.

“I’m going because Sakayanagi-chan is waiting for me.”

Not even hearing or heeding Horikita’s warning, Yamauchi walked off. Yamauchi did not even make an attempt to believe her.

“I am indeed this class’s lethal weapon. But that is exactly why it’s okay. On the off chance anything happens, I’ll take care of it.”

I'd like to hear in detail his countermeasure for taking care of it.

In all likelihood, he hasn't even given it any thought.

"...I get it. If you say you're going then I don't have any right to stop you. Just don't carelessly let anything about the class's internal affairs slip out."

"Don't worry about it. I am well aware of that."

After saying that, Yamauchi gave a cheeky laugh and left the classroom. A portion of the students, which includes Ike, hurriedly followed Yamauchi.

"We should go too."

The one who said that to me was Haruka. Apparently, she had also said the same to Keisei and Airi because the two of them are tagging along with her.

Since I don't really have a reason to decline, I gave a light nod and stood up. When we stepped out into the corridor, we immediately spotted a few boys there including Ike.

"Ahh, stop stop. This way, this way!"

When we tried to pass through, the Professor noticed and stopped us.

"The two of them are talking over there right now."

"...Ehh, what's with that speech?"

Haruka whispered that to herself after noticing that the Professor no longer uses 'gozaru' as part of his speech.

"Apparently he got set straight during the training camp."

I offered an explanation regarding the Professor's serious tone.

"How should I put it, it feels like he's lost his individuality. Well, I'm not interested though."

Haruka quickly lost interest in the Professor and so turned our attention to Yamauchi and Sakayanagi.

"Umm, so what did you want to talk about..."

Yamauchi nervously spoke to her.

Sakayanagi too, was using her left hand to shyly play with her hair.

If we look at this from a psychological perspective, it would be described as an unconscious reflex meant to make one look more attractive for a member of the opposite sex they're interested in.

"Could it be that Sakayanagi is legit interested in Haruki?"

While looking at the two of them, Ike muttered that in frustration.

He probably deduced that unconsciously from Sakayanagi's expressions and gestures.

However, in this case, we should assume Sakayanagi is deliberately creating that sort of image.

But in contrast to my calm analysis-

"No, no, this is way too stupid. She's super cunning. There's absolutely no way she's actually into Yamauchi-kun."

Haruka spat that out. Perhaps this is what you'd call a woman's intuition.

"I-I think so too."

Airi also agreed with Haruka, maybe because she felt the same way too after seeing this.

"Men really are simple, how could they possibly fall for something like that? She's definitely acting."

"...Is it really an act?"

Keisei couldn't tell from just looking. Well, I wouldn't have been able to tell either if I hadn't read between the lines though...

"She's definitely acting."

Haruka said so with certainty.



“Maybe she’s trying to acquire information on Class C like Horikita-san said.”

“But isn’t that way too obvious? There should be a better way to go about doing that. She has a higher chance of succeeding if she makes contact with Yamauchi in secret and she wouldn’t put us on guard either.”

“That’s true but...”

Keisei’s right too. If her intention here is to ensnare Yamauchi in a trap, there are plenty of ways for her to make contact with him.

She’ll only be incurring severe damage by acting in a way that tips off all of Class C. If this leads to a problem, Sakayanagi herself would definitely be ruled as having been involved.

Considering that, maybe she really is interested in Yamauchi like Keisei and Ike are saying... That would make more sense.

But Sakayanagi is aggressive and bold, so both of those are equally possible.

“The truth is, I’ve been wanting to talk to you for a while now, Yamauchi-kun.”

“R-r-r-really, really, really?”

“I don’t have time to lie about something like this, you know?”

As I conducted my analysis, a conversation began starting up between the two of them.

“I won’t be able to calm down here, shall we go elsewhere?”

“T-That’s right. Yeah, let’s do that, let’s do that.”

“In that case, please accompany me for a while.”

The two of them started walking side-by-side.

Yamauchi is trying to match Sakayanagi’s slow pace.

Looks like he is capable of being considerate, even if it’s only the bare minimum amount.

The other students saw the two of them off, perhaps having determined that following them any further would be difficult.

PART 2

The Ayanokōji Group assembled in a cafe with all its members present save for Akito, who’s headed off to his club. Haruka started the conversation.

“So, what do you think is the truth behind that little farce between Yamauchi-kun and Sakayanagi-san earlier?”

“Can we really call it a farce though?”

Keisei asked Haruka that once again.

“That’s- I mean, right Airi?”

“I... I think that was, umm, that...”

Airi said so with a slight blush.

“Ehh? But I mean, wasn’t that a bit sly?”

“Yeah, her gestures looked that way but... like Keisei-kun said, maybe she’s trying to investigate Class C so she can do something bad.”

“That’s that thing where you make someone think that.”

By boldly showing up, she’d try to make us think it’s not a trap because it’s overwhelmingly simple. There’s some truth to that as well.

“Kiyopon and Yukimu~, what do you think? Do you really think romance is a possibility?”

Haruka asked us again.

“I’m not very well-versed in that area. Please don’t ask me that so many times.”

Not wanting to talk about romance any further than this, Keisei refused to answer.

Inevitably enough, Haruka and Airi turned this way.

“Yamauchi and Sakayanagi haven’t interacted until now, it’s too abrupt. Isn’t it too much to call it romance?”

“That’s a rational opinion, Kiyopon. Romance does require a foundation but it’d be a different case for someone like Hirata-kun. Of course, the same

doesn't hold true for Yamauchi-kun."

In the end, we couldn't continue with the conversation with only the information we have at hand. Eventually, the topic changed from Yamauchi and Sakayanagi's romance to the situation in Class C.

"Ahh, speaking of Hirata-kun... He broke up with Karuizawa-san, right?"

"I'm not surprised, or maybe I should say I always thought they'd break up one day."

"Ehh, r-really?"

"You might call it appropriate for the boys' leader and the girls' leader to be a couple but they don't really go well together, do they? How should I put it, Hirata-kun seems like he'd appreciate a quiet, beautiful girl more."

"Karuizawa-san is also cute... Don't you think so, Kiyotaka-kun?"

Airi asked me a question that's truly difficult to answer.

Or rather, I should say she asked me because she wanted to hear the answer to that.

"I'm not sure. I've never really paid attention to Karuizawa after all."

I don't know what Airi's thinking but that answer is all I can give.

"Well, I suppose that's true~ Anyways, Karuizawa-san aside, the problem is that Hirata-kun is now free."

Haruka deliberately changed the topic back to Hirata.

“Quite a lot of girls in our class like Hirata-kun. I wonder what’s going to happen.”

“Really?”

“Ehh- You didn’t notice? For example, Mii-chan definitely likes him.”

“Ahh...now that you mention it, she looks over at Hirata-kun from time to time.”

“Right, right?”

Keisei took out his notebook, perhaps because he’s grown tired of the romance talk.

“I’ll study.”

“Ahh, it’s almost our end-of-year exam... I just remembered something depressing.”

“I need to come up with something for Haruka and the others to use as well.”

Haruka lowered her head towards the table as though bowing.

Chabashira didn’t give us any explanation in particular regarding the end-of-year exam. In other words, it’s going to be a written exam as usual.

If a student gets a failing grade, they’ll be expelled immediately. That’s probably how it’ll be.

“Around when do we start up our study group?”

“Let’s see… Let’s start as soon as the practice test on the 15th is over. If we start there, we’ll have roughly 10 days until the end-of-year exam. If we focus on past problems and trends, we should be fine.”

“As expected of Yukimu~, perfect plan. I agree I agree.”

Haruka seemed happy, maybe because she didn’t want to start studying right away.

“The last special exam of the school year will probably be held after the end of school year exam ends in March.”

“Last special exam of the school year… I see, the 1st year is almost over.”

“A lot of things happened but when it’s all over, it seems like time flew by.”

Airi and Haruka both look back on the past year.

“It’s still too early to be reminiscing. If you flunk the end of school year exam, it’s expulsion for you. And it still depends on the contents of the special exam.”

Keisei brought them back to reality. It’s probably because he wants what’s best for Haruka and the others.

“Ahh.”

Right after Keisei started studying, Haruka noticed something.

When I followed her gaze, I saw Ichinose there.

She was together with several boys and girls, all of them Class B students.

They're probably gathering much like we are but from what I can see, their expressions are stiff.

It looked like they're attempting to protect Ichinose from the slander and defamation she's receiving. But Ichinose herself probably doesn't desire a situation like this.

She's acting the way she usually does, chatting with her friends and cheerfully calling out to people as she went along. But if there's something worrying about this, it would be the fact that Kanzaki isn't there.

As Ichinose's second-in-command, I get the image of them frequently being together.

“Quite the problem now, isn’t it?”

Haruka looked at Ichinose coldly.

“...Weird rumors, is what it seems to be. I don’t know who’s spreading them around but that’s awful...”

“It’s not that unusual, is it? This time it went too far but similar things happen occasionally, don’t they? I guess that’s the burden popular girls have to bear?”

“Really?”

Airi looked perplexed, as though she had no idea about that.

“If Airi were the aggressive type like Ichinose, I’m sure there’ll be people envious of you right now though?”

That certainly may be the case. But still, it doesn't look like Airi can even imagine herself as the aggressive type.

She tried to think of it but it would seem she's failed at that.

“Well, isn’t it best to not worry about it?”

Ichinose probably understands that too, Haruka said.

I continued to listen to Haruka and Airi’s conversation without joining in.

PART 3

Roughly two hours after that. The girls kept chatting and Keisei kept studying.

I’d join Airi and Haruka’s conversation from time to time while fiddling with my phone.

Haruka’s phone, which she had placed on the table, then vibrated.

“Ahh, it’s from Miyachi.”

Haruka touched the screen and answered the call on speaker.

“Done with club activities?”

“Sorry, looks like I’ll be a bit late.”

It was a call from Akito, speaking in a slightly nervous tone, informing us that he'd be running late.

“Hmm? Could it be overtime club practice?”

“No... Looks like trouble's brewing.”

“What trouble? Give me a bit more detail here.”

“Class A and Class B are quarreling. Worst case scenario, I have to be there to stop them if a fight breaks out.”

Doesn't sound like Akito himself is involved though.

But Class A and Class B?

I recalled the faces of Class B's main members I spotted earlier. But I wonder if Ichinose would really allow such careless actions that could escalate into a fight.

“You should just let them be. It's got nothing to do with our class.”

“Could be us next, no?”

After saying that, Akito ended the call. Akito's a man of few words but sometimes he can be surprisingly passionate like when he invited Ryuuen, who no one wanted to get involved with, into his group during the training camp.

“I wonder who's quarreling...?”

Airi asked. Perhaps she's curious.

“It’s usually always that class stirring up trouble.”

Of course, they’re talking about Ryuuen’s class that’s now fallen to Class D.

“Now that you mention it, that’s right.”

The two of them tilted their heads at the unexpected confrontation between Class A and Class B.

“Hey Kiyopon, Airi. Why don’t we go take a look at Miyachi?”

“B-But wouldn’t that be dangerous?”

“I suppose so. But maybe even our class might get dragged into it if provoked.”

Haruka answered teasingly. But Airi shrunk back as though frightened.

“It’s alright. If push comes to shove I’m sure Miyachi will do something about it, no? Apparently, he used to be quite bad himself in the past too.”

“B-bad? Really?”

“I just heard it from him though.”

Perhaps the reason why he wasn’t afraid to deal with someone like Ryuuen is that he’s rather confident in his own skills.

“Well if Airi gets into a pinch, Kiyopon will save her. Right?”

“...I’ll do my best. But I’d rather not get into a fight.”

“Ahahaha. It’ll be fine. Violence usually doesn’t break out at this school. I think.”

Because there had been several such cases in the past, Haruka trailed off at the end there.

But since there’s no reason for us to not go looking for Akito, we decided to do just that.

PART 4

We saw no sign of Akito as we headed toward the archery club.

“Huh? Where’s Miyachi?”

There’s no doubt that Akito had been headed toward the cafe, so along the way, he must have come across a dispute and diverted from the path.

The three of us collectively agreed to search for Akito.

A few minutes after we started searching, we got some reliable information from some of the students who were heading home from their club activities.

Thus, we somehow managed to arrive at the gymnasium located a short distance away from the school building.

There, two first-year students were facing off with one another.

They didn't appear to be the people Haruka and the others had been expecting either.

The first student was Class A's Hashimoto.

The other was Class B's Kanzaki.

Meanwhile, Akito appeared to be in the difficult position of standing watch between the two.

"You guys aren't really going to fight, are you?"

"You're quite persistent, Miyake. I wasn't the one who instigated this in the first place, Kanzaki was."

While Hashimoto spoke as though he was being pestered by someone, our eyes met.

"It seems like your friends have arrived?"

After Hashimoto pointed this out, Akito and Kanzaki looked our way at almost the same time.

"...You guys came."

It seems like he didn't want us to interfere.

Well, nothing good comes from getting the girls tangled up in something like this.

Despite this, Haruka spoke up and inserted herself into the conversation.

“That’s because you’ve gone and gotten yourself involved in something strange. That’s why we came to help out.”

“Came to help... right...”

Realizing that he shouldn’t have said anything in the first place, Akito regretfully looked up into the empty air for a moment.

“So what is it? It doesn’t seem like they’re fighting.”

Realizing that it couldn’t be helped now that we were already here, Akito changed tracks.

“It seems like I misunderstood something. Although the situation does seem to have a bit of a dangerous feel to it.”

“Kanzaki is the dangerous one here.”

If I remember correctly, Hashimoto didn’t seem to be any different than usual.

However, Akito didn’t seem to be buying it.

“I would hope so.”

Akito didn’t show any intention of leaving any time soon.

It seemed like he wasn’t certain about whether or not things would take a turn for the worse.

At the same time, Kanzaki looked at us with a somewhat troubled expression.

That is to say, he had been hoping that nobody else would show up here.

However, he should also understand that such a dream was no longer possible.

For that reason, he chose to keep silent.

Ultimately, Kanzaki didn't say a word to any of us and once again turned his attention back toward Hashimoto.

"Continuing from where we left off, Hashimoto. What have you been doing after school? You don't belong to any clubs, so why are you here so late?"

"So if I don't have any club activities, I have to head home early? I'm free to go and do whatever I want after school. Moreover, out of everyone here, I think Miyake is the only one involved with a club. Right?"

Taking the initiative, Hashimoto poked a hole in Kanzaki's argument by dragging us into the conversation.

Compared to Kanzaki, our sudden appearance seemed to play right into Hashimoto's hands.

The members of the Ayanokouji Group briefly exchanged glances.

It wouldn't be possible to say that we're allies of Class A or Class B.

Though, if we had to choose between the two, we would definitely choose Class B.

That would be because of the armistice between Horikita and Ichinose.

“Ha! Not going to answer?”

Noticing that his question was being responded to with silence, Hashimoto let out a laugh.

“You’re not waiting here in order to meet anyone in particular. You’re just trying to spread rumors to as many people as you can, aren’t you?”

Kanzaki wore his usual calm expression, but his spirit was very imposing.

From what it looks like, Kanzaki had been questioning Hashimoto about the recent rumors surrounding Ichinose.

Akito was worried that they would get into a fight with one another, which leads us to where the situation is at now.

Hashimoto probably felt that his actions were exposed to a certain extent after listening to Kanzaki’s claim, as he nodded a couple of times in response.

“Rumors? Ah, you mean the ones about Ichinose doing various malicious things? What connection do I have with those rumors?”

“Playing dumb is just a waste of everyone’s time. I want to make one thing crystal clear with you. What you and the rest of your class are doing is simply too malicious. It’s no different than the type of thing Ryuuen would do.”

“Even when you say something like that, I don’t have an answer for you.”

Hashimoto, whose intentions are usually hard to completely understand, spoke evasively in response to Kanzaki’s questioning.

Akito seemed to grasp that the two of them wouldn't immediately break into a fistfight, he distanced himself from the two of them and came over to us.

“Hey, what should we do?”

Haruka asked Akito in a low voice.

“Nothing, let's just watch for the time being. If they split up without anything happening, it'll end with that.”

“But... Is it okay for us to be listening in?”

I could somewhat understand Airi's uneasiness.

Our Class C has nothing to do with their discussion.

At the very least, Kanzaki won't be pleased about having us be present here. That was the vibe I got from the air around him.

“What do you think, Kiyotaka?”

Akito asked for my input.

“Isn't it fine until they tell us to leave? If at some point, this turns into a fight, the presence of a third party can help keep things civil. Kanzaki should see the benefit in that too.”

It seems as though Akito immediately agreed with me, as he nodded a few times.

Hashimoto then took the topic of the rumors one step deeper.

“Hey, Kanzaki. This thing going on with Ichinose... are you sure they’re really just rumors?”

“What?”

“You can’t have smoke without a fire. That’s probably what most students are thinking.”

“Rumors can create smoke without a fire as long as there’s malicious intent.”

Hashimoto leaned against the nearby wall.

“Indeed. It’s true that rumors and fire are entirely separate things.”

Proverbs can’t be applied to every situation in the world.

“However, can you confidently tell me that Ichinose doesn’t have a dark past, Kanzaki?”

“Approximately one year. That’s how long I’ve been going through thick and thin together with Class B. That’s why I’m absolutely certain.”

“Oh give it up Kanzaki. Responses like that stink so much that I can’t even look you in the eyes.”

After saying so, Hashimoto dropped eye contact.

“Of course, I’ve also asked Ichinose directly.”

“Hoh? And what did she say?”

“She said something like: ‘I hope you aren’t entranced by any of those rumors. Don’t take them to heart.’”

“That is to say, she neither affirmed nor denied them?”

“That’s right. That’s why I decided to believe in her.”

“Oi oi, are you being serious? How much of a softie can you be?”

Hashimoto let out a laugh of contempt before immediately continuing.

“Not wanting to talk about your own dark past is just a part of human nature. Just because you’re friends, it doesn’t guarantee that she told the truth. That’s also why she didn’t tell the truth to her classmates. Or, are you saying that just because Ichinose is a good person now, that she has to have been a good person in the past as well?”

Hashimoto attempted to shake Kanzaki’s confidence.

However, Kanzaki didn’t appear to be distraught at all.

The look in his eyes told me that he has complete trust in Ichinose.

“You actually think that she’s going to tell you the truth just because you’re her right-hand man? How sweet of you.”

Hashimoto doesn’t mask his surprise at Kanzaki’s blind faith.

Or it could be that he came to the realization that there was no longer any need to prolong the conversation any further.

“I didn’t confront you to listen to something like this in the first place. I want the details of what you’ve been doing today.”

“Then I’ll tell you. I’ve been spreading around rumors about Ichinose.”

Hashimoto admitted to it.

“Hey, Kanzaki. You’re a smart, caring guy. However, that’s precisely why I suggest that you avoid getting too involved in things like this. All that you’ll be able to do is blindly believe in the other person.”

“In other words, you have no intention of retracting those rumors.”

“Aren’t you misunderstanding something here? There’s no way to ‘take back’ rumors. Rumors flow from one way to the next, spreading out however they please. I just caught wind of them and helped passed them along.”

While he admitted to helping spread the rumor along, Hashimoto clearly denied that he was the original source.

However, that didn’t make Kanzaki back down.

It seems that from the beginning, Kanzaki was aware that Hashimoto wasn’t the origin for the rumors.

“These last few days, I’ve been doing a thorough investigation on you guys in Class A.”

“And?”

“I determined that the source of the rumors all come from various students from the first-year Class A. Then, when we asked those people where they heard it from, they would give vague responses like ‘I don’t remember’ or ‘I heard it from someone else.’ Mighty similar to the response that you gave me just now. The true meaning behind this? You should already understand, Hashimoto.”

It means that someone had given instructions to everyone from Class A.

“I’m sorry, Kanzaki, but I have no idea what you’re talking about. If you don’t mind, would you please explain it to me?”

“The rumors about Ichinose were almost certainly propagated by your Class A.”

“Eh-”

“I don’t intend on listening to your excuses. I didn’t just ask first-years. I also consulted second-year and third-year students who claimed to have heard the rumors from you guys. If necessary, I can ask them to come out and confirm the facts in person.”

From the looks of it, Kanzaki and his classmates have been excessively thorough with finding the origin of the rumors.

He’s been convinced that the whole operation was spearheaded by Class A.

And with that, he’s now gone and approached Hashimoto.

Based on the fact that Kanzaki is here on his own, without a group, Class B is doing this out of consideration for Ichinose.

If a large number of students were to make a scene, it would end up attracting even more attention from students. Even those who aren't interested in rumors in the first place.

No, there's also the possibility that in this case, Kanzaki is acting entirely alone.

"I see. So that's why you've been stalking me all day today as well."

Because Hashimoto included the words 'as well', it meant that he had noticed when Kanzaki started tailing him.

Yet, he didn't seem like he cared about it at all.

That's because he understood that it obviously wasn't any sort of hindrance to what he was doing.

Hashimoto shrugged and let out a sigh as Kanzaki spoke up.

"Was it Sakayanagi who gave you instructions to spread the rumors?"

"Uh, no?"

"Then who did? She's the only one who can give instructions to you guys in Class A other than Katsuragi."

"Who knows? I'm just the same as any other student. I heard these rumors from someone else. Even if you're so confident that the rumors were started by Class A, I still don't even have the slightest clue what you're talking about. Maybe it's the handiwork of Ryuuен and he's actually just pretending to have retired?"

At that, Kanzaki changes tactics a bit.

“So you’ve all blindly accepted a rumor which may or may not be the truth and spread it around?”

“The world is overflowing with people doing that exact thing. It doesn’t matter if it’s true or not. If it’s interesting people will want to share it with others. Don’t you think that, due to their experience, girls participate in things like that much more than guys do?”

While saying so, Hashimoto turned his gaze towards Haruka and Airi.

“Well... I do like rumors, but...”

“The sad thing is, the juicier a piece of gossip is, the more enthusiastic people are to talk about it. Think about it a little bit more objectively, Kanzaki. When you asked Ichinose, she didn’t confirm or deny anything, and she also isn’t asking for any help. Don’t you think that’s strange? If it’s all just a lie, she would be seeking cooperation to catch the perpetrator instead.”

“Ichinose hates extreme conflicts. I’m sure that she has a big enough heart to even forgive the people who are defaming her.”

Since Ichinose won’t say anything on the matter, Kanzaki has no other choice than to believe in her.

“Good grief. You people from Class B...”

In any case, I’ve managed to confirm one thing based on the way Hashimoto has been speaking and acting so far.

The rumors that have been circulating about Ichinose recently... Sure enough, they aren't all lies.

I temporarily put aside my position as a student and looked at the situation from society's point of view.

Naturally, on the grounds of defamation and libel, Ichinose would be able to sue the party responsible for circulating the rumors. Regardless of whether they were true or not, the damage to her public reputation would give her the grounds to do so.

Well, provided that it's limited to situations where the truth isn't at odds with the public interest.

If this entire thing has been orchestrated by Sakayanagi, then, of course, everything should be going according to her plan.

The fact that Ichinose has chosen to stay silent proves that her strategy is working just as intended.

Giving Kanzaki a solid pat on the shoulder as he passes by, Hashimoto puts his hands in his pockets and begins to leave the room.

“Our conversation isn't over yet.”

“Haven't we said enough? Even if we continue the conversation, we won't end up being able to agree on anything anyway.”

Lightly gesturing a farewell to Haruka and Airi, Hashimoto left the room, heading toward the school building.

I felt a strange sense of incongruity after watching Hashimoto leave.

It was obvious that he didn't treat me the same way as he did back at the training camp.

In the end, it was nothing more than mere intuition.

What's changed between then and now... What's different... It's impossible to pinpoint the exact details.

"Excuse me."

Kanzaki gave us a slight bow and left, leaving toward the dormitories instead of the school building.

"Somehow, I feel like we just witnessed something totally awesome!"

"Why do I feel like you've been enjoying all of this?"

Haruka stuck out the tip of her tongue in response to Akito's retort.

"Well, that's because this 'so-called' violence is kinda exciting! Plus, if by some chance, we were attacked, Miyachi would have a plan ready to protect us right?"

While saying that, Haruka made a show of doing a few boxing jabs in the air.

"I heard that you used to be quite the delinquent?"

I asked, going along with the flow of the conversation. Akito let out a heavy sigh.

“I don’t really wanna talk about it, Haruka. I don’t want it to spread around.”

“It doesn’t matter, does it? You’re different now anyway. Were you really strong back then?”

“Let me just say this, I wasn’t some famous delinquent. Honestly, someone else was the top delinquent at the school I went to, and he was much stronger than me.”

“Huh. Was it a rough school?”

“Where I come from, adults would live a disordered life, and when they have kids, raise them that way as well. By the way, Class D’s Ryuuuen went to the middle school right next to mine.”

“Ehhh? Seriously!?”

“Aah. Throughout the several times when conflicts started between our schools, we came in contact with each other. Well, that guy probably never took me very seriously.”

Ah, so Akito is skilled at handling those kinds of situations because he’s grown accustomed to fighting.

“This conversation ends here. Don’t share this with anyone outside of the group, okay?”

“I getcha. Let’s go back to the cafe ok? Yukimuu is waiting.”

“Sounds good.”

In the end, this is just somebody else's problem.

The best option is to avoid digging any deeper. I'm certain of it.

CHAPTER 3:

NO INTENTION OF CHANGING

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday evening, I saw Ichinose while heading back to the dorms.

Ichinose is usually always surrounded by students of both genders. However, today she surprisingly appeared to be alone. For some reason, I couldn't sense any of her usual ambition in the way she was moving. I wonder if the reason she's alone is because she took the initiative to stay away from her usual groups of friends? At the moment, she's definitely the person in our school year who's flooded with the most attention.

Thoughtlessly involving other people in your own rumors may lead to them getting caught up in a second disaster.

It wouldn't be surprising for Ichinose to think something like this. I thought back to Kanzaki's conversation with Hashimoto a few days ago.

Should I try calling out to her? I thought about doing so, but...

I felt a presence behind me and decided against it.

I took out my phone and turned on the camera.

Changing the active camera from the one on the back of my phone to the one on the front, I nonchalantly took a peek at the situation going on behind me.

There were two first-year students on their way back to the dorms.

One of them was Hashimoto.

He was just walking normally, but given what happened the other day, it's difficult to think of this as a coincidence.

Is he tailing me?

However, while I was in the processes of confirming that, the other student began to approach me.

She was walking up to me without the slightest bit of hesitation.

I immediately turned off the camera and put the phone in my pocket.

“Ah, um, Ayanokouji-kun. Do you have a moment...?”

The person who called out to me from behind was my classmate, Mei-Yu Wang.

Because her name can be difficult to pronounce, people refer to her as ‘Mii-chan’. Though calling her that in my mind is already somewhat embarrassing.

“Right now... Are you free for a little while? I have something I'd like to consult you about.”

Consult with me? She and I have barely ever spoken with one another until now.

You could even say this was practically the first time she came to talk to me face to face.

It doesn't seem like there's someone other than her either...

Looking over, Ichinose continued walking back to the dorms without noticing me.

At this point, jogging over to catch up with her would just end up looking strange.

"I'm sorry, you're busy aren't you..."

"No, I'm just heading back to the dorms. It should be fine."

With that, Mii-chan looked a little happier as she let out a sigh of relief.

As I was speaking with Mii-chan, Hashimoto passed us on the way back to the dormitories.

However, he didn't look in my direction or say anything.

"So, you said you wanted to consult with me about something?"

"Speaking about it here... It's somewhat..."

She restlessly looked around at our surrounding. It seems like talking while walking back to the dorms isn't suitable for what she wants to talk about.

"Is that so?"

As I expected, it wouldn't be possible to ask her something like: 'Since the dorms are pretty close by, would you like to talk about this in my room?'

Moreover, I can't suggest something like going to Mii-chan's room instead.

"What do you want to do?"

Instead of making the decision myself, I decided to just let Mii-chan choose where we go from here.

After a little thought, Mii-chan suggested a location.

"How about the cafe... if that's alright with you? Though we might be somewhat late in heading back home afterward."

Since she herself wanted to go to the cafe, I didn't have any particular reason to decline.

Even if I'll be a little late getting back, the walk only makes a difference of 5 to 10 minutes, which isn't a big deal. Following Mii-chan's suggestion, we headed off to Keyaki Mall's cafe. Though, we're just two people who don't know each other very well. We ended up walking somewhat of a distance away from each other instead of side-by-side.

PART 1

As popular a location as ever, we arrived at the thriving cafe.

Even if I'm somewhat lacking in common sense, as an ordinary high school student, I'm able to understand something like this now.

This cafe is a branch location for a super-major company outside of the school, particularly popular among girls in the social world. Outside of here, the price per cup is expensive for high school students, so it's not something they could afford to be drinking very often. For a high school student who isn't working at least part-time, they'd only be able to afford coming here a few times every month. However, because students at this school receive 'money' corresponding to how many class points they have, many students can afford to come here as long as they aren't in a particularly dire financial situation.

Due to that, it's inevitable that the cafe would be thriving every day.

Though, it wasn't so full that we were unable to find a place to sit. We ended up taking a pair of seats facing one another. Mii-chan never tried to match my line of sight. Instead, she stared at the cup of coffee I had ordered that I was holding in my hands. I suppose she and Airi are similar girls. If I inadvertently pressure her too much, it might make it harder for her to say what's on her mind. I decided not to break the ice and waited for Mii-chan to initiate the conversation.

Meanwhile, I told her I was going to get up for a second and get some sugar from the counter.

There, I took a single pack of sugar.

Without letting my eyes wander, I confirmed that Hashimoto had also come to the cafe.

It's unlikely that he would have just so happened to suddenly want a cup of coffee.

Without a doubt, Hashimoto was following me.

Was he sent by Sakayanagi in order to monitor me? No, that doesn't seem very likely. Sakayanagi currently doesn't want to spread information around about my existence. Plus, even if she wanted to keep tabs on me, she would have forced Kamuro to do it. If Sakayanagi has a grasp on what type of person Hashimoto is, it's understandable why she wouldn't think he's the right choice for something like this.

She shouldn't be under any sort of rush to tell Hashimoto about me and risk having him then disclose it to a third party.

If that's the case, is he following me based on his own judgment?

Back during training camp, I don't remember doing anything that would necessarily attract any of his attention.

To him, I should have been just another member of the group. Ryuuuen, Ishizaki, Albert, and Ibuki. I considered the likelihood of any of them saying anything to him one by one, but none of them would have said anything.

Well... It's not like I'll be able to come to any conclusion by thinking about it now.

However, sooner or later it seems like it'll become an issue that I'll have to deal with, one way or another.

For now, I'll ignore Hashimoto and focus on my conversation with Mii-chan.

I returned to my seat after about a minute, and immediately as I did, Mii-chan broke the silence.

“Hey... Uh, it’s about Hirata-kun.”

About Hirata, is it?

“I was hoping you’d tell me a few things about him...”

“You know, Hirata and I aren’t particularly close to each other.”

I responded to her immediately in order to draw the line, however, she responded by giving me a surprised look.

“But then, why did Hirata-kun advise me that Ayanokouji-kun was the most reliable person in the class?”

“...Oh really?”

“Yeah. He said that Ayanokouji-kun was the most reliable and level-headed person in the class. He spoke really well of you.”

While it makes me happy to be praised by Hirata like this, if things like this continue to spread around I feel like it’ll develop into something troublesome. However, I understand why Hirata would give my name to Mii-chan.

There are plenty of reliable students, but in the particular case of Class C, it gets somewhat complicated.

Considering the other boys, it's not surprising that Hirata would look me as the next most reliable student.

Still, it's about Hirata, huh?

From my earlier conversation with Haruka, I can more or less guess what it's about.

"Recently, Hirata-kun and Karuizawa-san, uh... broke up with each other. Have you heard about it already?"

"Naturally."

What about it? I pretended as though I didn't understand where she was going with this.

"T-That, well..."

After faltering with her words several times, she finally began to speak about the real issue at hand.

"...Do you know if there's anyone, H-Hirata-kun likes right now?"

It appears that this was what she had been wanting to ask about. In this case, which answer is the correct one to respond with?

Although I thought something like that for a moment, I immediately came to the conclusion that giving a genuine answer would be for the best.

"I don't think so."

"R-Really!?"

“Of course I can’t say so with absolute certainty, but as far as I know, there’s nobody. Besides, he’s just been dumped by Karuizawa. It would be too early for him to like someone else already.”



While I was speaking, Mii-chan gradually calmed down.

“Is it alright if I ask you just one thing out of mere curiosity?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“When did you start liking Hirata?”

“Eeeeeh!?!?”

Did I ask her something strange? Mii-chan’s face turned bright red as she went into a panic.

“W-W-W-Why would you ask such a thing?”

“Oh no, if you don’t want to answer, you-”

“-Right after the entrance ceremony?”

-don’t have to.

“I’m... a little clumsy...”

A single encounter with Hirata was the only trigger she needed to fall for him.

Mii-chan spoke openly.

“...Something like that... I guess.”

“Is that so?”

Although there are various uncertainties, one thing's for certain. She was attracted to Hirata's gentleness.

“But-”

Mii-chan had been blushing as she talked about meeting with Hirata, but her expression clouded over suddenly as she was brought back to reality.

“I... I don't think I'm good enough to become Hirata-kun's girlfriend...”

“Why?”

How am I even able to ask that? I'm surprised that I'm even able to speak up.

“Because there are too many rivals... Besides, I've never been in love before or anything...”

Even though she's overflowing with feelings of love, it doesn't seem like she has the courage to take action.

And while I don't want to think that a lack of prior experience with love is a handicap, it definitely has some effect.

“Well, Mii-chan... Wait, is it alright for me to be calling you Mii-chan?”

“Oh no, you're totally fine. Everyone calls me that. Even though both my parents are Chinese, they both like my Japanese nickname, so even they call me Mii-chan.”

That is to say, she isn't half-Japanese or anything like that?

“Are you studying abroad?”

“Yeah. When I was in my first year of middle school, my father came to Japan on business.”

So she moved to Japan with the rest of her family?

“Have there been any difficulties with that? Like a language barrier or something like that?”

“It was pretty hard at first. I was more concerned about making friends than the difference in languages. However, there were a lot of people who were pretty good at English at the middle school I enrolled at, so I was able to make friends there.”

Speaking of which, I seem to remember that Mii-chan was pretty good at English.

It seems that on top of communicating with others in English, she managed to master Japanese perfectly over her 3 years of middle school. I've heard that Chinese students have to endeavor through a school system much more rigorous than Japanese students do.

I wonder if Mii-chan has been able to smoothly integrate into Japanese society because she's received that a high level of education.

Beyond this, she just needs to work on her communication skills like Airi.

“I wonder if I have a chance...”

“Speaking realistically, shouldn't you have a pretty decent chance?”

“Really?”

“I didn’t lie. However...”

“H-However!?”

While it will probably make her feel anxious, I still have to explain the difficult part of all of this.

“Hirata’s a good guy, isn’t he?”

“Of course.”

“Because of that, don’t you think he’ll be more careful next time he’s considering going out with someone? It is Hirata we’re talking about. He may be feeling responsible for it, like he was unable to keep Karuizawa happy.”

Mii-chan nodded as though a revelation had just fallen upon her.

“You’re right. Along with that, confessing so soon... I don’t think I’d be able to handle it.”

“I know you’re worried about what potential rivals might be doing, but you’re probably going to be rejected if you get impatient and confess to him so soon.”

I advised her to approach things slowly and steadily until she has a solid foundation to work with.

Of course, it’s really the type of situation where you’ll never know unless you ask.

However, I can't really see Hirata being in any sort of rush to associate himself with another girl at the moment.

The odds are that he'll end up rejecting the majority of the girls who confess to him.

In that sense, those who slowly stay on the attack will have a greater chance at victory.

“...I guess I had you a bit misunderstood, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Misunderstood?”

“You know, you’re usually really silent and you don’t say much... Kinda giving people the impression that you’re someone really scary. But after meeting with you face-to-face like this, I can tell that you’re actually super approachable and that you’re seriously listening to what I’ve had to say...”

It seems like she’s complimenting me.

However, instead of seriously listening to what she’s been talking about, it would be more accurate to say that I’m just doing an unconscious analysis of the contents of the conversation. I’m only examining each piece of information and deciding whether or not it will be useful to her later on. If she feels like I’m listening to her carefully, that’s all the more convenient for me.

Does she want to go deeper? It feels like now I have the chance to ask all kinds of things.

“Oh? Mii-chan and... Ayanokouji-kun?”

Just as I opened my mouth and began to a few other questions, first-year Hiyori Shiina from Class D appeared. I shut my mouth without saying anything.

“Hiyori-chan. Hello!”

Hiyori-chan. Mii-chan. From their close way of referring to one another, they seem to be rather close.

“Are the two of you, by any chance, on a date together?”

“N-N-No! Not at all Hiyori-chan!”

Mii-chan stood up in a panic and desperately waved her arms in front of her to deny the question.

Seeing her reject it to such an overwhelming extent hurt my heart a little bit.

“In that case, is it alright if I join in?”

“Of course! ...Are you alright with it?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you very much.”

Hiyori smiled happily and sat down in the chair next to Mii-chan.

“You two are quite the curious combination. What kind of things have you guys been talking about?”

“Oh... Uuuuh...”

It seemed like it was hard for Mii-chan to say that we had been talking about how to handle the person she likes.

“I’m interested in China, so I’ve been listening to her talk about it a little bit.”

“About China... is it?”

“Yeah. It’s one of the countries I’d like to visit someday, so I thought I’d hear about it from someone who’s from there.”

I sent a look over to Mii-chan as if asking for her confirmation. She hurriedly nodded two or three times in response.

“China’s nice isn’t it? I’m also pretty interested in it, with it having things like the Great Wall of China and all.”

Hiyori put her hands together in front of her and smiled.

Hiyori’s interest in the topic really went beyond my expectations.

“Speaking of China, the wall is definitely a spot that can’t be forgotten. Though, personally, I’d like to go to Pingyao Ancient City.”

“Pingyao Ancient City?”

It seems like Hiyori’s first time hearing of the place.

Mii-chan, on the other hand, widened her eyes in surprise at the fact that I knew of the place.

“Even though it’s a World Heritage Site, the fact that you know about it...”

“It’s just a something I heard about.”

“By the way, are the two of you... friends?”

Mii-chan asked the two of us after seeing Hiyori and I talk naturally with one another.

“Yep! We’re reading buddies.”

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

“Reading buddies...?”

Mii-chan had an expression on her face that was telling us she didn’t understand.

However, she immediately turned that confusion into positivity with her next question.

“Isn’t it great to be able to make friends across classes?”

It’s likely that she hadn’t had any friends outside of her own class until the training camp occurred.

“I think so too. School life can be more than just everyone being hostile towards each other.”

Inter-student competition is one of the foundational basics of Advanced Nurturing High School.

Here, most students have a strong tendency to see students outside of their own class as rivals.

However, this time around, the number of students who have opened their hearts to those from other classes has increased.

To some extent, the true aim of the school has become obscured and hidden.

Otherwise, there wouldn't be any rules like the ones we came across at the training camp. However, I can hardly say for certain that this won't be the cause of any negative impacts in the future. When you're forced into a confrontative relationship with others, creating these half-baked friendships could possibly end up causing some adverse effects.

PART 2

“Thank you for today, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“No, I’m the one who should be saying thank you for letting me hear what you had to say about China.”

“Ah. I-I see. Right.”

I unintentionally thanked her in response, prompting Mii-chan to shyly scratch at her cheek with her finger.

“I’ll head up after taking a look at my mailbox.”

I parted ways with Mii-chan and Hiyori as they headed to the elevator.

I get around to checking my mailbox one or two times a week.

Of course, other students also check theirs at a similar frequency.

Most of the stuff that comes in the mail was from the school. However, there are students who used the mail to exchange packages with each other or have things delivered by shopping online.

Though, I wasn't checking for any ordinary reason like that.

"Nothing today either, huh?"

I started regularly checking my mail ever since my father visited this school.

After all, it wouldn't be strange if he tried to get in contact with me soon.

As there was nothing particularly special in my mailbox, I headed back over to the elevator, only to find that Hiyori had chosen to wait up for me.

"Do you have a moment?"

"Sure."

We moved to the lobby's sofa just in front of the elevator.

"I had wanted to ask you about something earlier, but hesitated because we were in front of Mii-chan..."

Being a little bit mindful of her surroundings, Hiyori did a sweep of the area before speaking up.

"That thing going on right now with Ichinose-san, have you heard anything about it?"

“Heard anything? If you’re talking about those strange rumors, then I guess I know the rough details.”

“Yeah, those. Do you know who’s spreading them around?”

“No... I don’t know.”

It would have been easy to name Sakayanagi or Hashimoto, but I decided against it.

“Honestly, I don’t want to see Ichinose-san tortured like this anymore. She’s the type of person who’s even willing to be friendly to somebody with barely any friends, like me.”

If I’m remembering things correctly, Hiyori and Ichinose were in the same group during the training camp. I guess that after eating the same food and sleeping in the same room as one another, she would feel a stronger bond with her than she would with other students.

“Ayanokouji-kun.”

There was some kind of hidden determination in Hiyori’s eyes.

“When I first came here, I didn’t like this behavior that the school encourages, where we hurt others. But now, I think it’s necessary to fight from time to time in order to protect your friends.”

“That’s true. After all, there’s no way to be able to save everyone.”

“Even though we’re mutual enemies with Ichinose-san, there must be something we can do to help her. I haven’t been able to think of how yet, but... would you be willing to cooperate with me?”

“Cooperate, huh? If that’s the case, then you should consult Horikita.”

As I said so, I considered introducing them to each other.

“Horikita-san, is it?”

However, Hiyori’s expression didn’t lighten up.

“It’s possible that Class C might also be willing to help Ichinose.”

In which case, it’s possible that it might then turn into a situation where all 3 classes are willing to go up against Class A.

However, Hiyori still didn’t show any signs that she was happy with this.

“Aren’t you able to do something about it yourself, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“I don’t have any influence over Class C at all.”

“Is that right?”

She tilted her head to the side questioningly.

“For the girls there’s Horikita, and for the boys there’s Hirata. You’ll have no choice but to go to one of them about it.”

“I see...”

Hiyori’s shoulders dropped as her expression changed to one of disappointment.

“Dissatisfied?”

“No... just, I’ve never really gotten to know Horikita-san or Hirata-kun...
But if it was Ayanokouji-kun, I thought...”

Her shoulders dropped even further as she grew silent. It wasn’t the reaction I had been expecting.

“I’m sorry. I can’t do what I can’t do.”

“No... After all, I was only thinking as convenient for me, and spoke without considering things for you.”

After saying so, she bowed her head.

“For the time being, would you like me to start the conversation with them for you?”

“Really? You would do that for me?”

Despite asking me that, Hiyori then changed her mind.

“I’m sorry, let’s do it at another time. If our conversation helps spread things any further, we may end up troubling Ichinose by just that much more.”

“Yeah. That may be true.”

Those guys waging war against Ichinose... As things stand now, I don’t know what move they’ll make next.

Tactlessly stimulating the situation without knowing anything would be counterproductive. There’s also the concern that Ichinose’s rumors are closer to the truth than they appear.

PART 3

After returning to my room, I received a text message from Horikita.

[You around?]

Even though I didn't respond to her, another message came flying in.

[Since the message has been marked as read, I'll just continue talking as that's more convenient. Ichinose-san will be coming to my room tonight. Will you come?]

Such an unexpected message.

At first, I had only intended to read what she sent, but I chose to give a proper response.

[What developments took place to lead to the current situation?]

[We're in an alliance with Class B. It's only natural that we'd lend a hand given the current state of affairs. But, this time we don't know the full story. Therefore, I was thinking of hearing about it from the person herself.]

So, she got in contact with Ichinose and asked her if they could meet together in person.

She had made quite a bold move.

It's easy to refuse.

If I ask Horikita about it later, she'd tell me what Ichinose tells her.

Though, that doesn't mean Horikita will learn everything.

Even Kanzaki, despite how close they are, doesn't seem to know all the details about Ichinose.

In which case, would asking her directly bring me closer to the truth?

The problem is that if I put my foot in the door here, I'll end up getting involved.

What should I do, I wonder?

After thinking about it for a little, I sent a response back to Horikita.

[What time?]

[Seven.]

A bit late.

I'd have to be careful so as to not be seen by any of the other students.

[Understood. I'll let you know when I'm on my way.]

I decided to meet Ichinose together with Horikita.

PART 4

After that, I leisurely relaxed in my room until the appointed time.

When the clock showed five minutes until seven, I left, headed toward Horikita's room.

At almost the same time as I got off the elevator, Ichinose arrived in the elevator beside me.

"Ah! Good evening Ayanokouji-kun."

I lightly raised my hand in response to her greeting.

"I'm sorry to intrude."

"Ahaha. But I'm also the one who's intruding upon you here, so it's fine."

After saying so, Ichinose took the lead as we went to Horikita's room and rang the doorbell. We immediately heard the lock on the door turning from the inside.

"Please come in."

The plan was to meet at seven. Because of that, there wasn't anything particularly suspicious about us both arriving at the same time, so Horikita invited us into the room without saying much.

I sat down properly on the floor.

I've visited Horikita's room before, but it doesn't seem to have changed very much since then. Her room was very similar to my own, very monotonous and simple.

"I'm sorry for asking to meet with you on a weekday night, Ichinose-san."

“But aren’t you doing this out of consideration for me in the first place? You don’t need to apologize.”

The feeling I got from meeting Ichinose face-to-face so far was that she’s the same as she’s always been.

“Though… If this goes on too late, it’ll start to affect things tomorrow, so I hope you’re not looking to chat for too long… To start things off, there have been various worrisome rumors going around about me recently.”

“Yes. Do you know who has been spreading those rumors?”

Without beating around the bush, Horikita directly asked Ichinose.

I was curious to see whether or not Ichinose would answer the question honestly.

“I absolutely can’t speak with certainty here, but if I had to guess I’d say it’s Sakayanagi-san.”

Surpassing my expectations, she gave a clear response to the question.

If she was any less than half certain about it, she wouldn’t have said any name in specific. She isn’t the type of person who would speak ill of others without any sort of reason to do so.

I was also able to come to a conclusion based on her response.

That is, at the very least, Ichinose has been able to see that someone, in particular, has been spreading the rumors about her.

“Sakayanagi-san… What makes you think it might be her?”

“To put it simply, I guess it’s because she declared war on Class B. Do I need to give you any other reason for it?”

Horikita should know that Sakayanagi has an aggressive, warlike personality.

Considering the fact that she took the initiative to deepen the conflict in her own class in order to defeat Katsuragi, it’s easy to imagine that in order to defeat Class B, she would focus her assault on Ichinose, their leader.

“No. That reason alone is more than enough.”

Because Horikita thinks the same way I do, she didn’t see any reason to pry any deeper into that matter.

“So she’s circulating these absolutely baseless rumors, forcing you to have to bear responsibility for the damage?”

“Uhm... How do I put it...”

“Are you not going to deny the rumors?”

“Sorry, Horikita-san. I’m not able to tell you anything about that. Horikita-san and Ayanokouji-kun are friends, but you’re still students from another class. We may be in a cooperative relationship with each other right now, but sooner or later, we’re destined to fight against each other.”

Ichinose seemed like she was willing to answer anything Horikita asked, but she ended up refusing to answer this time.

But I guess that was the natural choice to make.

“I don’t mean to force you to say anything here, but you do know that silence can be interpreted as though you’re saying the rumors are true, right?”

“That’s at the liberty of Horikita-san and everyone else to decide after hearing the rumors for themselves. However, I have absolutely no intention of giving this matter any excessive amount of energy. Sakayanagi-san’s strategy is to stir up Class B, I think the correct solution for dealing with it is to simply stay silent.”

Ichinose showed us a smile, her conduct as natural as always.

The harassment going on here wasn’t anything special. It was a typical type of bullying that happens everywhere, and there was no perfect solution to it. You can aggressively deny the rumors, or you can simply stay silent, but in the end, the peanut gallery will make a fuss anyway, relying on speculation to fill in the gaps as they see fit. Due to this, Ichinose made the choice to simply not say anything and wait for time to pass.

“I had thought to meet with Horikita-san today and tell you this so that you’d avoid carelessly getting involved. If I continue to stay silent, yet the people around me start attracting more attention to it, the situation will take longer to settle down. Most importantly, there’s just no need for Class C to get involved with Sakayanagi-san in order to help me out. I’ll be fine.”

Ichinose nodded firmly, her smile entirely unchanged.

“...I understand that your will is strong. Anyone who gets caught up in such despicable rumors would undoubtedly take damage from them, regardless

of whether they're true or not. Nevertheless, you're not just thinking of yourself, but everyone around you as well."

"I am not that noble a person."

Looking a little embarrassed, Ichinose continued.

"So, Horikita-san and the rest of Class C can continue doing things as usual. I will clean up my own mess."

After saying this, Ichinose stood up.

It seems that she chose to come over today just to let Horikita know not to interfere any further.

"Do you know about what's been going on with Kanzaki and the others?"

Despite thinking it might be unnecessary, I decided to interfere a little bit.

"Kanzaki-kun?"

"A few days ago, he confronted Hashimoto from Class A and earnestly asked him to stop spreading the rumors around. No, it may have gone past simply asking earnestly."

"I see... Kanzaki-kun is very gentle. I told him I was alright. I didn't think I needed to say anything more to him."

"It's probably not just Kanzaki-kun. A number of your classmates are probably struggling to find some way to help you, for your sake."

Even though this should've been the first time Horikita had heard of the situation with Kanzaki, her speculation should be accurate.

“Then I’ll just have to go speak with my classmates again. If you don’t mind, could we stop our conversation here?”

“Are you really okay with this?”

Just to be sure, Horikita asked Ichinose a final time.

“Of course.”

Ichinose answered without hesitation.

“Thank you for your concern. And to Ayanokouji-kun as well, thank you for coming out for my sake so late at night.”

“No. I simply tagged along.”

Horikita didn’t stop her from leaving this time.

Ichinose wished us a good night and left the room.

“I wonder if there’s truly nothing we need to do.”

“Well, it’s hard to say.”

Based on Ichinose’s behavior, it doesn’t look like she’s any different than usual.

Instead of trying to stay strong, it’s more accurate to say that she’s trying not to think about it. That’s the impression I got from her.

“What do you think I should do?”

“Are you asking for my opinion?”

“Yes. I want your genuine opinion.”

Horikita spoke without hesitation.

“In that case, you shouldn’t do anything.”

“For what reason?”

“If Sakayanagi is the source of the rumors like Ichinose says she is, getting involved in this situation may prompt her to set her sights on Class C.”

“That makes sense, but what if Ichinose-san is defeated by Sakayanagi-san? Won’t she then turn her attention to Class C, anyway?”

What she’s getting at is that Sakayanagi will ultimately end up targeting Class C regardless of whether we help Ichinose or not. An inevitable conclusion.

“It is possible that, sooner or later, our class will end up being targeted. But when that time comes, the troublesome leader of Class B will have also been dealt with. That’s something to be thankful for in its own way.”

“...So you’re saying it doesn’t matter what happens to Ichinose-san? You’re being quite cold-hearted.”

“Cold-hearted? Isn’t that a good term to describe how you acted when you first enrolled here? It’s different when it comes to helping out a classmate, but Ichinose is a student from another class. She’s an opponent who we’ll

eventually have to fight and defeat. If she's defeated by someone else, as long as there's an upside to it for us, we don't have any reason to be worried about it."

"We have a beneficial relationship with her. Until Sakayanagi-san and the others fall from Class A, getting into a one-on-one conflict with Class B-

"Aren't you just being idealistic?"

For our cooperative relationship to cause Class A to conveniently fall down to Class C, allowing our classes to climb to the positions of Class A and B before finally facing off with one another. Such a fantastic story is nothing more than a pipe dream.

I don't know if it has to do with external circumstances, but Ichinose herself is turning away anyone attempting to help.

If this conversation had happened with the Horikita from earlier this year, she would have probably stopped pushing the issue any further when Ichinose tried to leave the first time.

How, and why, did she get to the point where she can think something like this?

Well, she's been aiming to improve her relationship with Kushida for the better, so I can make a good guess.

"You should leave it alone."

"That... makes sense..."

Horikita should also understand that this is the right thing to do.

That's exactly the reason why she didn't make any strong objections to it.

This time, we did our part as partners of the alliance by showing our concern for Ichinose and offering her our assistance. That should be sufficient enough. Class C can quietly catch up to the other classes, so long as we don't do anything to stand out. Slowly drawing closer while those at the top take each other down is a wise strategy to take here.

However, at this point, the important thing is that I don't offer any assistance with that.

I only told her this because she asked me for my opinion. Horikita is the one who ultimately decides what our class will do from here.

That said, in all probability, Horikita will decide against becoming any further involved with Class B.

After all, she doesn't have the ability to be able to change Ichinose's situation for the better until Ichinose herself decides to change strategies.

"I'll head home as well. A lone boy can't be staying in a girl's room this late at night."

It was getting close to 8:00 PM. Things would get troublesome if I was seen here this late.

"Yeah..."

Horikita, lost in thought, responded to me without paying me much attention.

Horikita has begun to change little by little.

However, the changes are still too extreme right now. Her tendency to lose sight of herself and get unnecessarily influenced by her surroundings is becoming more and more prevalent.

For the time being, Horikita will have to work hard to get along together with others.

Beyond that, I wonder if she'll be able to reach her true self?

That's what's important.

After I left the room, I could see the figure of Ichinose standing before the elevator.

While wondering if she had been waiting for me to come out, she waved me down with a smiling face.

“Over here!”

She called out to me in a low voice, and as I approached I was essentially dragged into the elevator along with her.

Ichinose pressed the button for the first floor and we started to descend to the lobby.

“Can you keep me company for a little bit?”

“I don't mind but... where are we going?”

“Hmm. Let's go outside for a bit, okay?”

We disembarked at the lobby. Since there was nobody around, we went straight outside.

The sun had already set completely. In the dark, Ichinose and I walked to one of the rest areas on the way to the school buildings.

“I understand that it’s cold outside but... I don’t want to attract any attention.”

“I know. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Ah... well, how do I say this... I truly am sorry.”

As soon as she got her words in order, the first thing out of her mouth was an apology.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“I guess it’s because I’ve troubled Horikita-san and Ayanokouji-kun, as well as everyone else from Class C. These rumors have caused everyone so much unnecessary worry. Anyhow, please forget about it.”

“Isn’t this what you said to Kanzaki and everyone else as well?”

“This is simply the very best option available to me. This is the stance I will take until the rumors have subsided.”

Upon saying that, she looked at me, eyes blazing with determination. When she puts it like this, I can see why Kanzaki and the other students from Class B who have been supporting Ichinose would have no choice but to listen to her.

“Actually, that’s everything I wanted to say… It’s cold, isn’t it? Let’s go back.”

“Alright.”

We only chatted for a short time.

Ichinose urged me to head back first so we didn’t arrive together, so I ended up returning to the dormitory ahead of her.

PART 5

The people surrounding my daily life started getting busy.

I wasn’t actively doing anything to interfere with that, just passing the time by passively drifting along with my surroundings.

And although it is somewhat difficult, the everyday life that I’ve been looking for may look something like this.

I had a premonition that, somehow, I’d manage to arrive at an answer to my question.

However, a concerning event happened to take place around this time.

Nighttime. The cell phone I left by my bed vibrated quietly.

The time on the clock was just past one in the morning. I checked to see who was calling me at such an unnatural time, only to find that it was a number I hadn’t registered as a contact.

However, there shouldn't be any way for an outside number to get through to my phone.

The cell phones provided to the students by the school should only be able to dial out to a designated list of phone numbers. They're also set up ahead of time to only accept calls from other phones used by the school. All of this is based on a setting with the phone itself that can't be changed. This is all to avoid any possibility that the student might have accidental contact with the outside world.

It isn't a particularly rare feature for phones to have. It's based on a security system that's usually used when young children are given their own cellphone. In other words, it means that this was a call from someone on campus who I'd never registered as a contact in my phone before.

It was impossible to determine whether was a student or one of the teachers.

“...Hello?”

Being cautious to some extent, I picked up the phone while still groggy from having just woken up.

I pressed the phone up to my left ear.

I wasn't able to hear anyone speaking on the other end.

The silence continued.

And still, the only sound that reached my ears was the very faint sound of breathing.

As I waited for the other party to make a move, the silence had continued for about 30 seconds.

“I’m going to hang up if you don’t say anything.”

I gave out a fair warning as I was getting tired of sitting on the phone in silence.

“Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.”

The other party spoke my full name.

It was a voice that I had no memory of ever hearing before.

But based on the sound of the voice, I don’t think they were an adult.

In which case, it follows that they were a student.

“You are...?”

I asked in return.

The call went back to silence.

And then, the caller hung up.

“Even if you’re just going to say my name...”

It would be impossible to dismiss this as someone having accidentally called the wrong number.

“In other words, you’ve finally started to take action...?”

Exactly who the other person was didn't matter anymore.

That man's strategy. I can see he's begun to make his move against me.

Though, the strange part of this is why he would let me know he's coming.

If his goal is to force me to drop out of school, it would make sense that he would approach this more like a surprise attack.

Going about it like this can only mean he intends for me to take it as a threat.

That man... Is there anything outside of his reach?

Either way, he's already begun to make his move.

CHAPTER 4:

ICHINOSE'S SECRET, KAMURO'S SECRET

INTRODUCTION

It was a Friday, four days after Kanzaki reached out to Hashimoto.

The rumors about Ichinose had been spreading more each day, and it had gotten to the point where it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that all of the students in the school had heard about them by now.

However, Ichinose herself didn't appear to have reported anything about them to the school.

She gave off an appearance that told everyone that she didn't care very much about the rumors, and she spent each day as she always had.

Despite being harassed with unpleasant rumors, Ichinose stood firm. And as she expected, eventually, students began to speak in support of her. Students were saying things like: "The rumors really were just rumors."

"She was totally being framed." and "They were all lies."

All gossip has an expiration date.

The plan to defame Ichinose had failed miserably.

She had successfully managed to get through it by simply staying silent. Eventually, everyone began to shift their attention to studying earnestly for the upcoming final exams.

Though, during this time, another incident occurred. One that once again stoked the flame of the rumors throughout the school.

It was Friday, after school.

On my way back home from the school building, I bore witness to a large crowd of people as I entered the dorm lobby.

A scene like this taking place as I returned to the dormitory was one I felt like I had experienced before.

“Deja vu, is it?”

Coincidentally, Katsuragi was standing in the same spot as he had been back then. The only difference was that this time Yahiko was also standing beside him. Since there didn’t seem to be anyone I was acquainted with nearby, I decided to approach them and called out.

“What’s with all the commotion?”

“Ah. It seems like a letter has been put into everyone’s mailboxes. It’s similar to that case that happened earlier this year.”

Katsuragi mumbled, crossing his arms in dissatisfaction.

“Didn’t you get one in yours as well? Ayanokouji?”

Yahiko pressed me to go look, so I lightly nodded in response.

“I’ll go check to make sure.”

I went over to my mailbox, turned the dial to the right combination, and took a look inside.

There, someone had neatly inserted a paper, folded in the same 4-fold style the last one had been.

If it was the exact same type of message as last time, it would be a print. That is to say, it would be a printed copy.

Naturally, it’s impossible to tell the difference between a handwritten letter and a printed copy when it’s folded like this.

I slowly opened the paper.

『Ichinose Honami is a criminal.』

That was written inside.

However, this time the name of the sender wasn’t included like it was in the letter last time around.

It was just this one line.

The font it was written in was also a standard one, making the entire letter come across as unusually simple. Since it doesn’t seem like the type of thing that would be printed at the convenience store, it was probably printed with a personal printer.

The one sentence reminded me of the rumors that had quieted down.

Additionally, the letter went one step further by calling her a ‘criminal’.

Though, there was no mention of what she had done to deserve that title...

“I’m sure Ichinose will be surprised by this.”

“But if it’s presented in such a straightforward way, won’t it cause the sender all sorts of problems? Isn’t there an issue with doing something so malicious in such a public way?”

Yahiko was asking Katsuragi if the letter was a poor move for the sender.

“Indeed, this situation is quite different than what happened last time. Back then, it was just an allegation that Ichinose could’ve been illegally amassing private points. It turned out that she hadn’t done anything wrong. The school even made an unprecedented announcement by recognizing the authenticity of her large numbers of points. However, this time the letter is obviously meant to defame Ichinose. If she was to report it to the school and ask for help with it, it’s possible that they’ll be able to track down the person who sent out the letters.”

“The sender is an idiot then.”

“No, I’m not so sure.”

“Really?”

“This person... It’s impossible for them not to understand something so simple.”

“Huh... Is it possible that the person spreading the rumors... That Katsuragi-san knows who it is?”

“It’s nothing more than a rough idea.”

Even though Sakayanagi had given me advance notice about her plans, to the rest of the school, she has ostensibly denied her involvement with these rumors. It’s possible that Hashimoto acted alone, or acted under the instructions of one of the second or third years. There’s also a chance that the source of this rumor is someone completely different.

However, Katsuragi said that he had a rough idea about the source in this case.

Which means that Sakayanagi is the clear favorite.

“Whether or not the school takes action here. It will depend on Ichinose as the person at the very center of this incident.”

The person responsible for sending out these letters is convinced that Ichinose won’t report anything to the school, just like with the rumors. That is, they’ve determined that no matter what they do, Ichinose will choose to remain silent.

When Ichinose doesn’t take action against the letters or the rumors, the school also isn’t able to take action.

In the middle of all of this, Ichinose herself entered the lobby. She had probably been contacted by one of her classmates in Class B and hurriedly returned to the dorm.

A friend immediately gave her one of the letters and she looked through it.

Katsuragi, me, and about 10 other students stood in place and watched Ichinose.

“...”

Ichinose didn't say a word. She just looked down and stared at the letter.

The sentence on the letter takes no more than one second for somebody to read in their mind.

From the looks of it, Ichinose spent dozens of second reading that single line of text over and over.

“...This is in the mailboxes?”

“Yeah... It's terrible, isn't it? It's probably in every first-year mailbox...”

One of the girls from Class B, Mako Amikura, spoke as she approached and hugged Ichinose.

“Hey, you don't need to put up with this anymore. Why don't we talk to the teachers? Something like this shouldn't be forgiven.”

“That's right! If we bring it to the teachers, they'll definitely find the culprit!”

So far there had just been invisible rumors, but this time was different. There was now something that could serve as physical evidence. There was clear proof that someone has been maliciously attacking Ichinose.

“I’m okay. Something like this isn’t enough to get to me.”

“Y-You have to! If you don’t, the horrible rumors about Honami-chan are going to spread everywhere!”

It’s no surprise that her classmates were desperately trying to convince her to reconsider.

Even if nine out of ten people don’t believe in the rumors, it’s still a big deal if that one remaining person does. That student’s impression of Ichinose Honami will slowly deteriorate.

Ichinose is able to decide to stay silent without any hesitation, but the people around her are different.

They’re all looking for some way to help her. After all, proving her innocence would also lead to being able to enact punishment on the culprit responsible for all of this. However, doing that would only push Ichinose into a corner.

“I’m sorry everyone, for continuing to trouble all of you. But please, don’t worry about me.”

With those words, she smiled at the girls of Class B.

Without a doubt, these letters were distributed out to the mailboxes during the middle of the night when everyone was asleep. Since very few people check their mailboxes in the mornings, the big discovery came in the evening after everybody had come back from school.

All that had to happen then was for somebody to find the letter and tell Ichinose.

All this time, a lone girl had been carefully watching over the reactions of the upset Class B students.

Katsuragi was glaring at her with a sharp look in his eye.

She was a first-year student of Class A, Kamuro Masumi. A girl often seen together with Sakayanagi, but today, she appeared to be alone.

“Is something up with Kamuro?”

“No... It’s nothing.”

Katsuragi didn’t give an answer. He tossed his letter into the trashcan, called for the elevator, and got in with Yahiko as it had been waiting on the first floor. Katsuragi’s expression remained stern even until the final moment when the doors shut. Watching the elevator go up, I decided to return to my room as well.

PART 1

My room was located on the fourth floor of the dorms, Room 401.

As soon as I stepped into the elevator, Kamuro got on at the same time.

“Which floor?”

Even though I asked her this as I stood in front of the buttons, she didn't give me an answer, so the elevator doors just closed in silence.

Shortly after a quiet ride, the elevator reached the fourth floor.

I got off the elevator. So did Kamuro. It was almost as if she was following me.

'Just a mere coincidence', 'she only got off on this floor to meet up with some guy', a reason like these didn't seem very likely.

As soon as I reached the door to my room, which just happened to be right next to the elevator, I turned and asked:

"Is there something you want from me?"

"I want to talk."

"If possible, I'd prefer that you'd have said something sooner."

"What, do you have plans?"

"No. Do you have an issue with talking right here?"

"I'm sensitive to the cold. If it's alright with you, could you invite me in?"

Even though she had asked me if I was alright with it, her request ended up coming across as more of a threat instead.

"That's fine..."

I unlocked the door and we went inside my room.

Kamuro's expression didn't change at all. She looked around my room with a serious look on her face.

"What a dull room."

"Is that really the first thing you're going to say after forcing your way in?"

"When did I force you to do anything? You rightfully gave me permission."

With that said, Kamuro sat down on my bed.

"The way you went about getting said permission... Nevermind. So now...?"

"Get me something to drink. We'll be talking for a while."

Really, what a shameless girl.

"Well, I'll make some coffee or tea."

"You don't have hot chocolate?"

"...I do."

"I'll have hot chocolate then."

I clearly presented her with two options, yet she unexpectedly demanded a third.

"So what is it that you wanted to talk about? If it was too cold in the hallway, we could've talked down in the lobby."

Since the heater was running in the lobby, we should have been able to talk there without any problems.

While preparing the hot chocolate, I took control of our conversation.

“There isn’t anyone who can bother us here. Talking in your room was for the best.”

“What are you wanting to say?”

To be honest, I wasn’t interested and didn’t want to hear about it.

“Does my presence make you feel apprehensive?”

“It would be strange if it didn’t. A girl I have no intimate connections with, who also comes from the rival Class A, suddenly wants to come to my room?”

“Hmm, that sure is nothing like how Yamauchi reacted.”

She replied, looking straight at me as if daring me to do something.

“Curious?”

“Not at all.”

“Really. Then I won’t touch on that subject anymore. It doesn’t matter anyway.”

While it’s possible that she has someone eavesdropping over the phone or she’s concealing a tape recorder, Kamuro is in a somewhat special position.

Since Sakayanagi already knows about me, it isn't necessary for Kamuro to come here looking to catch me off guard.

If needed, Sakayanagi is in a position where she can wage war against me anytime she wants. At the moment, the only reason she doesn't is because she doesn't want me to stand out.

“That letter from earlier, about Ichinose. What do you think?”



“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Do you believe that she’s a criminal?”

“I don’t know. I’m not interested either.”

“Even if you’re not interested you should still have an opinion about it. Do you think Ichinose is a good person or a bad person?”

“You can’t say that someone’s a bad person just because they’re a criminal. Just like how you can’t say that someone’s a good person just because they aren’t.”

In the first place, the definitions of good and bad are ambiguous and subjective. Depending on how you look at it, what’s considered good and what’s considered bad can change quickly.

“...”

Kamuro stared at me listlessly.

She had no intention of allowing me to move the conversation in this direction.

At this point, there was no way for me to continue avoiding the essence of the conversation.

“I think the letters are just like the rumors that somebody somewhere has been spreading.”

“Yes. I did hear that someone somewhere has been spreading rumors.”

“It’s conjecture, but I think some of those rumors are true or at least come close to the truth. Which is why Ichinose wouldn’t fight back against the rumors, or in this case, won’t fight back against the letters. If she did, the truth that she’s been trying to keep hidden would be revealed.”

“Her strategy is to continue to ignore it so that the rumors don’t end up as anything more than suspicion.”

“Yeah. However, that doesn’t solve the problem. If the person who’s spreading the rumors knows the truth, eventually more and more specific rumors will emerge until Ichinose admits to it. It’s highly probable that when that time comes, she won’t be able to simply gloss over it.”

The hot water began to boil so I poured it into a cup.

Then I put the cup of hot chocolate on the table. Kamuro didn’t reach for it.

“Not going to drink it?”

“I’m sensitive to hot liquid.”

I wonder just how true that really is.

“It’s just like you thought. Right now, Ichinose is being targeted by a student who knows the secret that she wants to keep hidden.”

“Why do you know something like that?”

“You know why. Sakayanagi said it in front of you, after all.”

Of course, I remember that.

However, Kamuro herself shouldn't have any reason to tell me that.

Was this also one of Sakayanagi's strategies?

"That said, Sakayanagi doesn't know that I'm here right now talking with you about this. She'd probably be angry if she knew."

"In other words, you're saying you betrayed Sakayanagi?"

"That's one way to put it."

"Sorry, I can't believe that."

"I suppose that makes sense. Therefore, I'll tell you the secret that Ichinose has been hiding as well. After all, tomorrow or the day after, everyone else will have probably already heard about it."

In which case, you can prove to me that the things you're saying are true, huh?

"But before I tell you about that, I need to tell you about something else. About why I've been letting Sakayanagi push me around like she has been."

"Your own personal story?"

"I know you're not interested, but you're going to hear me out."

It didn't matter if I was interested or not, I planned on listening and hearing her out anyway.

Because if I didn't, she was never going to leave.

PART 2

It was about a week after the school entrance ceremony when Sakayanagi first contacted me.

On my way back to the dormitories, I stopped by the convenience store. I quickly finished my business in the store and left.

“Just a moment please.”

In route between the convenience store and the dormitories, one of my female classmates called out to me.

“What do you want?”

“It hasn’t been very long since we started school here, so I thought that I’d like to talk with you for a little bit, Kamuro-san.”

“You’ve remembered my name.”

“I have memorized the names and faces of all my classmates.”

That said, this girl’s pace was very slow.

The walking cane she grasped in one hand was more than enough proof to show that her legs were bad.

I remembered her name- Arisu Sakayanagi. She was very conspicuous because of her physical handicap. Even though I had no intention of remembering the names of my classmates, hers had managed to stick with me for some reason.

“May I accompany you on the way back?”

I would usually decline. However, although it wasn’t directly because of her bad legs, the mood made it hard to turn her down.

“Suit yourself.”

“Thank you very much.”

She gave a pleasant smile and sped up a little in order to match my pace beside me.

“I’m not going to help you if you fall from overdoing it.”

“I’ll be okay. This cane and I are old friends.”

That said, she still wasn’t moving very quickly.

“Haa...”

Even though I let out an intentionally heavy sigh, Sakayanagi didn’t seem to pay it any mind.

Her outward appearance was frail, but she had the heart of a lion.

“By the way, what were you doing at the convenience store just now?”

“What?”

“From what I can see, it doesn’t seem like you bought anything.”

“So what? Sometimes you just can’t find anything you want.”

I attempted to end the conversation there, but Sakayanagi grabbed ahold of my arm.

“You were shoplifting, were you not?”

Sakayanagi asked, looking me straight in the eyes.

Her eyes were shining. It was as if she had just found herself a new interesting toy.

“While I’m guessing that you’ve scoped out the place a few times already to determine the positions of the cameras, was this your first time doing it at this school? Or how many times does this make it now?”

“Are you sure I stole something?”

“Yes. It seems like you aren’t taking me very seriously, but I am confident. If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t have asked you if you shoplifted something.”

“Well. That’s true.”

Sakayanagi reached out to me because she had witnessed me steal from the store.

“Even if I did steal something, so what? Gonna tattle to the school?”

“Let me see. While it would be very simple for me to report this to the school, please hear me out before it gets to that point.”

“Huh?”

Without making it clear whether or not she even took notice of my confusion, Sakayanagi continued:

“Your execution was magnificent. What surprised me the most was how you kept your composure. Normally, people would buy cheap things like gum or candy in order to ease their guilt. However, you don’t seem like you’ve ever done that. This also proves that shoplifting has become routine for you.”

Sakayanagi had hit the mark. After seeing me in action once, she could tell that I had been doing it for a long time. But, what does that matter?

I had no intention of letting this go on for very long.

No matter how good my execution was, the fact that she had seen me in the act would never go away.

“Do what you want.”

I reached into my bag and took out the can of beer I had stolen from the convenience store.

Generally speaking, people under the age of 20 weren’t allowed to buy it.

It was only sold here for the teachers and other staff living on campus.

“Hurry up and contact the school.”

Even though I said this, Sakayanagi asked me something entirely unrelated to that.

“Do you drink often?”

“Hah? ...No. I don’t have any interest in liquor either.”

“In other words, you don’t use shoplifting as an outlet to ease the burdens of everyday life, but instead as a means for you to savor a thrill and experience the guilt of sin.”



She proceeded to arbitrarily analyze the situation.

“I get it. You’re able to calmly analyze a situation. So how about we go and quickly hand me over to the school?”

“Are you certain you want that? If the school finds out you shoplifted, you probably wouldn’t be able to avoid suspension.”

“So?”

“It has yet to be one week since the entrance ceremony. There are still many things, both enjoyable and not so enjoyable, to look forward to after this, yes?”

“If you’re not going to contact the school, I’ll do it myself.”

I tried to take out my phone, but she stopped me.

“I’ve grown to like you, Masumi Kamuro-san. You have to become my first friend.”

With that, she urged me to put my phone away.

“What are you saying?”

“I’ll keep your secret, so in return, please help me out with a few things.”

“That... isn’t what I’d call a friend.”

“Is that so?”

“Besides, do you think I’ll just obediently listen to you?”

“Indeed, even if I was to report you to the school, you likely wouldn’t suffer very much damage. But even so, your status as a shoplifter would then be exposed. If that were to happen, wouldn’t that cause issues with your ability to shoplift again in the future?”

“Not only are you saying that you’ll let me get away with it this time, but I’d even be able to do it more if I wanted to?”

“You’re free to do whatever you want. I won’t be getting involved with that. In the first place, even if I appealed to you and told you that what you’ve been doing isn’t acceptable from a moral standpoint, it still wouldn’t be able to make you change your ways. Or am I wrong?”

“That... Well, I guess...”

“Still, I believe following my instructions will be anything but boring. That place in your heart that could only be satisfied with shoplifting... Perhaps I’ll be able to find something else that can take its place.”

That was my first encounter with Arisu Sakayanagi.

PART 3

“-Ah, how tiring. It’s been quite a while since I last sat down and said so much like that.”

Finished with her story, Kamuro looked up at me with the same serious expression she had at the start.

“In short, I’m a habitual shoplifter.”

“Even recently?”

“Sakayanagi has been working me hard. I haven’t had the spare time to steal anything.”

Even though it wasn’t something she wanted, she didn’t seem to be unsatisfied about it.

Before Sakayanagi, Kamuro probably hadn’t been relied on before. She had been holding a darkness in her heart.

Still, it was necessary for Sakayanagi to get Kamuro in a position where she wouldn’t be able to continue committing crimes.

Therefore, Sakayanagi cleverly took advantage of her. If Kamuro was to continue shoplifting, sooner or later, she’d be tracked down.

It wouldn’t matter if she was stealing outside of school grounds, but she was doing it from within the confined school campus.

When the store eventually notices what’s been going on with their inventory, it wouldn’t take them long to figure out the truth.

If that were to happen, Class A would definitely suffer a non-trivial amount of damage.

“Back before the training camp, Sakayanagi had said that you and Ichinose were both hiding the same secret.”

In other words, assuming that everything Kamuro just said really is true, Ichinose has a history with shoplifting as well.

“That’s exactly where I was going with this.”

“Regardless, what are you hoping to accomplish by revealing your past to me?”

Depending on the situation, it wouldn’t be impossible to look back into her past and investigate her crimes.

In which case, Kamuro would suffer alone.

“I don’t particularly like Sakayanagi or Ichinose. But, to be honest, the fact that Ichinose has been stealing as well really hit me hard. She’s so incredibly popular that she really ought to be entirely satisfied with what she has, but honestly, the same should go for me.”

Kamuro laughed in self-derision.

“Stop Sakayanagi. You can do that, can’t you?”

“So you’re saying you want me to help Ichinose?”

“Yes. As it is now, Ichinose will definitely be crushed. I’m not talking about her being crushed physically, I mean her heart.”

“I see.”

It’s difficult for me to confirm if what Kamuro has been saying is true, and it’s just as difficult for her to prove it.

Even if the store noticed a difference between their digital stock and their physical inventory, it would still be very hard to determine the cause of it. After all, it could've been a store employee making a handling error. While she did begin shoplifting immediately after enrollment, she didn't repeatedly steal the same item several times. It was a one-time affair.

It would also be impossible to ask the store to show me the surveillance footage.

The only move I could make would be to report Kamuro's theft to the convenience store and the school authorities. But even then, going about doing that would just be too disadvantageous for me, regardless of whether her story is true or not.

Even if I assume that what she said is true, I don't want to obediently follow along with what she's asking of me.

While it's probably true that she's dissatisfied with Sakayanagi, there's little incentive for her to betray Sakayanagi just to ask someone unknown like me for help.

In which case, what's the point of all of this?

Thinking about it reasonably, this was all probably carried out per Sakayanagi's instructions.

She probably decided to use Ichinose as the medium for getting into a head-on confrontation with me.

“So, you think I'm lying?”

After a long period of consideration, Kamuro broke the silence.

“To be honest, there’s no absolute guarantee that what you said is true.”

Of course, after listening to her, it was clear that she was almost certainly telling the truth.

Even so, I didn’t admit this because of Kamuro’s close connection with Sakayanagi.

“...I see. In which case, should I just go and prove it to you?”

“Can you?”

“Probably.”

As she said that, she took out her student ID card and handed it to me.

“Well then, wait here and don’t lock the door.”

With that, Kamuro left the room.

No way, is she planning on going and stealing something right now to prove she’s a shoplifter?

I looked at her card absentmindedly for a short while, and after about 10 minutes, Kamuro came back. She took something out from her clothes and showed it to me.

“Hey now...”

It seems like my guess hit the mark.

“While I thought about taking a pack of gum or something, I grabbed a beer. This way was more credible.”

If it was something like gum that anyone could purchase, it would've been simple for her deceive me just by purchasing it in advance. But it's an entirely different story when it comes to alcohol. Even if she was to go and borrow an ID card from another student, it still wouldn't have been possible for her to purchase this beverage. It's impossible for students to purchase age-restricted goods. Along with that, it's unrealistic to think that she utilized the school's working force or the teachers on campus. There was no mistaking that this was stolen merchandise.

Did she do it in order to gain my trust?

“Get it now?”

At that, Kamuro began to put the beer away, but I reached out my hand.

“Just in case, let me make sure it's authentic. It could be fake.”

“...Idiot. Could I even make something like that?”

Kamuro showed reluctance for a moment, but it didn't take long for her to hand it over.

It was ice-cold, as though it had just been purchased from the convenience store.

I slowly analyzed the surface of the can. It was definitely an authentic alcoholic beverage.

“If it's so important, you can just have it.”

“No need.”

In the unlikely event that the can was found in my room, things would become troublesome.

Kamuro took the beer out of my hand and began lightly tossing the can in the air.

“Anyway, do you believe me?”

“You showed me the real thing. I can’t not believe you.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Well, why me?”

“There’s nobody else I can count on in this school other than you. You should know that much.”

I picked up the cup of hot chocolate that I had prepared for Kamuro. At this point, I was confident that she wouldn’t actually take a drink. It had already gotten warm because around ten minutes had passed.

“There isn’t any benefit in it for me.”

“Maybe so.”

Seemingly satisfied with that, Kamuro stood up.

“I’ll be looking forward to the end results.”

Like that, Kamuro tried to one-sidedly end the conversation and began to leave the room.

“Wait a moment.”

“...What?”

“You forgot your ID card.”

Realizing that she had totally forgotten it, she grabbed her student ID card with her other hand. With that, Kamuro had finally left.

Though, she really presented me with something troublesome.

Is ignoring Ichinose’s current situation still the right choice to make?

“No... Am I sure about that?”

Rather, it may be a better choice to take advantage of this opportunity.

I grabbed my student ID card and my cell phone and left my room, headed toward the convenience store.

On the way, I got a call from Horikita’s older brother.

I had thought that I’d finally be able to relax after the uninvited guest left but...

Nonetheless, the caller was someone unexpected. It wasn’t going to be a meaningless call.

“There are a few things I want to talk to you about.”

The older Horikita spoke just after I pressed the answer button.

“Is it urgent?”

“Depending on the situation, it may already be too late. It’s about my sister.”

“...About your sister?”

This was also unexpected.

The older Horikita wouldn’t be bringing up anything about his younger sister unless the circumstances were extreme.

“Kikyou Kushida. She made contact with Miyabi Nagumo.”

“Really.”

I was surprised, but at the same time, I was impressed at the speed of the older Horikita’s information network.

“I thought that you were surrounded with enemies. You’ve done really well to acquire this type of information. Who did you hear this from?”

“This information came from Kiriyama. It’s clear that my relationship with Nagumo deteriorated at the last training camp. He’s definitely going to try something else. I’ll have to take action at this point.”

Vice President Kiriyama, huh?

As I thought in silence, the older Horikita continued.

“You can’t completely trust him, can you?”

“I don’t know Kiriyama as well as you do.”

“That’s fine. You always err on the side of caution.”

As the former student council president, Horikita would always approach others with a certain amount of trust, whether it was Kiriyama or Nagumo. Until there were any suspicions or he was betrayed, his trust in them was set in stone. I would never be able to imitate this type of behavior.

“So what happened?”

“She asked him for assistance with expelling Suzune Horikita. A very bold move.”

“I wonder what happened that prompted her to change strategies?”

As her penalty for losing the bet with Horikita, Kushida gave her word that she wouldn’t interfere in the future.

That said, she clearly had no intention of keeping it.

Just as she tried to use Ryuuken to achieve her goal, she’s now reached out to use Nagumo as well. After seeing what Nagumo did at the training camp, it’s not a surprising action for her to take.

Of course, Kushida should’ve also noticed. Even though she managed to push Horikita into a desperate situation, she’s only gotten herself into one as well. However, necessity knows no law. I felt like she had reached that resolution. To be honest, I had thought that she jumped the gun a bit by siding with Ryuuken, but getting close to Nagumo here isn’t a bad idea for her. If she sides with an upperclassman, there wouldn’t be an additional person who knows her past after they graduate.

However, that assumes that Nagumo is a trustworthy person in the first place.

“After this, Nagumo or the people near him are going to be taking measures against Suzune.”

“What do you want me to do? You’re not asking me to protect your little sister, are you?”

“If Suzune drops out of the school in the future, that’s her own responsibility. However, Kushida also listed your name as a troublesome existence.”

“I see...”

While Nagumo may not have very much interest in me, hearing my name come up over and over will eventually clue him in anyway.

In other words, if I don’t cut the connection before it’s too late, I’ll keep finding myself getting involved with more trouble.

“What’s the possibility that Nagumo got in touch with Hashimoto?”

“What’s your reason for asking such a question?”

“I had noticed a slight change in Hashimoto’s behavior between the beginning and the end of the training camp. I wasn’t sure back then, but after meeting up with him again recently, I realized that this change wasn’t just something I imagined, making the whole thing seem even more suspicious. That is to say, Hashimoto heard something about me from someone during the end of the training camp.”

The number of people in a position where they would tell Hashimoto what they know about me is extremely limited.

“It’s as you say. During the training camp, Nagumo told Hashimoto about you. That said, Hashimoto still probably hasn’t reached the conclusion that you’re the student manipulating Suzune.”

“I see.”

So he’s poking around to find out the truth?

“I don’t think there’s any need for me to ask, but… Are you dissatisfied with this?”

“No. Even if I had known already, the situation would’ve still ended up this way.”

“I suppose.”

The older Horikita muttered in response.

It doesn’t matter if one of Sakayanagi’s followers is distrustful of me.

As long as I don’t do anything, they won’t find out anything no matter how long they search for clues. Even if they think of a strategy, once Sakayanagi gives the thumbs down, the matter is over. It was a lot easier than dealing with Ryuumen or Nagumo.

Nagumo, however, has all his bases covered. It’s a little inappropriate to simply wait and see what happens at this point.

“I’ve given you the information. It’s up to you to decide what to do with it.”

“I will.”

The call disconnected.

In this school, this type of information means quite a lot. Every day, someone is always crafting a plan to best someone else. In that sense, the older Horikita is useful as one of my information sources. While he's not as adaptable as Nagumo and doesn't have as large of an information network, his credibility and accuracy are far higher.

In any case, sparks are starting to fly. In order to stop the problem as soon as possible, I'll have to be the one to make the first move.

CHAPTER 5:

SPREADING RUMORS

INTRODUCTION

The weekend passed by and it was now Monday morning.

After getting out of the shower, I dried my hair with a toothbrush in my mouth. I had spent some more time relaxing than the usual morning. The plan was to wait until I was a little late before leaving to school.

I remembered that I had turned off my phone before I went to bed last night, so I turned it back on.

My phone screen lit up immediately and displayed all of the messages that had accumulated over the night.

[Kiyotaka-kun, do you have a bit of time this morning? Is it fine if I come by your room?]

The message was from Airi, and it seemed to have arrived just after I got in the shower.

There was also a missed call from Kei, but I'd get back to her later.

[Sorry. I was in the shower so I didn't notice your messages. There isn't much time right now. Can we talk at school?]

[That's fine. Don't worry about it. It can wait for later.]

Her response came back immediately after I sent the message.

The speed of her response made me wonder if she had just happened to have been looking at her phone, or if she was waiting for me to respond.

Nonetheless, her response told me that it probably wasn't an emergency.

That being the case, I concentrated on straightening up my appearance first.

I didn't have time to slow down. I finished my preparations for the day and called for the elevator to take me down to the lobby. Many students commute to school in the morning, so the elevator is pretty busy and doesn't come immediately after calling for it. I had waited until the last possible moment to leave for school, but I still wasn't able to avoid the wait.

In the meantime, I took out my cell phone and sent a message to Kei.

[What was your call about? If possible, I'd like to meet up with you this evening.]

The message was marked as read immediately after I sent it.

[I didn't call for any reason in particular, just forgot about it. Anyway, I'm fine with meeting up, but can you make it earlier? I already have plans to go out with my friends tonight.]

In which case, I decided to suggest a time around five o'clock.

[Does 5 work? Anytime before 6 is fine.]

[Okie~ 5 o'clock then. What's it about?]

[I'll explain when we meet.]

The elevator arrived as soon as I sent the last message.

Hirata was the only one onboard.

“Hey. Good morning Ayanokouji-kun.”

“How unusual, Hirata. We’re both pushing it to the last minute, aren’t we?”

Hirata was an honors student, so he usually left for school in the mornings with quite a lot of time to spare.

It would be unusual for him to be one of the students leaving late, but it was even more so for him to be pushing it to the utmost latest time possible like this.

“To be honest, I had planned on leaving earlier, but...”

As his words trailed off, his expression changed to a somewhat complicated, bitter smile.

“But?”

I questioned Hirata as we got off the elevator on the first floor, only to find several girls waiting there.

They weren't all from one class. Instead, the girls standing before us were from Class A all the way to Class D. I had to think for a moment about why they had all gathered together, but I quickly caught on to the situation.

"Good morning, Hirata-kun!"

"Yes. Good morning."

He had a refreshing smile on his face, but it still appeared somewhat strenuous.

"This... is for you!"

In a chorus, all six girls presented him with Valentine's Day chocolates at the same time. This scene had probably already repeated itself many times. As he went back to his room with the chocolates, I figured that he was probably pushing it so late due to having already made a few trips back to his room.

I parted ways with Hirata and decided to hurry to school.

It would've been easy to wait for him, but I lost out to the pressure of not wanting to get in the way of the girls.

So today is Valentine's Day, huh?

"I've never been given chocolates before..."

I accidentally muttered such a thing.

Before I consider whether or not I want a girlfriend, I think it'd be nice to receive chocolates.

I was surprised that I even had such a desire.

PART 1

It seemed that I wasn't the only guy excited at the idea of receiving Valentine's day chocolates.

As soon as I stepped into our classroom, I noticed that Class C was steeped in a strange atmosphere.

Many of the boys were gathered together in one place.

Valentine's Day was the culmination of an entire year's excitement.

It was, along with Christmas, a day that highlights the romance between boys and girls.

"Oh, there you are Ayanokōji. You come over here for a moment."

Sudō called over to me, so I approached the group.

"Did you get any chocolate?"

"Huh?"

Sudō asked me with a somewhat tense expression, a glare in his eyes.

"To explain, it seems like he's really asking if you've gotten any chocolate *from Horikita*."

Ike added with a sly grin.

“Don’t say weird stuff like that, you idiot. It has nothing to do with that.”

Contrary to what he had said, Sudō’s eyes weren’t smiling at all.

They were practically filled with demonic intensity, demanding an answer.

“I didn’t get anything from her. There’s no chance she’d give me anything.”

“...For real?”

“Yeah.”

Sudō nodded a couple of times before freeing me from his stern gaze.

“Well, I can understand why Ken is nervous. After all, *that* Ayanokōji is a monster, you know~?”

With that, Ike drew the outline of something resembling a plastic water bottle in the air with his hand.

“...Ayanokōji, you little shit, don’t assume you’ve won just because of that, got it?”

“No, I’m not at all...”

Ever since the training camp, I’d occasionally hear annoying stuff about what happened.

“Come to think of it, how are things doing on your end, Kanji? Things still doing okay with Shinohara?”

“H-huh? Why bring up Shinohara now?”

“Honestly, you should stop trying to downplay it. Everybody knows already.”

“E-everybody knows... D-do you know, Ayanokōji?”

He somehow ended up trying to confirm by asking me about it.

I understood the flow of the conversation by now, so I responded to him with a light nod.

Ike groaned in shame and crouched down to hide his reddening face.

“See? Even a stick in the mud like Ayanokōji knows about it. So what happened? Did you get anything from her?”

I didn't notice any envy in anyone's voices, probably because Shinohara didn't seem to be very popular within the class. His friend Yamauchi might've shown a poor display of irritation about it, but he was nowhere to be seen at the moment.

“I didn't get anything...”

“You and I are in the same boat then.”

Sudō rested his hand on Ike's shoulder sympathetically.

“No, it's fine. I got chocolates from Kushida-chan, after all.”

As he spoke, Ike proudly flaunted a box of chocolates tied shut with a pink ribbon.

“You say that, but didn’t all the guys get something? She gave me chocolate too.”

“Same here. Of course I’m happy about it, but in the end, it’s just obligation chocolate.”

I hadn’t expected Kushida to give chocolates to every single male first-year student at all. It made me wonder how she went about doing that.

Though, for Kushida, I suppose it wasn’t that surprising.

Regardless, the only thing I could see was a bunch of boys stewing in their own hot air. This kind of childish behavior felt like the reason why none of them could get closer to girls, but there was nothing that could be done about that.

It was inevitable that it would turn out this way for a class like ours with barely any experience with love.

Getting something or getting nothing. It all depends on how someone usually handles themselves.

Being desperate isn’t going to get them what they’re really after.

I stood back and thought about this, watching as a girl from Class B offered a box of chocolates to Akito.

PART 2

“Tomorrow on the 15th, all of you will be expected to complete a comprehensive provisional test. However, just like with the test earlier this year, it won’t have any effect on your grades. The goal is to thoroughly test your current strengths. Furthermore, it will help you prepare for the final exams coming at the end of the year. While the tests won’t contain identical questions, the provisional exam will have similar questions to those found on the final exams. Do not be negligent with your studies simply because you’ve been promoted to Class C.”

Chabashira’s appreciated explanation finished, marking the end of today’s lessons.

As the girl in the seat beside me began her preparations for returning home for the day, I opted to ask her a simple question.

“How’s it going with Kushida?”

“What are you getting at?”

“I’m asking if you’ve been successful with her lately.”

“I wonder. I’m hard at work planning out how to improve my relationship with her. Are you looking to cooperate?”

“I was just asking.”

“Kushida-san has been changing, little by little.”

“In what way has she been changing?”

“Today, after we wrap things up here, I’ll be having tea together with her at Keyaki Mall. The Kushida from before would’ve turned down such an offer

without hesitation.”

As it turned out, these unexpected developments seemed to be nothing more than superficial.

“In other words, you’re expecting to see results?”

“If we communicate, we might be able to come to a mutual understanding.”

“Glad to hear it. See you.”

After giving a brief reply to Horikita, I got up from my seat.

“...What was that?”

In response to my ridicule, Horikita looked at me with a slight trace of contempt in her eyes before looking away.

Shortly thereafter, Horikita stood up as well.

“Ah, Suzune. Uh... When’s a good time for you to help me with my studies?”

“That’s quite proactive of you, Sudō-kun.”

“That’s... well, I don’t wanna drop out, ya know?”

Despite what he said, he gave off a somewhat nervous appearance.

His true aim was, of course, to receive valentine’s chocolates from Horikita.

“Any time works for me. Even today.”

However-

“Your club activities still haven’t gone on break yet, have they? We’ll have time for studying after the provisional exams.”

With that, Sudō’s dreams were shattered.

I left the classroom.

The Ayanokōji Group was making plans to meet up, but I decided to refuse this time.

There were other matters that required my attention at the moment.

“Kiyotaka-kun!”

I heard my name reservedly being called from the hallway behind me.

“What’s wrong, Airi?”

“Are you really not joining up with the group today?”

“That was the plan.”

“I-it’s fine if you’re late, so could you still try joining up with everyone?”

“I suppose... Maybe sometime after 6?”

“Sure! I think everyone should still be together then!”

“Alright. I’ll get in contact with you then, okay?”

With that, Airi's firm expression changed into a beaming smile. I parted ways with her and started moving towards my destination. Class B's classroom was strangely quiet by the time I arrived there.

Because there were only a few Class B students who I could reliably talk to, speaking with Kanzaki would've been my first choice. Sumida and Moriyama, who I had been lodging together with at training camp, would've also been fine.

However, as I looked around the classroom, the three of them were nowhere to be found.

I had been hoping to catch someone suitable before they left, but that's just not how it worked out.

I decided to turn back for the time being.

On the way out, I overheard a conversation between two girls as they left the classroom behind me.

“Hey... Do you think the reason why Honami-chan was absent today...”

“Something like that totally isn't possible.”

The two of them shared a brief back and forth.

Was Ichinose taking a day off?

Was it merely a coincidence, or was it related to what happened a few days ago like that girl just thought?

I thought about this as I distanced myself from Class B.

How did Sakayanagi come to know Ichinose's secret in the first place?

There are certainly conversational techniques designed to draw out secrets from other people, such as cold and hot reading. However, I can't imagine that Ichinose would want to let anything slip about her past with shoplifting. The fact that she was denying it even now is proof enough of that.

Considering how she's handled herself so far, it even makes me question whether or not she would ever cave into the incitement from the greatest enemy class to begin with.

It would be different if it was Ike or Yamauchi, but Ichinose is clever.

"Did she get carried away by Sakayanagi's coaxing...?"

Is it possible that there's someone else that knew Ichinose's secret?

But even Kanzaki, the person who seems to be Ichinose's closest ally, didn't know anything.

And after seeing her close friends, it doesn't seem like they know either.

Then one of the teaching staff or... the student council?

"If Nagumo abandoned Ichinose and sided with Sakayanagi, it would be possible."

However, this hypothesis rests on a few assumptions being true.

In the first place, there's no proof behind this conclusion other than what Kamuro told me.

Plus, the only person who'd be able to disprove that premise would be Ichinose Honami herself.

The school may be wide, but when compared to society, it's actually rather confined.

Due to that, if you want to speak with someone in secret, you must put top priority to ensuring that the two of you are truly alone.

Basically, this would mean limiting the interactions to early in the morning, or late at night.

While I don't know Ichinose Honami's room number, getting it at this point should be easy. Just make a call to the dormitory management office and ask for it directly. There's no reason for the school to keep the room number of their students a secret. If you tell them that you're in a scramble to get in touch with them, they should be understanding.

I made the call to verify the room number as I continued walking, getting it without any difficulties.

I felt the presence of Hashimoto behind me, watching me from a distance, but I ignored him.

Recently, he'd taken to tailing me both during the daytime and in the evening.

He didn't have a bad sense of distance, giving off the impression that he's had experience with tailing people before.

At first glance, it didn't seem like there were any advantages to going to see Ichinose with him following behind me. But, it was actually the other way around. The fact that he was watching was exactly what made it worth showing him what I was up to.

I had decided to return to the dorms early to confirm things with Ichinose, so I went to her floor. Unfortunately, there appeared to be several girls in front of her room as I got there.

A group of girls who were all particularly close friends with her.

I immediately turned around and got back on the elevator.

I'd have to give up here for today.

PART 3

5 o'clock. I made contact with Kei, calling her out to a place a short distance away from the dorms.

Despite the destination being relatively unpopular, it wasn't the type of place absolutely nobody visited at all.

"Ah, it's chilly. Why are we meeting up at a place like this? There are other options, you know?"

"But the lobby doesn't work for you, does it? Strange rumors might start to spread if we're seen together like this. That would be a problem for you, wouldn't it?"

“Well, sorta... But meeting covertly like this... doesn’t it stand out in its own way? If we’re seen carelessly, I feel like it’ll produce rumors anyway...”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m getting the feeling that you haven’t been cautious enough about this... but whatever.”

That’s fine. After all, the man who’s been following me has to put up with it for a while as well.

“Even so, it’s too cold. I wish summer would come sooner.”

“In the summer, wouldn’t you just end up saying that you wish winter would come sooner?”

After I asked this, she pondered the question for a bit.

“That’s just how maidens are, okay?”

Karuizawa pouted.

“Come to think of it, I wonder if there isn’t going to be a special exam this month.”

“The training camp only just ended, so that wouldn’t be surprising.”

“Then, we can take it easy?”

“Are you all set for the end-of-year exams? It seems like they’ll be quite difficult.”

As I said this, I noticed Kei's movements stiffen up.

“Eh... Really?”

Until now, Kei had managed to get through one way or another, but she wasn't in a position where she could start to be negligent with her studies.

“Could you help me study?”

“Ask Hirata. It would be difficult for you, but not impossible, right?”

Kei should've been brazen enough to ask him for his help, even immediately after parting ways with him, but she didn't seem very eager about it. She stared at me.

The simplest solution would be to have Keisei tutor her, but that just wasn't realistic.

If she was to be tossed into my group all of a sudden, there would definitely be problems.

“It would have to be in the middle of the night. Is that okay?”

“It's much better than dropping out I suppose.”

Exactly.

“Well, I'll put together a schedule.”

“Alright.”

However, even if she passes the end-of-term exams, a new problem was going to show up shortly afterward.

This upcoming March. In all likelihood, a large special exam was waiting just around the corner.

It seems like she'd only be safe after overcoming what remains in the 1st year curriculum.

We wouldn't be able to relax until this battle reaches the bitter end.

“Anyway, uh, what do you need from me?”

She asked, looking nervous for some reason.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just thought that you urgently wanted to meet up with me today.”

“It’s nothing that has to be done today, but I’d like to have it checked out ahead of time.”

“Hmph.”

She scoffed, a look of suspicion filling her eyes.

I decided to disregard it, instead focusing on the issue at hand.

“Do you know anything about this number?”

I showed her the unregistered phone number that called me a few days earlier.

“Eh? Who is this? What, are you getting calls from strangers?”

“Something like that.”

Kei pressed down on the dial button on her phone and manually entered the number into the virtual keypad.

If the number was registered on her phone, a contact would appear after the number has been typed in.

“It doesn’t seem like you have anything.”

“I do have more contacts than the average girl, but I don’t know pretty much any of the seniors.”

I had wanted to see if she would have the number registered, but, as I expected, it was just a slim hope at best.

“Why not just try and call them back?”

“I’ve tried doing that a couple of times, but the other side has always been turned off.”

“Really...? If it’s that important, why not have me check it out for you?”

“Yeah. That’s why I called you out here today. But, don’t be careless with how you go about it.”

With a nod, Kei took note of the phone number.

“Is that everything?”

“Yeah. See you.”

I tried to end our conversation there, but Kei called out to me in a hurry.

“Oh, uh, by the way, there’s this small something I’d like to talk about. Can I ask you something?”

As I was taking my leave, Kei stopped me with an obscure question.

“Do you know what day it is today? Come on. 5… 4… 3-”

“…This is an easier question than I imagined. So much so that I feel like I’m being tricked into giving a wrong answer.”

“Don’t overthink it, just give it to me straight.”

“Valen-”

“Yeah yeah yeah.”

She lightly tapped a small box on my head.

“You’re giving me this?”

“I was originally going to give it to Yousuke-kun, but there’s no reason for me to do that anymore.”

“For Hirata, is it?”

“Oh, so you don’t like it?”

“No, I was just thinking about how long in advance you must have been preparing for Valentine’s day.”

It had been over a month since Kei had resolved herself to break up with Hirata.

“I-I make careful preparations ahead of time, okay? Even though I had already decided to break up with him, there was still a chance I would need to have it, you know? Well, I guess it’s nothing I should expect someone so inexperienced with romance to be able to understand.”

That could be true.

“I just thought that you wanted to see me today hoping for me to give you something like this.”

“Sorry. It never crossed my mind.”

Kei briefly had a slightly irritated expression on her face, but she quickly recovered.

“Anyways, did you get something from any other girls?”

Kei changed the subject ever so slightly. It was as if she was trying to avoid talking about it.

“No, nothing at all.”



I decided to respond like this, regardless of whether or not I had actually received anything from somebody else.

“Serves you right. A man absolutely unsuitable for others~”

She began to make fun of me without hesitation.

“But are you okay with that? If you give this to me, I won’t be unsuitable anymore, you know?”

“That makes you that much more pitiful. It just means that you’ll have to look to me for salvation.”

She was really looking down on me.

“Oh yeah, and you can thank me by returning the favor 1000 times over.”

She continued spouting unreasonable nonsense.

“By the way, uh-”

Kei attempted to change the topic yet again.

However, she swallowed her words as soon as she looked into my eyes.

Standing a short distance apart, we stared at one another.

I slowly shifted my gaze in the direction of the dormitory.

“Well then, I’m heading back to my room.”

“Yeah. Later.”

With that, Kei was ready to quickly return to the dorms.

I immediately put her present into my bag.

CHAPTER 6:

SOMETHING VAGUE

INTRODUCTION

For Hashimoto Masayoshi, the question of whose side he supports was a trivial one.

Or better yet, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he didn't care about it at all.

Regardless of whether the leader of the class turned out to be Sakayanagi or Katsuragi, he would've chosen the side that turned out most beneficial to himself. That's all there was to it. While he was fortunate to have started out in Class A, he was always considering the option of falling down to Class B or C.

The important thing for him was to take up the position that would turn things around in the end.

This was the reason why, after sensing his potential, he had gotten into contact with Ryūen Kakeru after he had quickly risen to power within Class C at the start of the year.

His outstanding talent could've taken down both Sakayanagi and Ichinose. Hashimoto had realized that the man had an ominous amount of strength. If Ryūen had asked for it, Hashimoto wouldn't have hesitated to leak him information about Class A. Of course, this behavior was just espionage done under Sakayanagi's instruction. However, if Ryūen had the potential to overtake the other classes, he was fully prepared to double-cross even her.

This was the same reason why he had targeted Ichinose in Class B. However, Ichinose was different than Sakayanagi or Ryūen because underhanded deals simply wouldn't work with her. In response to this, Hashimoto decided not to be too pushy, choosing instead to gradually approach from another angle. While they wouldn't go as far as to betray Ichinose, he established connections with a certain someone from B class who was close to her.

Hashimoto had promptly set up this type of social network with students from each class immediately after coming to this school.

It was better to prepare as much insurance as possible for the sake of any unexpected situations.

And today, once again, he was making preliminary arrangements in preparation for yet another *unexpected situation*.

“U-um, Hashimoto-kun. Do you have a minute?”

Within the hallways, after school. A girl from Class A, Motodoi Chikako, called out to Hashimoto from behind. Like Hashimoto, she was a member of the tennis club. She appeared to have run to catch up with him after he

had left the classroom. She gave off a slightly fidgety appearance, unable to completely maintain her composure.

Hashimoto immediately understood what was going on without having to hear anything more.

Today was February 14th. He had already experienced this sort of scene several times.

However, even though he understood what was happening, he didn't let that show on his face. Of course, he wouldn't say anything either.

“Sure thing, Motodoi. What's up?”

After getting such a gentle response, Motodoi composed her thoughts and came out with it.

“This is chocolate. Because, uh, it's Valentine's day today.”

As she spoke, she held out the chocolate, to which Hashimoto immediately accepted.

“Thanks Motodoi. I'm glad.”

“G-great!”

Hashimoto had already noticed that Motodoi had been looking at him with affection as a member of the opposite sex. Thus, this chocolate was most likely meant with romantic intentions. While he was confident that he would succeed were he to confess, he felt nothing towards her. This was because, for better or worse, he saw her as a person who simply wasn't

worth using. He had already judged that there weren't any merits to going out with her.

"You should show your face around the club every once in a while."

"Sorry, I've been skipping out a lot recently, haven't I?"

"Definitely. Our senpais have been worried."

"I'll keep that in mind. Anyways, I'll make sure to properly show you my thanks next month."

"Y-yeah."

Motodoi blushed, nodded, and ran off. It was as if she was escaping from the embarrassing atmosphere.

Despite the fact that there was no possibility that the two of them would get into a relationship, Hashimoto made sure to keep his options open.

After all, maybe there would be some sort of change with her in the future.

In order to make up for this delay, Hashimoto sped up his pace as he moved toward the first-year Class C classroom.

For now, there was somebody far more worthy of his attention than Motodoi.

A male student within Class C, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka.

"Why is it that I care so much about him..."

There was a part of himself that couldn't help but wonder.

Before the training camp, he had no impression of him. He was just another student with a vaguely familiar face. He could remember that he had run a fierce relay against the former student council president during the sports competition, but that was all he could think of. Even then, Hashimoto didn't think that his evaluation of someone should change simply because they were quick on their feet. Furthermore, both Sakayanagi and Ryūen were quick to catch on to things like this, yet Ayanokōji hadn't caught the attention of either of them.

Recently, however, there was an incident that forced him to change his opinion of Ayanokōji.

A curious remark from the current student council president, Nagumo Miyabi, enigmatically claiming that Ayanokōji was somebody that Horikita Manabu holds in higher esteem than anyone. Hashimoto planned on passing it off as a joke, but somehow he was just unable to do so.

As he thought about it again, there had been signs that he had overlooked.

Why did the former student council president and Ayanokōji personally confront each other during the relay?

What if that confrontation was more than just a mere coincidence?

What if it was intentional? Spurred on by some form of goal, pressing them to race against one another?

Doubts like these began to swirl in his mind.

Hashimoto had also yet to be convinced about what had happened to Ryūen, who was said to have been overthrown by Ishizaki and others from his own

class. Moreover, the current Class C, who had started out the year at the very bottom of the ladder, was now steadily starting to close the gap with the upper classes.

What if Ayanokōji had actually been involved with each of these events...?

“What if... he’s an existence that surpasses both Sakayanagi and Ryūen...?”

At this point, this train of thought didn’t seem very likely to him.

And that was to be expected. For now, it was nothing more than a mere suspicion accompanied by exaggerated delusions. It was missing something definitive to tie it all together. What Nagumo had said was simply an unrealistic joke, and the reality of what had happened during the relay at the sports festival was nothing more than a fantasy that Hashimoto had come up with to fit his own convenience.

That was why Hashimoto chose to confirm the facts.

He usually spent his time acting under the orders of Sakayanagi, spreading rumors about Ichinose, but recently he had been spending his free time shadowing Ayanokōji, spying in order to find out the truth.

Hashimoto finally reached the Class C classroom, but Ayanokōji was already nowhere to be seen.

“You never do waste time, do you Ayanokōji?”

His pool of friends was rather limited, so he seldom stayed behind in the classroom after school.

Was he with Yukimura and Miyake and that group of close friends today as well? Hashimoto considered it, but saw that both Yukimura and Sakura were still in the classroom, so he quickly dismissed the idea.

“Yo, Hirata.”

Awkwardly watching the students of another class would make him stand out.

To avoid that, immediately after arriving at the classroom, Hashimoto called out to Hirata, who had yet to head out to his club activities.

“Yo, Hashimoto-kun. What’s up?”

“I just came by to see whether or not you’ve gotten yourself a new girlfriend.”

“Is that it? I’m not thinking about finding a new one right now.”

“In the midst of healing your broken heart, are you?”

“Haha… Something like that.”

“I’d like to hear all about it sometime. Anyways, I’ve been asking around for the contact information for the guys I was lodging with back during the training camp. I was looking to catch Ayanokōji, but it looks like he’s gone home already.”

“You didn’t run into him? I think he left just a minute or two ago...”

He had missed him by just a bit. Quickly making the judgment that he could still catch up with him, Hashimoto gave his thanks to Hirata and

immediately went back out into the hallway.

The end-of-year exams were coming up soon, so Hashimoto couldn't afford to keep tailing Ayanokōji every day. He was hoping to come to a definitive conclusion about Ayanokōji soon so that he could turn his full attention to the exams and tackle them at peak condition.

"I'd love to catch onto something new any time now."

He would make his move at the soonest opportunity. With this conviction, Hashimoto moved forward.

Luckily, Hashimoto caught sight of Ayanokōji standing near the front entryway, his attention focused in on his cell phone. Was he meeting up with someone, or was he just killing some time? Either way, it was a lucky break.

Ayanokōji was always using his cell phone to stay in touch with somebody. Was he just getting in contact with Miyake and the others? Or was he speaking to someone Hashimoto hadn't ever met before?

The one thing he could say for certain was that Ayanokōji was an unusually easy target to track.

Hashimoto had tailed a fair number of students so far. Katsuragi, Ryūen, Kanzaki, and even Ichinose at times. None of them were particularly easy to keep tabs on. It would be a stroke of good luck to be able to follow one of them once every two days. On the other hand, it would take more than an entire week to find out any new information about them if things went poorly.

However, Ayanokōji lived a monotonous daily life with a very confined amount of friends and social connections.

This made it incredibly easy to anticipate his actions ahead of time. Moreover, Ayanokōji didn't show a shred caution in regard to his surroundings.

He never took note of what was behind him, never showing any indication that he had sharp senses or a keen intuition.

Even so, Hashimoto wouldn't allow himself to grow complacent.

Though it might be overcautious, he decided that he would follow Ayanokōji from even farther away than necessary.

At that point, Hashimoto got a phone call from one of his classmates, Naoki Shimizu.

“Hello. Has something happened, Naoki?”

“No... Actually, it's about this morning... I've seriously had enough of this.”

“Ah. It would probably be better for you to forget about it, right? There are just a lot of talkative people in our class.”

A somewhat problematic event had taken place within Class A that morning. Shimizu had confessed to a girl named Nishikawa, only to be rejected, and knowledge of his failure had begun to circulate among the girls of the class. Perhaps Nishikawa had carelessly told one of her friends

about the confession, and it just spread around from there. Something like this would happen every once in a while.

“You won’t be able to confess to anyone at this rate if you worry too much about every single thing, you know?”

“Th-that’s right... but I still can’t forgive Nishikawa for spreading it.”

“Well, while I’d love to hear you complain about it, I’m in the middle of something else right now.”

“Oh really? My bad.”

Hashimoto made arrangements to call him back this evening and cut the call.

“This is just how confessions end up when you don’t meet all the conditions to ensure your success.”

With the resolution to comfort his friend later on, Hashimoto returned to his mission of tailing Ayanokōji back to the dormitories.

“If he’s going straight to his room like this, then I suppose I won’t be finding anything new out today either.”

If there was anything painful about tailing Ayanokōji, it would be the overall monotony of the entire thing.

However, after Ayanokōji got into the elevator, it passed the fourth-floor, where his room was located and continued to rise. Hashimoto watched the elevator monitor from the lobby as Ayanokōji disembarked on the girls’ floor.

“If my memory serves me right... that’s the floor Ichinose is on, isn’t it?”

Or was that merely a coincidence, and he was just there in order to meet with another girl?

Though, given the recent events, it was hard for him not to associate things like this with Ichinose.

“Even though it’s weird, it is Ichinose... so isn’t it possible that he’s just making a courtesy visit...?”

While Ayanokōji only has a very confined amount of friends, Ichinose was incredibly popular with students throughout every school year.

It wouldn’t be surprising for her to be friends with Ayanokōji. In addition, that wasn’t even considering how cute she is. It wouldn’t be strange for a student to expect to get something by making her a courtesy visit.

However, Ayanokōji immediately got back into the elevator and rode back down to the fourth floor, where he got back off.

“What...?”

Nothing about it made any sense. Hashimoto continued to watch the monitor as the elevator returned to Ichinose’s floor and several girls from Class B got on. He came to the conclusion that Ayanokōji had run into all of these girls who had come to visit Ichinose before him, and made the decision to turn back after getting cold feet.

Just in case, Hashimoto immediately rode the elevator up to the fourth floor, but Ayanokōji had already disappeared.

It was pretty much guaranteed that he had returned to his room.

“So in the end, I don’t find out anything today either, huh?”

Considering whether or not to call it quits for the day, Hashimoto ultimately decided to ponder the situation for a little while in the lobby.

It was still pretty early. Hashimoto decided that it was still rather probable that Ayanokōji would try to get in contact with Ichinose later on, or even potentially make arrangements with somebody else entirely. In addition, as long as he used the elevator, it didn’t matter if he went upstairs or downstairs because he’d be able to confirm things on the monitor.

Hashimoto’s resolution to stick around paid off after an hour or so.

Ayanokōji boarded the elevator and began to ride down to the first floor.

Furthermore, he hadn’t changed out of his school uniform yet.

“Is he heading back to the school?”

It wouldn’t make any sense for him to head all the way back to school after deliberately heading home.

For instance, it would make sense that he wouldn’t bother to change his clothes if he was simply heading off to the convenience store, but he had his school bag with him.

Hashimoto quickly got up from the sofa and hid in the emergency stairwell.

“I’m looking forward to seeing where this goes from here.”

As if in response to Hashimoto's wishes, Ayanokōji walked out of the lobby, headed toward a relatively unpopular part of campus. With this, the odds of him heading to the convenience store or the school vanished. In which case, who was he meeting with? No, the place he was heading toward wasn't suitable for the usual simple meeting with a friend.

Given the situation, anybody would be filled with anticipation about what he's going to do and who he's going to meet.

The idea that he was meeting up with someone was effectively certain at this point.

If he's meeting up with former student council president Horikita, or even Ryūen, things were about to get pretty heated.

However, each and every one of his expectations were spectacularly betrayed by what he saw.

“Woah, woah, are you serious...?”

The person who turned up to meet with Ayanokōji was none other than first-year Class C's Kei Karuizawa.

She was a girl who, due to her recent break-up with Hirata, had caused a bit of a buzz within Class A. Even though Hashimoto had never had any contact with her so far, he still couldn't hide his astonishment at her unexpected appearance.

Feelings of weakness began to overwhelm him. The betrayal of all of his expectations.

This had nothing to do with the ‘other side’ of Ayanokōji that Hashimoto had been seeking to uncover. Instead, this was a matter of love. His brain automatically tried to see it in a different light, but no matter how he looked at it, their relationship with one another was clearly beyond that of just friends.

Hashimoto had witnessed Hirata and Karuizawa’s relationship several times before, but he had never felt a strong sense of ‘love’ or ‘intimacy’ between the two of them.

“...I don’t get it. Why Ayanokōji?”

In the first place, which one of them was interested in the other? Or were they both interested in each other? He could posture guesses as much as he wanted, but he would still never come to an answer. After all, at a fundamental level, there are no such things as answers when it comes to love. If you were to objectively compare Ayanokōji with Hirata, 80% of girls would end up choosing Hirata. However, it wouldn’t be strange for the remaining 20% to choose Ayanokōji.

That is to say, if there were 100 people, 20 of them would end up picking Ayanokōji.

In which case...

“Ayanokoji... has been in frequent contact with Karuizawa...?”

Hashimoto immediately abandoned that idea. It was just something he had come up with to explain the current situation, nothing more than an aspect of his imagination. He wouldn’t be able to come to any conclusions without investigating things further. However, due to the low traffic of people

through the place they were talking, it was impossible to get closer to hear exactly what they were saying.

“What should I do...”

Just as Hashimoto was pondering about what steps to take next...

There was a sudden development between Karuizawa and Ayanokōji.

“Chocolate, huh?”

Karuizawa handed Ayanokōji an object that she had been holding onto. Today was February 14th. For her to hand something over in a place so obviously outside of the public eye, anyone would be able to tell what she had handed over without actually seeing the gift.

Due to this, it's clear that, at the very least, Karuizawa favors Ayanokōji.

“Well, at any rate, I guess I can leave it at that for today.”

However, this bit of knowledge was unrelated to what he originally set out to discover.

With this in mind, Hashimoto started off back home. However, he then stopped in place.

“It's a rare opportunity... Why not challenge him directly?”

Given that there wasn't very much time left until the end-of-year exams, this could also be the best option available to him.

He could shake things up a bit by forcibly dragging the unrelated Karuizawa into this. It was his chance to expose Ayanokōji's weaknesses. At the same time, if Ayanokōji doesn't show any response to his challenge, Hashimoto could conclude that he had nothing to worry about to begin with.

Satisfied with his decision, Hashimoto began walking toward Ayanokōji and Karuizawa.

PART 1

I sensed the presence of someone approaching us from behind. Their pace was quick. So much so that it was obvious that they didn't intend to overlook the closeness of my conversation with Kei.

“Yo, Karuizawa.”

It was Hashimoto, who had been concealing his presence behind me ever since I left the lobby.

“...Uh, who?”

Kei didn't appear to know who Hashimoto was, so she turned to me for an explanation.

“He's Class A's Hashimoto. I was grouped together with him during the training camp.”

“Oh yeah, and Ayanokōji as well.”

After this quick greeting, Hashimoto drew closer to Kei.

“For a man and a woman to hold a secret meeting in a place like this... You’re quite the smooth one, Ayanokōji.”

I had known that Hashimoto would attempt to get in touch with me eventually, but I had to think about why he chose now, of all times, to do so.

Nonetheless, I’d use his plan for my own benefit as well.

“We’re not out here doing anything in particular-”

“Don’t try to hide it. It’s Valentine’s Day. Even if you two aren’t a couple, it isn’t strange to have a secret meeting like this. Actually, you’ve already gotten something from her, haven’t you?”

It seemed that Hashimoto had seen me accept her chocolate and immediately put it into my bag.

“She just gave me this chocolate by coincidence. I didn’t come out here expecting to get anything.”

I attempted to deny it, but Hashimoto saw through my excuse with a sneering grin on his face.

“No, you knew that she’d be giving you chocolate from the beginning, didn’t you? Your bag.”

“My bag?”

“Since you’ve already been back to the dorms, there’s no reason for you to take your bag with you as you go out afterward.”

“...No, I was originally intending on heading over to the library. But just before I could head out, Karuizawa called me and I agreed to meet up with her, that’s all.”

“In other words... It’s just a coincidence?”

I nodded in response to Hashimoto’s deduction before taking two library books out from my bag and showing them to him to prove it.

“Well, it’s all the same either way. In the end, you did get chocolate from Karuizawa.”

From Hashimoto’s point of view, even though I wasn’t the one to reach out to Karuizawa, the fact that I had received chocolate from her was truly important.

“I’m not sure I understand... Is there a problem with that?”

“I’m simply curious about what it is about you that Karuizawa’s interested in. Her previous boyfriend, Hirata, was one of the most popular guys in the entire school, right? It makes me wonder why she’d pick you after dumping Hirata.”

In other words, he wanted to know how things managed to get to this point.

Kei, who had been listening to our conversation in silence, spoke up.

“Aah, sorry, but there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding?”

“Yep. I originally planned to give that chocolate to Hirata-kun. It would’ve been a pity to throw it away, so I thought about giving it to someone, and then I just decided on Ayanokōji-kun.”

“You hand over such an intimate gift, but then claim it’s just done on a whim? I’m sorry, but I don’t see it. Moreover, what’s with the location? For a lie, that’s a pretty bad one.”

Hashimoto let out a laugh as he said so, to which Kei responded with a blunt display of anger.

“Haa? You show up out of nowhere and just say everything that comes to your mind. Who in the world do you think you are?”

Kei looked at him with an overbearing look in her eyes.

“I simply want to know the truth.”

Hashimoto was overwhelmed a bit.

Though it was true we hadn’t concealed the unnatural aspects of our confrontation very well.

That was why I decided to change directions.

This would be Kei’s chance to prove how well she could keep up with me.

“Well, it’ll be better for you to just speak honestly here, Karuizawa. If we continue to hide something here, I think it’ll just be troublesome for you afterward. If *that guy* ends up thinking we’re dating, you’d be troubled, right?”

With that said, I passed her the baton.

Without hesitation, Kei let out a single deliberate sigh.

“Ugh. I’ll say it, but this can absolutely never spread from here, okay?”

With this, Kei pointed at Hashimoto.

“I’ve only temporarily entrusted this chocolate with Ayanokōji-kun, in order for him to give it to the person I like.”

“So, you’re saying that Ayanokōji is just the middleman?”

“That’s right. Do you understand now?”

Hashimoto’s expression said that it was simply unbelievable.

“If that’s the case, then who is that chocolate actually for?”

Hashimoto continued his questioning.

“Huh? This is the first time I’ve ever met you, yet you want me to tell you something like that? Are you stupid?”

Kei was definitely stirring things up, but nothing about it seemed like she was being fake.

That was just the guise of the gyaru that Karuizawa Kei had created for herself.

“That’s... Well, I guess you’re right.”

Hashimoto assented with a somewhat surprised look on his face and ended up bowing his head in apology.

“This won’t blow over just by lowering your head. Seriously, spare me.”

“...Is that so? It seems like I really have misunderstood, my bad. When I thought that you two might like each other, I couldn’t help but get suspicious.”

“Why are you sticking your neck into something you have nothing to do with in the first place?”

“Well, when it comes to you, I’m anything but uninvolved.”

“Wha?”

Hashimoto drew a few steps closer to the irritable Kei.

He reached out his arm and pressed it against the wall behind her, closing off her way out with his own body.

“Wha-what?”

“I’ve thought you were fine for a while now, so how about you go out with me, Karuizawa? I don’t know who you like now, but if you still haven’t given them any chocolate, that means you haven’t conveyed your feelings yet. Isn’t that right?”

Thinking that he still had a chance with her himself, Hashimoto forcefully made a move on Kei.

“What on earth are you saying... Do you think I’d be okay with something like that?”

“It’s all part of the unpredictable twists and turns of love... Isn’t it interesting?”

With that, he cast a sharp glance at me for a split second.

He may have been attempting to bait a reaction out of me by making a move on Kei.

I spoke up.

“Well then, I guess I’m going to head back.”

“Huh? Wait, I’ll head back too.”

Kei forcibly pushed Hashimoto away and took her distance from him.

“How cold.”

Hashimoto smiled bitterly. It didn’t seem like he was going to continue with his aggressive tactic.

Or rather, it seemed that he had lost interest in Kei altogether.

Given the current situation, Kei let out a noteworthy, deliberate sigh and left back to the dorms on her own.

“Sorry for intruding into things like that.”

“No, it’s nothing.”

I walked together with Hashimoto until the point where the pathway to the dorms and the school split up.

“Still, you have it rough when it comes to love, don’t you?”

“What are you talking about?”

Hashimoto gave off a mocking smile before wrapping his arm around my shoulder and whispered into my ear.

“I’m talking about how you’re pretty big. Girls who lack experience won’t be able to handle yours.”

Bringing up that again...

“Don’t look so exhausted. There’s a good number of people that respect you for it.”

I wasn’t happy at all.

Rather, what happened at the training camp was steadily becoming a source of constant discomfort.

“By the way, *King*. How about we exchange contact info?”

“I’m fine with giving it to you as long as you never use that nickname you just came up with ever again.”

“Hahahaha. I won’t I won’t.”

With that, I took out my cell phone and exchanged contact information with Hashimoto.

“Well, I’m gonna head back myself. See ya, Ayanokōji.”

Hashimoto came and went like the passing of a storm.

Did he think that he had gotten enough information? Or did he feel like he had pushed too far into something unrelated?

In either case, my existence would continue to remain uncertain for Hashimoto.

If only it would stay that way.

I decided to drop by the library and meet up with Hiyori, who should be on standby there.

And after that, I also had to meet up with another person who had requested to meet up at the school.

PART 2

I got home that evening later than I anticipated, so I wasn’t able to meet up with the Ayanokōji Group.

When I had gotten back to my room just before seven, I found that a paper bag had been placed right in front of my door.

I took a peek inside the bag and found two differently packaged boxes. One was square while the other was a circle, and they each came with a first

name written on the front. They were Valentine's Day chocolates from Haruka and Airi.

Based on what was being talked about in the group chat, Akito and Keisei had gotten the same things.

I went into my room and lined up all of the chocolates on my desk.

"I never expected to get five of them..."

Kei, Airi, Haruka, Hiyori, and... one more.

It was a box of chocolates all wrapped up with a lovely pink ribbon.

Later that night, just after ten, I went back out into the hallway wearing a hoodie over some of my casual clothing and got onto the elevator.

The surveillance camera inside the elevator shouldn't have been able to catch my face.

It was a pre-emptive measure just in case something went wrong. In the first place, it would've been ideal for us to meet up somewhere else, but nothing could be done about it if she really did have to recuperate from an illness.

Given that, it wouldn't even be strange for her to be sleeping at this time of night. To check for this, I had Horikita let me know how to get in contact with Ichinose ahead of time. I had already sent her a text message and confirmed that she was still awake, so I moved forward with my plan.

However, I still hadn't told Ichinose that I would be going to her room.

I got off the elevator on Ichinose's floor and went to her door. I rang the doorbell and waited. Ten seconds passed. Then twenty seconds.

I didn't hear anything from inside the room, so I rang the doorbell once again.

It was only natural for Ichinose to be confused about a visit this late at night.

After about thirty more seconds, I decided to call out to her.

"Ichinose, it's me. Ayanokōji."

It would've been a problem for me to linger around on her floor after curfew had already set in.

Ichinose should've understood this as well.

She wouldn't be alright with carelessly exposing somebody else to a dangerous situation like that.

"...Ayanokōji... kun. Whatsa matter?"

I could hear Ichinose's voice from the other side of the door. As far as the tone of her voice was concerned, she sounded weak.

Immediately after she spoke, coughing resounded from within the room. It was difficult for me to discern whether or not she was truly sick based solely on how her voice and cough sounded.

"Something important has come up. I was hoping I could speak with you about it in person, is that alright?"

“Well... Uh...”

“To be honest, it seems like things might get troublesome if I’m seen by another girl right now.”

I pressured her a little more forcefully.

“Hold on a second, alright?”

She responded with that, and after a short wait, I heard the sound of the lock disengaging from inside the room.

Ichinose opened the door. I could see that she was in unbelievably low spirits.

“Nyaha, that was a bit pushy there, Ayanokōji-kun...”

She was wearing a mask and seemed to truly be in bad shape.

It looks like she wasn’t feigning an illness after all.

“Sorry. I definitely got a bit forceful. You don’t look like you’re doing very well.”

“Yeah... I’m just a little spent is all.”

“I apologize for coming by at such a bad time.”

“It’s alright. The fever is already almost gone. How should I put it, instead of feeling icky from the fever, I feel more hungry due to oversleeping, y’know? Oh, I’m sorry, but could I also get you to put on this mask?”

So as to not have me catch her cold, Ichinose presented me with another mask.

My immune system was much stronger than average, but nobody is absolutely safe when it comes to things like this. If I was to recklessly refuse her offer and then get sick later, Ichinose would probably end up regretting it. I accepted her offer without a moment's hesitation and put on the mask.

“So, have you been to the infirmary?”

“I went earlier this week.”

Many students were thinking that Ichinose faked her illness to avoid the rumors that had been spreading about her, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

There was no mistaking it. She had really been sick after all.

“You were probably worried that I was absent because of all of these rumors lately. Thank you for your concern.”

“No...”

Did she manage to see through my intentions?

“You’re the first person I’ve met up with face to face since I got sick.”

“Is that so?”

“There were a bunch of students who came to visit me while my fever was worse, but I was having a hard time so I had to turn them all away. Since

then, some of my friends have been giving me space, thinking I'm depressed."

I had come to see her so much later than everyone else, yet I was ironically the first person to actually meet with her.

In reality, Ichinose had taken a day off to recuperate from her illness. However, given how she had handled herself so far, it was obvious that she was also the type that attentively makes sure she's staying healthy. Given how quickly the end-of-year exams were coming up, Ichinose should've wanted to avoid getting sick as much as possible. There was no mistaking that this cold of hers came as a result of her recent mental trauma and the weakening of her own immune system.

"I'm not going to skip out on school just because of those rumors."

Well, Ichinose herself wasn't going to admit to that part of it.

"How resilient of you."

"Resilient, you say...? Ah, sorry, but could you shut the front door behind you? I was airing out the room earlier, but it's a bit cold now. Please also remember to wash your hands thoroughly after you go back."

"Yeah."

She had a humidifier running in her room to prevent the air from getting too dry. The cold virus is one that thrives in cold, dry air. These conditions directly increase how much of the virus is floating in the air. Due to that, it is important to increase the humidity of the room to easily create an environment where the virus would become inactive. Neglecting these

precautions could lead to prolonged colds and even increase the odds of infecting any visitors. In fact, the main reason why colds tend to drag on during the winter months is because of the dryness of the air.

Though, a lot of girls have been coming over to my room lately, and I have been going over to a lot of the girls' rooms as well. It was strange how none of those visits have had anything to do with love affairs thus far.

“What’s the matter...?”

Ichinose looked at me with a strange expression as I stood there staring at the humidifier.

“I really am sorry to intrude while you’re resting.”

“No, it really is fine. It’s definitely safer not to meet up with anyone face to face right now, but it’s probably for the better to let somebody else know that I’ve actually caught something.”

Ichinose was well aware that speculation about the legitimacy of her illness had already begun to spread.

Ichinose showed me her cell phone, as if trying to prove it to me.

There was evidence of several exchanges she had been engaged in with Horikita.

It seemed like Horikita had been worried about Ichinose in her own way.

The two of us didn’t talk for long. I took my leave as soon as the right time presented itself.

PART 3

The day of the provisional exam had arrived.

That morning, each class would be focusing in on the exam.

Though, nobody in the classroom was diligently studying, as everyone was immersed in conversation instead. None of this conversation had anything to do with preparations for the upcoming exam. Rather, the topic of discussion was something completely unrelated to that.

“It’s pretty noisy.”

“Of course it is. It’s because of those outrageous rumors that showed up this morning.”

“Outrageous rumors? Have there been new ones about Ichinose?”

“No. They’re new ones that have been causing internal chaos within Class C.”

“New rumors, huh...”

With just one look at the restless classroom, it was obvious that this was no trivial matter.

“Incidentally, this has something to do with you too, Ayanokōji-kun.”

With that, Horikita showed me the screen of her cell phone.

She had written down a total of four rumors on the phone’s memo pad.

“This...”

- Ayanokōji Kiyotaka has a crush on Karuizawa Kei
- Hondō Ryōtarō is only interested in obese girls
- Shinohara Satsuki was a prostitute back in middle school
- Satō Maya hates Onodera Kayano

The content of the rumors all followed a similar pattern. The full names of four people, including me, were directly stated as victims of the attack.

“Where did this gossip come from?”

“Are you familiar with the forums that the school set up for each class?”

“The ones in the school’s app, right?”

When students need to look into their point balances or something of that sort, they’re expected to login to an application that the school created for them. Coupled with this application is a set of message boards that students have the liberty to make use of as they see fit. However, because there are several easy-to-use chat applications already available on our cell phones, these boards didn’t see very much use among the students.

“That’s a good catch. Who discovered them?”

“By the time I got to the classroom this morning, the rumors had already started to spread. It’s possible that somebody came across them accidentally while they were using the app. There are also notifications that go out when the forums are updated.”

These forums weren't just for class discussions. They were also used for general conversation. Due to the fact that anyone could access them, there was a high probability that these rumors were seen by the other classes as well.

"Don't you think that this is a little different from what happened with the previous rumors?"

"Regardless of whether it's the same perpetrator or not, there are countless ways to spread rumors. Wouldn't you agree that there's no reason to get caught up in the differences? It's not something that can be covered up now that it's been posted online."

With that, Horikita transitioned to another topic.

"I'll just ask to be sure, but... is it true?"

"No it is not."

I denied it immediately.

"There are only a few people who know about my relationship with Karuizawa as it is now anyway."

"So you have an idea as to who posted it, then?"

"Not exactly."

I gave her a brief summary of what happened during my encounter with Hashimoto the day before.

“There’s a high probability that Hashimoto-kun is the one that spread the rumors about Ichinose-san, so it wouldn’t be surprising if he was also spreading these new rumors about you and Karuizawa-san.”

“But, what about the other victims? There aren’t many ways to verify the truth.”

“Yeah...”

A student willing to personally look into the truth of each of these rumors...

“Oi! Were you really a prostitute, Shinohara!?”

Unable to read the atmosphere of the room, Yamauchi shouted out such a thing with a smile on his face.

“A-absolutely not!”

Shinohara stood up in a panic and adamantly denied it. Embarrassment and anger could be clearly seen on her face.

“Well then, how about you show me the evidence.”

“You’re asking for evidence...? How am I supposed to give you something like that!?”

Meanwhile, the audience, captivated by the rumors, began to spread them amongst the incoming students who were just entering the classroom.

Well, it was going to end up like that sooner or later.

“If you’re saying it’s a lie, then are you saying that everything that’s been put online was also a lie? That we’ve all just been running our mouths?”

While watching Shinohara and Yamauchi’s argument unfold, I confirmed my thoughts with Horikita.

“Hmm... I suppose we have no other choice than to check with each of the victims one by one like Yamauchi.”

Though, most people aren’t able to pry into someone’s trauma like that.

“Are you stupid!? You’re getting swept away by rumors and you don’t even know where they came from!”

Shinohara’s anger toward Yamauchi was by no means unreasonable.

It was surprising that she was able to stay calm like this.

“Though~ Don’t you think that all of the stuff posted online seems pretty realistic?”

“You... Knock it off, Haruki!”

In response to his friend’s merciless hounding, Ike reached out and forcefully grabbed Yamauchi by the shoulder to signal that it was time to stop.

“Wh-what’s wrong? This is my chance to get back at Shinohara for always acting so high and mighty.”

“Getting back at her...? No matter what, those rumors have to be lies!”

“How are we supposed to know that? A relatively ugly chick like her could’ve totally done something like that.”

Yamauchi continued to talk mindlessly, without a shred of concern for Ike’s feelings on the matter.

“Oh, I see… Ike, you have a crush on Shinohara, don’t you? So that’s why you can’t admit-”

“Haruki!”

Ike grabbed Yamauchi by the collar of his shirt.

“Cut it out you guys.”

Unable to sit still and watch from afar any longer, Sudō forcibly separated the two of them. At the same time, Hirata arrived at the classroom and immediately caught on to the atmosphere of the situation. He approached some of the girls and began to hear out the specifics about the rumors.

Since Shinohara was just denying everything, Yamauchi decided to temporarily change targets to someone else.

“Well then, Hondō~ Are you seriously only into fat chicks?”

Yamauchi turned his attack toward Hondō.

“N-no way! Absolutely not! Those rumors are downright lies! Right, Ayanokōji? You probably don’t even like Karuizawa, right!?”

Naturally, Hondō also denied everything. He then turned to me for help with escaping the spotlight.

Everyone's attention turned to me immediately. Fortunately, Kei and most of her friends hadn't gotten to the classroom yet.

I responded to him with a nod.

"See!?"

He shouted out as he turned his attention back to Yamauchi.

"Dammit. What the hell? Are they all just lies?"

With the three of us all denying our part of the rumors, the classroom began to calm down just a little.

"But... Satō-san doesn't like Onodera-san very much, does she?"

Maezono muttered these few absent-minded words. They probably came out of her mouth without a second thought because Onodera hadn't come to school yet.

"Wha-! Ho-hold on, Maezono-san!"

Satō frantically attempted to stop Maezono, but it was already too late.

"Come to think of it, has anyone here ever seen Satō hang out with Onodera before?"

"Th- That's-"

Things seemed to be developing in a way where it wasn't possible for the rumors to be dismissed as simple lies anymore.

In this situation, Sudō confirmed that Ike and Yamauchi would remain separated from each other before walking over to me and Horikita.

“Ayanokōji. You really don’t like Karuizawa?”

Even Sudō felt like he needed to ask such a question.

“No, I don’t.”

“Hmm. Well, it doesn’t matter to me if it’s true or not. Hey Suzune.”

“What, Sudō-kun?”

“Ah, well, it’s just that I managed to overhear part of your conversation. If it’s alright with you, I’d like to help out.”

“How so?”

“Well, I have no shame. I should be able to ask around about the rumors straightforwardly like Haruki did.”

Sudō presented her with such an offer.

It was true that Sudō could be a useful tool for determining exactly where these rumors originated from.

Though at the same time, he said he had overheard our conversation, so he should’ve heard me tell Horikita that I wasn’t interested in Kei.

“You shouldn’t do anything that will lower other people’s evaluations of you. You already aren’t very well respected by your peers. You should be focusing your attention on improving how other people see you. Think

about how Yamauchi-kun's tactless remarks seem to have dramatically lowered his social status within the class."

It felt as though Yamauchi had managed to instantly overthrow Sudō from his position as the most disliked person in the class.

Most significantly, even Ike, his closest friend, had vented his anger at Yamauchi's behavior.

"That's probably true... But I really do want to be helpful somehow."

Sudō glanced at me for a moment before immediately turning away. I guess that he must have been vaguely aware that Horikita would consult with me about various things. Of course, he should also understand that it was easy for us to talk with one another simply because we sat next to each other.

"In which case, you should keep watch over Yamauchi-kun to make sure he doesn't spiral out of control. It would be different if there was only one positive rumor going around, but this time, if these troublesome rumors really are true, everything becomes really personal. I'd like for you to look after Hondō-kun as well because these rumors have probably dampened his spirits by quite a bit. You can do that, right?"

"... Yeah, you're right."

Sudō seemed a little disappointed, but he still obediently followed Horikita's instructions.

After confirming that Sudō had left, Horikita went back to the subject at hand.

“In all likelihood, this has all been a part of Sakayanagi-san’s plan as well. She wasn’t satisfied with going after Ichinose-san alone, so she set up the same type of trap for Class C. Then she attacked both classes at once. I think she’s trying to shake us up before our end-of-year exams... What should we do?”

“What do you mean, ‘What should we do’? Do you think there’s a way to confront these rumors? The more we try to deny, the more we’re going to blow up the issue. Even if we were to admit that they’re true, people will just continue to gossip behind our backs. The rumors about me aren’t a big deal, but if the rumors about the others start to be treated like facts, then that could cause a lot of damage.”

“...Yeah. That may be true.”

Horikita nodded approvingly as she looked over at Shinohara and Hondō. The way she did it made me wonder if she was imagining herself in their shoes.

“But, in some sense, this was a dirty move. How can we fight back against something like this?”

“I wonder.”

“Even though you see the fire starting to spread, you’re still just going to sit back and watch?”

“It’s not that big of a deal to me. On the other hand, Karuizawa is most likely going to be facing some problems.”

“In other words, you don’t care?”

“Yeah, I don’t care.”

For some reason or another, it seemed like Horikita wanted to see me panic.

Due to this, I was able to see Horikita show a rare expression of disappointment.

“At any rate, it’s fortunate that it wasn’t the other way around.”

The other way around. Meaning that Kei was the one with a crush. On me. It would give birth to even more rumors about how she’s chasing after another guy immediately after breaking up with Hirata. There would be all sorts of speculations going around.

Even if something isn’t true, there will always be people who treat it like fact. People that treat fiction like reality.

“But... I just can’t sit back and watch this happen like you.”

“Is that so?”

Even if we were to leave the rumors alone, judging from the current state of affairs, the problem was clearly only going to continue to spread.

Yamauchi attempted to approach Shinohara and Satō again, but Hirata intervened first.

“Yamauchi-kun. Just because something’s been posted on our class’s forums doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s true. At the very least, it’s wrong for fellow classmates to be hurting each other like this.”

“But just like with Ichinose’s rumors, doesn’t everyone know already? So it doesn’t make any difference whether or not we say anything, right?”

“I’m not sure I agree with you about that. At least not in the current situation. That’s why, right now, I think that the proper course of action is to avoid getting tricked by these rumors while we sort everything out.”

Hirata’s words were met with strong voices of approval from both the boys and the girls. Of course, it was no permanent solution, but it was enough to successfully handle it for now.

At that moment, a single message came in on Horikita’s cell phone.

“From Kanzaki-kun...”

Saying as much, Horikita took a glance at the message.

“It seems as though Ichinose-san is taking today off as well.”

The very day of the provisional exam. Even if she’s only somewhat sick, she should still want to participate in a test like this where her academic abilities will be measured. Not to mention that Ichinose is the leader of Class B, the one who chose to take on the burdens of all of her colleagues. Well, judging from how she looked the night before, there was no way she would’ve been able to recover completely.

“One more thing... It seems like there were rumors posted on Class B’s forums as well.”

“That is to say, Class B has become aware of the rumors in Class C.”

“So it seems.”

Horikita quickly logged into the app on her phone and checked Class B's forums. It turned out that there were four rumors listed there as well, similar to the ones found for Class C. The same was also true for Class D's forum.

“Conveniently, no rumors were posted for Class A. Do you have time after school today? I'd like to hear the details about Ichinose from Kanzaki, and I'd also like to discuss how to deal with these forums.”

“Sure.”

I agreed with Horikita's request.

“For now, let's focus on the provisional exam. After all, this is a valuable opportunity for us to confirm the difficulty level of the end-of-year exam and get a good grasp on where we're at as a class.”

However, while that would be easy for Horikita, the people that had been targeted by these rumors wouldn't be able to do that so simply.

When Kei and the rest of her friend group finally got to the classroom, they all gathered together and began to whisper amongst each other.

Each of them would periodically glance over in my direction with a look of disgust in their eyes.

Even though I wasn't able to hear their discussion, it was perfectly clear what kind of things they were saying to each other. Something like...

‘Do you really think Ayanokōji-kun has a crush on Karuizawa-san?’

‘What do you think about him, Karuizawa-san?’

And there was no doubt in my mind that Kei was responding to them, describing me with words like ‘gross’ and ‘terrible’.

“Didn’t you say that you didn’t care?”

“...It’s still kinda hard.”

I would’ve continued to watch them talk, but I didn’t want to actually hear any of the insults they’d be tossing around, so I looked away.

The real problem was the other students targeted by the rumors other than me.

PART 4

The provisional exam began despite the traces of the awkward, uneasy atmosphere that were still lingering within the classroom.

It was a critical time for the end of the school year.

The content of this provisional exam was more challenging than that of any of the exams we had taken so far. It was really difficult.

However, the students who managed to get through the previous exams without any problems should probably be able to get through this one smoothly as well. On the other hand, the students who have been just barely scraping by from test to test would probably have to study intensely moving forward.

I had gotten an invitation to study together with everyone in the Ayanokōji Group, but I was already going to be meeting up with Kanzaki together with Horikita after school, so I got in touch with them and let them know to start without me. Kanzaki didn't appear to want to stand out very much, so he arranged for us to meet up at Keyaki Mall after the provisional exam was over.

After class, I followed Horikita to the spot where Kanzaki was waiting. It was near the southern entrance to the mall.

It was the place on campus furthest away from the school, so students would only rarely be in the area.

I had no interest in the inter-class struggles that were going on, but as a friend, I was still a little worried about Ichinose.

Getting more information couldn't have hurt as well.

Besides, Hashimoto had been continuously keeping an eye on me over the past couple of days.

If I was to get into contact with Class B, the looming shadow of Class A would continue to draw even closer.

And that was exactly the kind of development I was hoping for.

In fact, Hashimoto had tailed me from an appropriate distance all the way to the southern entrance of the mall.

"Two days off in a row. And you still haven't been able to get in contact with Ichinose-san yourself?"

“It’s not that we can’t get into contact with her, it’s just that she’s been slow to respond to us. The most I’ve gotten from her was a notification that she’s been out sick with a cold.”

Recently, Kanzaki has been in a constant state of stress, completely unable to relax. Ichinose has probably told him countless times to stop worrying about it by now, but it doesn’t seem like it’s that easy for him.

Her poor physical condition may be one of the reasons for why she’s so reluctant to meet her classmates face to face, but at the same time, she really didn’t want to have to talk about the rumors.

“What did your homeroom teacher say about it?”

“Nothing different from usual. Just that Ichinose is staying home again because she’s caught a cold.”

Their homeroom teacher should’ve been told the same thing as anyone else.

The reason why Kanzaki’s expression was heavy was that he couldn’t help but question the true reason behind Ichinose’s absences. Recently, Ichinose has been at the center of a maelstrom of rumors. Kanzaki’s uncertainty was entirely justified.

“How about going to visit her? Wouldn’t it all become clear if you go and meet with her in person?”

“Some of the girls from my class have tried to see her, but it doesn’t seem like any of them have been able to get her to open her door.”

Realizing that the situation wasn't very optimistic, Horikita carefully considered the options before speaking up.

"I guess if there's a bright side, it's that she's excellent with her academics. Even though she didn't take the provisional exam, I don't think she'll run into any problems."

Sick students who missed the exam like Ichinose still had options. They'd be able to take a make-up exam and reach out to other students to see what the exam was like.

"That's not what any of us are worried about. We're just concerned about her state of mind."

Horikita and Kanzaki.

Just as the two of them were beginning to come up with a plan, a group of people approached us.

It appears Hashimoto already gave her a report about our meeting...

"It seems that Ichinose-san is absent today as well. The end-of-year exams are going to begin at the end of next week. If her string of absences is to repeat itself until then... it may turn into quite the problem, don't you think?"

"...Sakayanagi."

Sakayanagi and her underlings approached Kanzaki, making it very clear who she had actually come to meet with. She was accompanied by

Hashimoto, Kamuro, and one more student, a boy from Class A named Kitō.

In other words, the main members of the Sakayanagi faction.

“Now what in the world could you be discussing with these Class C students?”

“This has nothing to do with you.”

“It seems like we’re not welcome here.”

“If you wanted to be ‘welcome’, then you should’ve stopped spreading strange rumors everywhere before things got out of hand.”

Sakayanagi and her classmates looked at each other and couldn’t hold back their laughter.

“Oh please. What are you talking about?”

“I hope you know that the unity of my class won’t falter just because of a couple of rumors.”

“I do not know anything about what sort of situation Class B is in, but I am looking forward to the future.”

Sakayanagi may have only come by in order to see the results of her plans in person, but Kanzaki was making it perfectly clear to her just how effective her plans truly were.

“Don’t let her get to you, Kanzaki-kun. This is all a part of Sakayanagi-san’s strategy.”

“I know.”

Faced with a problem like this one, Kanzaki was suffering precisely because of his modesty and concern for those around him.

PART 5

Even after school, the rumors continued to spread with no end in sight.

“Wait! W-wait wait wait! What’s going on Kiyotaka!!”

While spending some leisure time after getting home from school for the day, I got a call from Kei.

“What do you mean ‘what’s going on’?”

I already knew what she was getting at, but I wanted to ask anyway.

“Stop with the ‘what do I mean’! T-there’s, uh, well, a rumor going around that you have a crush on me! How could you not notice!?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“N-nonono. Do you think I can ignore it just cause it’s a rumor??? How did it end up like this in the first place!?”

She started speaking so loudly that I started to hear a painful ringing sound from the inner part of my ear, so I moved the phone away from my head for a moment.

I pressed the button on my phone to lower the volume of the call.

“Maybe Hashimoto spread it after what happened yesterday. Or maybe some other student saw us together.”

“Eeee~!”

Kei let out a quiet scream.

“Well, it’s fine, isn’t it? It would be terrible for you if our positions were reversed.”

“R-reversed?”

“A rumor like ‘Kei has a crush on me’ would be pretty troublesome, right? If it ended up like that, I think everyone would be much more suspicious of you than me since you just broke up with Hirata.”

“...I-I guess so, but...”

“Just don’t worry about it. Rumors always tend to fade away with time.”

“For real?”

“That being said, thanks to this rumor, it should be easier for the two of us to get in contact with each other moving forward. If I start talking to you now, people will assume that it’s because of the rumor, and we could leave it at that.”

It all just depends on how we think about it.

I never had any intention of talking with her in a conspicuous place in the first place, but this rumor could act as insurance just in case I needed to at some point.

“Nonononononono.”

This time around, she repeated the word ‘no’ several times more than she did earlier.

“If we’re seen alone together, people will totally look at us weirdly, right!? Absolutely weirdly, right!?”

Is repeating yourself like this becoming some kind of trend? What a strange way of talking.

This was the type of information that I was indirectly planting for Hashimoto as he followed me.

“Anyway, don’t worry about it.”

“Even if you say that..... No, it’s still absolutely impossible!”

After a long silence, she still ended up deciding that it was too difficult.

After quietly grumbling about something else for a little while, Kei gave up and ended the call.

PART 6

The situation began to unfold at a dizzying pace.

The special exam didn't seem like it was going to happen this month, so everyone should've been focusing their efforts on preparing for the upcoming end-of-year exam, yet something troublesome was still developing.

It was Friday, February 18th. Three days after the end of the provisional exam.

A fair distance away from the school campus, students from Class A, Class C, and Class D had gathered together.

Given the importance of the upcoming exam, Hirata had attempted to stem the flow of the new rumors, but despite his best efforts, they still managed to spread around the school.

Class A, the only class that hadn't had rumors posted about them on the school forums, was also already grasping that information.

“Yo Ishizaki, something you wanted to say to me?”

The same attitude as ever, Class A's Hashimoto spoke up, posing a question to Ishizaki.

“Something I wanted to say? You tell me, Hashimoto! What are you doing bringing Kitō along with you? Didn't I tell you to come alone?”

“Well, you brought Albert along with you yourself. I'm just being careful.”

There was a stinging, tense atmosphere between the two of them.



The atmosphere made it hard to imagine that they had lived in the same room together during the training camp. Though, ultimately, their reaction towards one another was understandable.

“We’ve just invited you out here today to have a talk. Isn’t that right, Ishizaki-kun?”

Ishizaki and Albert weren’t the only Class D students that had come to participate in the conversation. Hiyori and Ibuki had also come along with them.

“Well, as long as they’re able to control themselves, I guess everything should be fine.”

“But...”

Even though she stopped herself, Hiyori’s worry was by no means unreasonable.

Given the personalities of the people present, it was hard to imagine that nothing would end up happening.

“But, what about those guys? I didn’t know you invited people from Class C as well.”

Looking over at us, Hashimoto let out an exasperated sigh.

“Dunno. Aren’t you the ones that invited them?”

It seemed as though both Class D and Class A felt a bit uncomfortable about our presence.

“It’s just like you said, Ayanokōji.”

Akito spoke up from beside me, accompanied by the rest of the Ayanokōji Group.

Before coming here, we had all met up at the cafe and were about to start studying together.

“I had been thinking about that time a while ago when Kanzaki and Hashimoto were going at each other. Then I just so happened to see all of you guys heading off campus, so I brought it up to Akito...”

After seeing the Class A and Class D students leave the campus, I let Akito know that there might be something else going down similar to what had happened last time and we immediately went to take a look.

However, Airi, Haruka, and Keisei all unexpectedly came along as well.

“There are more people than there were last time, too. This looks like it might get pretty serious...”

“Jeeze. Why is such a tense situation taking place again?”

Haruka commented, exasperated from having come across a scene like this for a second time.

“Forget it. It doesn’t matter who called them over. Let’s hear what you have to say, Shiina-chan.”

“It has to do with the rumors. You guys from Class A are the ones that posted them, right?”

Judging that they might run into problems should Ishizaki lead the conversation, Hiyori took over.

“Hey hey hey. Why are you asking us something like that?”

“Isn’t it obv-!”

“Please. Leave this to me, Ishizaki-kun.”

Hiyori gently stopped Ishizaki from angrily lashing out at Hashimoto.

“I heard it through the grapevine. I was informed about what you had told Kanzaki-kun when he confronted you about the source of Ichinose-san’s rumors.”

“What a chatterbox. Did you happen to hear that from those two over there?”

He gestured over to Akito and me since we had witnessed the entire exchange in question.

“Please answer the question, Hashimoto-kun.”

Without even looking over to us, Hiyori continued to press Hashimoto for answers.

“...Well, Ayanokōji and Miyake over there already know about it, so I’ll just speak honestly. Back then, I just happened to hear some rumors about Ichinose, so I decided to help spread them around because it seemed like an amusing thing to do. I wasn’t the source.”

Of course, Hashimoto doesn’t acknowledge the truth.

“What a convenient excuse. Do you think that we’re just going to accept that?”

“Excuse? It’s the truth. Well, I guess it is somewhat sinful of me to spread it around just because it seemed amusing, but it’s still strange, isn’t it? That the students from Class D would come along and butt-in to something that they should be entirely unrelated to?”

With a cheerful, yet piercing look in his eyes, Hashimoto continued:

“Isn’t it possible... that you guys in Class D are ones actually spreading the rumors?”

“You’re full of shit! We already know that Sakayanagi is the one behind the rumors!!!”

“Oh, so you’re jumping to conclusions now? It may be true that the leader of our class is belligerent. There are indeed also times where she heedlessly provokes Ichinose. It’s not like I can’t understand where you’re coming from, but you’re reading too much into it and arbitrarily deciding that she’s the source of the rumors. Honestly, it’s really none of your business anyway. You don’t actually have any proof it was Sakayanagi now, do you?”

Ishizaki was frustrated with Hashimoto’s response, but there was nothing incorrect about what he said. The letters that had been placed in all the mailboxes. The rumors that had been posted online. There was no conclusive evidence tying Sakayanagi to any of it. Though, I was eighty to ninety percent certain that she really was behind it all.

“Which is why I came here today. To question you guys about whether or not you’re the ones that spread the rumors. However, I never expected that you guys would go and try to support Ichinose as well.”

Ishizaki and his friends responded to Hashimoto’s remark with glowering expressions. Understanding the situation he was in, Hashimoto let out a sigh.

“It’s no use playing stupid, Hashimoto. Not only did you guys go and spread rumors about Ichinose, but then you even had the nerve to go and stir up shit about us as well.”

“I see. So that’s the reason after all. You guys don’t really care about the stuff with Ichinose, do you? You’re just upset that Class D got swept up in the rumors. Oh yeah... I heard you were sent to juvie because of some stunt you pulled back in elementary school, isn’t that right, Ishizaki?”

The moment Hashimoto instigated him further, Ishizaki clearly snapped.

Hiyori hurriedly grabbed him by the wrist and held him back, preventing him from jumping at Hashimoto.

The rumor that Hashimoto brought up was one of the lies that had been written on the school forums.

Given the nature of that lie, Ishizaki’s anger was certainly justified.

This sort of outcome was inevitable.

Without showing any interest in stopping, Hashimoto continued:

“Anyways, I’m shocked that you guys are even able to come up with all those rumors. Ichinose’s situation aside, please, do tell me how you guys managed to find out so much about the people from other classes.”

“Stop fucking around Hashimoto!”

“Hold it Ishizaki!”

Thinking Hiyori wouldn’t be able to handle him on her own, Akito hurriedly spoke up to stop Ishizaki.

“Don’t butt in, Miyake! I can’t just stand by and let Class A bad mouth us like this!! I’ll send him flying!”

“Stop it Ishizaki. You’re just gonna hurt yourself. I know you’re confident in your fighting skills, but this isn’t the right place for that, okay?”

Kitō took a single step forward and readied his fists toward Ishizaki and Albert.

It looked like, depending on what happened next, he was willing to accept their challenge.

“Stop it. All of you. You know the school is very strict when it comes to fighting.”

From a fair distance away from them, Akito spoke up, attempting to calm things down.

“Well, that was true... until now.”

“Until now?”

“It seems like the current student council president is willing to turn a blind eye to petty disputes, just like this one.”

Hashimoto closed the distance and threw a kick at Ishizaki, but Akito immediately intercepted the blow with his left arm.

“...Seriously? That student council president... Does he think he can just do anything he wants?”

Hashimoto’s words were hardly enough to guarantee that the ban on fighting had really been lifted.

So, he went to prove it by personally making the first move himself.

“Not bad, Miyake. It makes sense now why you were so confident that you could stop us from fighting.”

Hashimoto fell back and took his distance once again.

The atmosphere became even more tense and rigid than it was before.

Hiyori spoke up.

“Fighting still isn’t allowed.”

“I know. I didn’t come here to fight with you. That was just my way of proving to all of you that we’re more than capable of defending ourselves.”

“...Can I trust you?”

Looking Hiyori in the eyes, Hashimoto nodded, but none of us truly believed him.

“Give it up, Hiyori. This guy lies as easily as he breathes. No matter how you look at it, the rumors were spread by Class A. It’s obvious because Class A was the only Class that wasn’t included in the rumors.”

“That’s... Then isn’t there a chance that they aren’t at fault?”

“It’s just as Shiina-chan says. If we were the ones that posted the rumors, wouldn’t we have also posted some lies about Class A on the forums in order to avoid suspicion?”

“It’s hard to say. I don’t think that everyone in Class A would know that Sakayanagi is the main perpetrator for the rumors about Ichinose. If the class wasn’t informed ahead of time, when the rumors are spread, there would definitely be confusion.”

As Akito pointed this out, Hashimoto let out another sigh.

“Well, your deduction isn’t unreasonable, but in the end, it’s still probatio diabolica.”

His excuse was extremely suspicious, but ultimately, we had no evidence to disprove it. At the same time, it was also hard for him to prove his innocence.

“If we want to get information out of these guys, it looks like we have no choice but to talk with our fists.”

“Woah Woah, cool it Ibuki-chan. Picking a fight with us like that won’t accomplish anything, you know?”

“Telling me to stop after picking the fight yourself, well aren’t you full of it?”

“Class A doesn’t have anything to do with it. Believe me.”

With that, Hashimoto let out a laugh, but Ibuki was not smiling.

On the contrary, she seemed to be trying her hardest to hold back her rage.

Ibuki had fallen victim to the rumors posted on the school’s forums, just as Ishizaki had.

“You… Do you really think that you can look down on us just because Ryūen is no longer our leader!?”

Ishizaki finally reached the limit of his patience and pushed Akito aside.

Ibuki stepped forward to confront Hashimoto and Kitō right alongside him.

“Wait wait wait. Take it easy.”

“The rumors about Ichinose and the rumors about us. Get Sakayanagi to apologize for both of them.”

“You’re still misunderstanding something. We didn’t spread the rumors.”

“What a joke!”

Ishizaki forcefully kicked the nearby handrail.

Hashimoto began to understand that the situation was getting a bit out of control.

“...Then, what are you gonna do about it?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We’ll shut you up by force.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yep. If that sounds unpleasant, then you better go and get her to take back the rumors right now.”

“I’ve already told you countless times. We didn’t spread the rumors.”

Even though he continued to deny it, Hashimoto also understood that it wasn’t an excuse that the others would easily accept.

After all, the current state of affairs was essentially the same thing as Sakayanagi having declared war on Ichinose. It would be difficult for him to prove his innocence.

Hashimoto’s expression softened for a moment.

“Oh? What’s so funny?”

“Sorry, sorry. This is all just too absurd. I don’t understand what you want from me.”

Because Hashimoto wouldn’t acknowledge that Sakayanagi was the source of the rumors, he didn’t have any other option but to turn Ishizaki down.

“Then, I guess we’ll just have to go ask Sakayanagi herself.”

“You? Fat chance.”

Hashimoto dismissively waved his hand, as if to say ‘There’s no way that she’d bother with the likes of you.’

Before they all came here, Ishizaki must have reached out to Hashimoto because he knew there’d be no way for him to reach Sakayanagi directly in the first place.

“Kitō. We might not have any other choice.”

Reading the atmosphere, Hashimoto concluded that they wouldn’t get anywhere with peaceful conversation.

Kitō seemed to have already prepared himself for this outcome, as he smoothly transitioned into a fighting stance.

Immediately, Ishizaki yelled out a war cry and charged in, attempting to tackle Kitō.

At the same time, Ibuki attacked Hashimoto with a high-flying kick, but he ended up getting out of the way at the very last moment.

“Close!”

Due to her sudden, jumpy movements, Ibuki’s cellphone and student ID card fell out of her pocket.

Hashimoto realized that Ibuki was faster and stronger than he expected. His expression showed concern for the danger he was in, but was followed up by a look of genuine admiration.

“I seem to have forgotten... Ibuki-chan is more experienced at fighting than I remembered.”

“Stop it! All of you!”

Akito shouted out while picking her phone up off the ground.

However, the Class D students didn’t show any signs of stopping.

Ibuki didn’t seem to care in the slightest that her phone might’ve been damaged from the fall.

I reached out and picked up her ID card that had fallen near my feet.

My gaze suddenly fell upon the small photograph of Ibuki depicted on the card.

Of course, her expression in the picture was as stiff and unsociable as ever.

However-One particular detail on the card managed to catch my eye.

“What’s going on...?”

“What, Ayanokōji?”

From beside me, Keisei spoke up, having heard my mumbling. I immediately shook my head to dismiss his question and temporarily put Ibuki’s student ID card into my pocket for safe keeping.

“No, it’s nothing. More importantly, it seems like stopping this fight should be our top priority.”

“You say to stop the fight... but how?”

The situation had already developed into a two-on-two, and the second round was just about to begin.

“Exactly. It doesn’t seem like we should get involved.”

“It’s dangerous, Kiyotaka-kun.”

Haruka and Airi spoke up as well, suggesting that we stay out of it.

“...That’s true. Then I guess it’s better to just let Akito handle it.”

In order to stop the next exchange of blows, Akito forced himself between Ishizaki and Hashimoto.

“Don’t get in my way, Miyaki!”

Ishizaki attempted to push him aside with brute force, but Akito seized him by the hand and forced him down to the ground.

“You bastard! Let go of me!”

“I’m sorry Ishizaki. It’s nothing personal.”

“Stop interfering!”

Ibuki kicked out once again, aiming for Akito’s head.

Akito quickly got off of Ishizaki, narrowly dodging Ibuki’s kick at the same time, but the whole affair caused him to lose his balance.

Making use of the opening, Albert grabbed ahold of Akito from behind him.

“Hold him down Albert.”

“Dammit...”

Akito couldn't resist Albert's otherworldly strength, pinning him down from above.

Class D had concluded that they would win if the two-on-two played out without any obstructions.

"Ibuki!"

Ishizaki called out to her as Kitō lunged forward, aiming for her neck.

"Don't look down on me!"

She reacted quickly, kicking Kitō's hand away.

"These guys are seriously fighting, aren't they... What do we do?"

The four of us, watching from the sidelines, weren't in any position to stop them.

"It can't be helped now that things have progressed this far, but you lot from Class C are really getting in the way..."

While keeping tabs on Ishizaki as he got up off the ground, Hashimoto shifted his gaze over in our direction.

"We only happened to come here by chance, but I have something I want to say. Our friend Ayanokōji was a target of the rumors, just like Ishizaki and the others."

Keisei appealed to Hashimoto with Airi nodding enthusiastically beside him.

“Hmm, now that you mention it... Something about him having a crush on Karuizawa, right? Isn’t that a lovely rumor?”

“I-it’s absolutely not lovely at all!”

The usually quiet Airi raised her voice in objection.

I spoke up after her, attempting to seem like I agreed with my friends on the matter.

“I hate to say it, but I suspect you as well, Hashimoto.”

“...I guess that makes sense. After all, I was the only one who saw you and Karuizawa meeting up together in secret a few days ago.”

“I-in secret?”

Airi and Haruka immediately looked over at me.

“There’s nothing going on between us.”

“Really? B-but Kiyotaka-kun, I’ve been starting to think that... y-you and Karuizawa-san have been on pretty good terms with each other lately...”

Airi had been watching me carefully, so she should understand that much.

However, what was truly important here was for Hashimoto to hear this.

It was essential for him to know that other people know about my relationship with Kei.

At the time, we had used the excuse that I was just the middleman for the delivery of her Valentine’s day chocolates to her real crush. For that to

happen, Kei and I would've had to have at least a certain degree of intimacy with each other in the first place.

His actions were an act, done for the sake of testing me. Taking the opportunity to evaluate how my classmates saw my relationship with Kei.

Hashimoto's excellence had caused him to shut out many other possibilities.

Even though he had been keeping an eye on me, thanks to this testimony, he would now end up with an incorrect conclusion.

As a result, his suspicions about me would start to fade.

“I’m the one you’re dealing with right now, Hashimoto!”

“Good grief... This is getting rather troublesome.”

“Please don’t keep going on like this Ishizaki-kun. I won’t allow you to continue any further.”

Hiyori firmly declared her stance to Ishizaki.

Unable to completely disregard what she said, Ishizaki looked over to her with a troubled look on his face.

“B-but!”

“Let’s suppose that you manage to beat Hashimoto-kun and Kitō-kun in a fight here and force them to confess to everything. That still wouldn’t be real evidence. I’m also fairly certain that the person that matters, Sakayanagi-san, won’t admit to anything at all. Isn’t the fact that we weren’t able to get him to admit to it more than enough?”

“So you expect us to just swallow our anger?”

“I know it seems unfair, but it is what it is. Please just bear with it for now.”

“Aren’t you the one that wanted us to come along with you in the first place? But then you ask us to stand down? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I promise that I will make it up to all of you later.”

Amused by what he was hearing as he listened in on their conversation, Hashimoto let out a whistle.

“Hoooh? So you’re saying that Ishizaki isn’t the one who set up this meeting? It was all done by Shiina-chan instead?”

“Albert-kun. Please let Miyake-kun go as well.”

Following her directions, Albert slowly released Akito.

“We’ve gone and made all of you from Class C worry as well.”

As she spoke, Hiyori turned to us and deeply bowed her head.

“How selfish, wrapping up our conversation like this. Do we just have to accept the beating along with your baseless suspicions?”

“Could you please forgive us?”

Hiyori took Hashimoto’s complaints head-on. Hashimoto should understand that there was no benefit in dragging this confrontation out any longer.

“Well, it’s not like we were injured. Let’s call it a day this time, Kitō. But, please stop pointlessly doubting us. If you want to doubt us again, before

you come to talk with us, please make sure you have undeniable proof first.”

Hiyori had managed to successfully get the situation under control before things got too out of hand, but now, Class A had gotten to the point where they wouldn’t be able to repair their relationship with the other classes.

PART 7

That night, I made a phone call to Horikita Manabu.

“It’s rather unusual for you to contact me.”

“There’s one thing I wanted to ask you.”

“And what is that?”

I filled him in on what I had noticed after looking at the ID cards of two particular students.

“You sure... you aren’t misunderstanding something there, right?”

He answered back in surprise, as if it was the first time he had heard about it.

“Based on the way you phrased that, the student council... No... Does that mean this has never happened before?”

“Exactly. That is, as long as it’s not a simple mistake.”

Of course, the possibility of it being a mistake couldn't be ruled out completely.

At the same time, it wasn't the type of mistake that would just casually happen.

"Of course, the school is also gradually changing and evolving every year, so this phenomenon that you've noticed is bound to hold at least some meaning. As the first person to notice it, you might just find the knowledge useful in the future."

Even if that future came, if at all possible, I was hoping to have already ended everything without having to put it to use.

"It's highly likely that you first-years will have to finish one more special exam this school year."

The first-years will? Which is to say that the situation is different for students in the other grades?

"At least, that has been the case for all the years so far. While nothing is certain moving forward, if I base my guess on how it's worked in the past, the third-years should have at least two more special exams left to take."

"For you, that's quite the disaster."

If Nagumo were to utilize his influence over all of the second-years and provide assistance to the third-year Class-B students, the elder Horikita may not be in a very safe position.

“It’s certainly a risky, unpredictable situation, but it’s nothing you need to be worrying yourself about.”

As expected of the former student council president, the elder Horikita didn’t seem to feel as though he was in a particularly desperate situation. He had the ability and potential to overcome his current situation and fight on. That was the extent of the confidence that I felt from him.

Said confidence, however, was limited to Horikita Manabu alone.

After all, Nagumo would focus his attacks on weak points that would be easy to exploit, just like how he had targeted Tachibana Akane during the training camp.

“Instead of worrying about me, you should be worrying about the first-years as a whole.”

“If the student council were to provide Nagumo backup, they’d be able to cover up his actions to some degree, right?”

“Ah, that is possible. Of course, if they go too far, the student council may breach the trust of the school and be forcibly disbanded. Though, it is Nagumo we’re talking about. He should be able to cover it up properly. Did you run into any problems regarding Kushida?”

“If you’re asking about that, it’s been taken care of.”

“It seems as though they’re doing something behind the scenes regarding the whole ordeal with Ichinose.”

“I’ll contact you again.”

After I had gotten the information I needed, I cut the call.

PART 8

After that, a few days passed in the blink of an eye.

During that period, the ever-controversial Ichinose continued her string of absences, failing to show up to school even a single time.

However, that changed on February 24th, one day before the end-of-year exam.

Ichinose had finally come to school again. While I personally didn't see her, Ichinose had been absent for more than a week and many people were keeping their eyes on her. The news reached me almost immediately.

That being said, her presence was only truly important for Class B. For Class C, the upcoming end-of-year exam on the 25th was far more important.

“Very good. Ayanokōji. Akito. Haruka. Airi. You've all done excellent.”

During our lunch break, the Ayanokōji Group had gathered around Keisei's desk before class.

We had taken a mock exam that Keisei had made us, and the time had come to hear the results.

It was a voluntary exam that he had us take the night before, all for the sake of testing our true abilities.

“Wow~! Kiyopon you got a 90! Totally awesome!”

In the middle of eating her sandwich, Haruka spoke up, surprised by my result.

“Well, the tests Keisei made were flawless. Didn’t you manage to score about the same?”

While there was some variance in the scores, the three of them had managed to get around an 80.

“If you guys are able to get through both the provisional exam and this mock exam I made, the exam tomorrow won’t be a problem for you at all.”

“If Keisei’s saying something like that, this exam will be a piece of cake.”

Akito rolled his stiff shoulders a few times. He seemed to be pretty fired up.

“Thank you so much Keisei-kun. I’ve been… anxious every time I take an exam...”

“Don’t mention it. This much is the least I can do for all of you.”

A little embarrassed from Sakura and Akito’s words, Keisei lightly scratched the bridge of his nose.

“But are you really sure that we don’t need to do anything else today?”

“You’ve all spent a lot of time studying this past week. Since today is the last day before the real thing, I’d prefer it if all of you took a break. You’ve all studied diligently up to this point, and I don’t think you’ll easily forget anything you’ve learned. Furthermore, it’d be dangerous if you push yourselves to the point where you end up getting sick or for you to doze off during the exam. It’d be a shame if you did worse because of a few careless mistakes.”

“Roger that. I’ll follow your instructions, Yukimū.”

As Haruka responded to Keisei with a weird salute, the others nodded along, agreeing with her words.

Suddenly, a loud noise resounded throughout the classroom as the door was violently flung open from the other side.

“Oh my god! Everyone!”

Just as we were about to enjoy the rest of our lunch...

“Ugh. This is the worst...”

Haruka had dropped her sandwich onto the floor, startled by the sudden noise. She spoke up.

“Hey! What’s wrong with you!”

Without attempting to hide her displeasure, Haruka glared at Ike.

“Something’s going down! A bunch of students from Class A marched into Class B just now!”

Ike spoke, full of momentum.

“With Ichinose-san returning to class, Sakayanagi-san is making her move...”

Mumbling that, Horikita, who was also having lunch in the classroom, stood up in a hurry. Without saying a word to me, she rushed out of the room. Seeing her leave, Sudō, Hirata, and a few others followed after her.

Tomorrow was the end-of-year exam.

If Sakayanagi wanted to make a move, she would have no choice but to make that move today.

To make a direct attack in order to bring down Ichinose after she's come back to school.

“What are you going to do, Akito...?”

“It looks like I don't have any other choice. If it turns into the same type of thing that happened a few days ago, somebody will have to be there to stop it.”

“Well, that *is* right.”

“However... Haruka, Airi. The two of you should stay here. There's no reason for more people to get involved than necessary.”

“Yeah yeah, I get it. We'll take our time and finish lunch.”

“What are you going to do Kiyotaka-kun?”

“I...”

Keisei stood up along with Akito. In this kind of situation, it was hard for me to say that I would stay behind as well.

“I’ll come along just in case. Though, I don’t think that I’ll be much help.”

The three of us left the classroom, heading toward Class B.

The commotion had already spread into the hallway, as people were gathering together.

“What are you doing here, Sakayanagi!?”

As we entered Class B’s classroom, we witnessed Shibata approach Sakayanagi.

“What am I doing here, you ask? Why, I’ve come to rescue everybody in Class B, you know?”

Sakayanagi was accompanied by Kamuro and Hashimoto. There was no sign of Kitō or anyone else from Class A. It wouldn’t have been surprising to run into problems if they had come with a larger group, so they probably decided to make their move with a smaller one.

“I wonder what you mean by that, Sakayanagi-san.”

Ichinose spoke up from deeper within the classroom, surrounded by several of her classmates.

“Wait, Ichinose. You don’t need to get involved with this.”

“Yeah! Don’t do this Honami-chan!”

They surrounded her tightly, trying their best to prevent Ichinose from getting in contact with Sakayanagi.

“To start things out, congratulations on your recovery. In fact, I wanted to reach out to you earlier, but I’ve been quite busy studying for the exam. Nevertheless, I’m quite happy for you. You’re just in time for the end-of-year exam tomorrow.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

The two of them spoke to each other from a distance.

It was perfectly clear that every single student from Class B was looking at Sakayanagi with hostility.

After all, even though it was lunch break, every student from Class B was present.

It was highly likely that the entire class had banded together with the goal of protecting Ichinose.

However, Sakayanagi didn’t seem shaken by their unity at all. Rather, she seemed to be enjoying the feeling of being in enemy territory.

She had anticipated Ichinose’s movements. Given that Ichinose was currently in the middle of a maelstrom of rumors, she had foreseen that Ichinose wouldn’t make use of the cafeteria or other facilities on campus during the lunch break.

“You said you were here to ‘rescue’ us, Sakayanagi?”

“Correct.”

Responding to Kanzaki’s question, Sakayanagi nodded and let show a bright smile.

“Does that mean... you admit to spreading the rumors?”

‘If you came here to apologize, I guess I kind of get what you mean by ‘rescue’.’ Kanzaki mumbled.

“I’m not the one who spread the rumors.”

“...If that’s the case, then what are you getting at?”

“In the past, there were rumors saying that Ichinose-san was maintaining a large sum of points, remember? At the time, the school announced that there was no foul play going on, so those rumors subsided almost immediately.”

“What about it?”

In order to prevent Ichinose from saying anything, Kanzaki responded without missing a beat.

“This may be nothing but my own imagination, but... there are very few methods available for someone to get their hands on such a large sum of points without breaking any rules. For example, one could periodically collect private points from all of their classmates, gathering them together under a single person. In short, they would be playing the role of a bank, and I’ve determined that Ichinose-san is carrying this very responsibility for Class B.”

“That’s not something I can say.”

Kanzaki’s response was only natural. After all, it was directly related to Class B’s internal affairs.

“Indeed. I didn’t come here looking for a response to that in the first place. It’s just that… If, for instance, Ichinose-san truly does play the role of a bank like I’ve surmised… I think that may be a very dangerous situation for all of you.”

As she spoke, Sakayanagi directed her gaze toward Ichinose, who was intently staring back at her.

“.....”

Ichinose did not respond. Instead, she simply continued to return Sakayanagi’s gaze.

“Am I mistaken? *Ichinose Honami-san*?”

Sakayanagi’s question was truly cruel. It had certainly managed to force Ichinose into desperation.

Unable to do anything but respond with silence, Ichinose had finally been cornered, driven to the very brink of a sheer cliff.

With a single push, she’d be sent plummeting to the bottom.

That was the sort of situation that Sakayanagi had created for her.

However, this plan of hers wasn’t going to work.

“Could you give me a little space? Chihiro-chan. Mako-chan.”

“B-but!”

“It’s okay. You don’t need to be worried about me. I’ll be alright.”

With a gentle smile, Ichinose calmly moved forward and closed the distance with Sakayanagi.

Ultimately, Ichinose faced not toward Sakayanagi, but to all of her classmates throughout the classroom.

“...Everyone, I’m sorry!”

Standing before the teacher’s podium, Ichinose bowed her head in apology to the students of Class B.

“W-what are you apologizing for Ichinose? There’s no reason for you to be apologizing, right?”

Shaken from her words, Shibata attempted to interrupt Ichinose’s apology.

“Please don’t try to stop her, Shibata-kun. She was just about to confess.”

Sakayanagi smiled happily.

“This past year... The secret I’ve been hiding all along...”

“Hold on Ichinose. You don’t have to say anything else right now.”

Feeling unsettled, Kanzaki attempted to stop Ichinose from continuing any further once again, but she didn’t back down.

“There have been many strange rumors going around about me these past few weeks, and one of them isn’t just a baseless rumor. Just as it was written in that letter… I am a criminal.”

As Ichinose spoke these words, Sakayanagi showed a satisfied smile.

“Is that true?”

The noisy classroom fell into silence as her words sunk in.

“It seems like these foolishly good-natured classmates of yours have been caught completely unaware, so please, do give them all the details, Ichinose-san. What kind of crime did you commit?”

“I-”

Ichinose stopped and gulped nervously.

“I’ve kept this from all of you… but I’ll confess it all right now.”

Declaring such, Ichinose finally began to speak about the past that she had kept buried within.

“I… was a shoplifter…”

The shoplifting honor student, Ichinose Honami.

In light of her unexpected revelation, the surprise was great enough that it managed to impact spectators outside of Class B, such as Keisei and Akito.

After all, Ichinose really didn’t come across as the type of student who would do such a thing.

“Honami-chan... a shoplifter...? R-really?”

“Yes. I’m sorry Mako-chan.”

While apologizing, Ichinose began to recount her experience with shoplifting.

“I came from a fatherless family, living with my mother and my sister two years younger than me. While we weren’t very well-off, we were never unhappy. My mother had it hard, working full-time as she raised two children all by herself. That’s why, ever since elementary school, I planned to get a job after finishing middle school. After all, it would cost a lot of money to go to high school, so I wanted to find a job to help my mother support my younger sister instead. But, my mother was against it. I think that, just as I, an older sister, sincerely wished for my younger sister’s happiness, my mother wished for the happiness of both of her daughters.”

Ichinose opened up about her past.

“I understood that, even without money, if I studied as hard as possible, I’d be able to make use of the student scholarship system. So, I studied hard. I developed my skills as I managed to reach the top of the school. But... just like that, during the summer of my third year of middle school... my mother pushed herself too hard and collapsed.”

It seemed that, in order to support her family’s livelihood, Ichinose’s mother had overworked herself.

She had given up her own body, all for the sake of raising her children.

“It was almost my younger sister’s birthday. For as long as I could remember, she had never asked for anything from either of us. She was still in her first year of middle school, so it would’ve been acceptable for her to act a little spoiled sometimes, yet she always managed to hold herself back. Instead of getting the clothes she wanted, or accompanying her friends as they played or went shopping together, she just put up with all of it and held herself back from asking for anything. And then, that selfless little sister of mine... expressed that she wanted something for the very first time. A fashionable hair clip that her favorite celebrity wore back then. My mother undoubtedly overloaded her schedule in order to buy my sister that hair clip.”

However- Due to her sudden hospitalization, she was no longer able to get her daughter that birthday present.

“I can still remember everything. My mother, sobbing as she apologized from her bed in the hospital. The face of my sister as she showered our mother with all the ridicule and blame she could produce. The face of my sister as she cried and screamed about the hair clip she was looking forward to getting. Even then, I still wasn’t able to blame her. The only gift she had ever asked for...”

Sakayanagi listened to Ichinose’s confession with an unwavering smile on her face.

“As the elder sister... I thought that I had to find a way to return my sister’s smile. So, after school on the day of her birthday, I went to the department store.”

By now, you could tell that she was just as anxious as she was back then.

“My feelings back then were surely shrouded in darkness. I told myself that it was okay... That it wasn’t a big deal to do something sinful, just once, for the sake of my younger sister. After all, there were so many people in the world constantly doing bad things. The feelings I was holding inside... That there was no reason for *my* family, who had always held back, to be blamed for my actions. I told myself that it would be acceptable, that it would be forgiven... Back then, that was my selfish, egotistical interpretation of reality. The hair clip that would normally cost over 10,000 yen... The hair clip that my sister wanted so desperately... I stole it for her.”

Ichinose spoke as though she was revealing something heavy.

“Even though it was a decision that I knew would make everyone unhappy, I still wanted to do something for my sister.”

That desire of hers was the cause for all of this.

“...But, that’s still no excuse, is it?”

Ichinose mumbled quietly.

“In the end, a crime is a crime. No matter what you do to repent, your sin will never go away.”

She expressed her thoughts in a disconnected manner.



“Are you saying you got caught?”

In response to Hashimoto’s question, Ichinose simply shook her head.

“I just left the department store with the hair clip. It was the first time I ever shoplifted, the first time I ever committed a crime. Nobody found out. Immediately afterward, I went home and presented the hair clip to my sulking little sister. But, because it had just been stolen, it hadn’t been wrapped yet, so it was a really sloppy present. Still, she was so happy. When I saw her smiling face, for an instant, the guilt of what I had just done faded a bit. But, that didn’t last very long. The pounding guilt in my heart just continued to grow.”

Ichinose’s smile was full of self-ridicule.

“After all, doesn’t it seem impossible for a mother to fail to notice when her daughter’s done something sinful? Even though I had told my sister to keep the present a secret, she wore it the next time we went to visit our mother in the hospital. And why wouldn’t she? There was no way my sister would’ve thought that I had stolen it for her. That time... That time was the first time in my life where I had ever seen my mother seriously angry. She slapped me and took the hair clip from my sister. I don’t even think my sobbing little sister understood why. Despite the fact that she had to stay hospitalized, my mother forcibly dragged me back to the store. I prostrated myself, begging for forgiveness. That was the first time I truly understood just what I had done. How heavy of a crime I had committed. No matter how many excuses I make, nothing would ever be able to make up for it.”

This was Ichinose’s past. The past that she had been hiding.

“In the end, the store didn’t hand me over to the police. But, in the blink of an eye, the commotion still spread, so I closed myself off. For almost half of my third year of middle school, I just shut myself up in my room and stayed there... Eventually, I started to think about moving forward once again. It was all because my homeroom teacher told me about this school. The cost of admission and tuition are waived for you, and if you graduate, you can find a job anywhere you want. I wanted to start over. To start over with a blank slate.”

Finished, Ichinose once again bowed her head to her classmates.

“I’m sorry everyone. I’m such a pathetic, useless leader...”

“That’s not true Ichinose.”

Listening from nearby, Shibata spoke up.

“After listening to everything you’ve had to say, I’m sure of it. You’re still a good person.”

“Yeah! Sure, Honami-chan may have done something bad, but-”

The loud, distinct sound of a cane striking the floor echoed throughout the room.

“I will have to interject. Could you all stop being so ridiculous?”

Ichinose’s support was casually brushed aside.

“Really, what a trivial, boorish farce. Are you trying to gain sympathy by bringing up all these needless details about your past? No matter the

circumstances, shoplifting is still shoplifting. There's no place for sympathy. Your theft came from a place of self-interest."

As Sakayanagi spoke, Kamuro, standing right beside her, momentarily showed a stiff expression.

"Yes, I agree with that. The circumstances of my past have nothing to do with it."

"The fact remains: you've committed a *crime*. So, when it comes to the large amount of private points you've been entrusted with, isn't it possible that you'll steal those as well when graduation comes along?"

".....I'd never do something like that, Sakayanagi-san. Disregarding my classmate's intentions in order to get into Class A would be an act of betrayal. I don't think the school would ever allow it."

"I agree. You're a clever one, after all. You'd never use an obvious tactic like that. On the other hand, what if you do this little sympathy-seeking performance again in order to get everyone's permission to go to Class A?"

Sakayanagi was relentless.

"You're right... Maybe... Maybe all my hard work will seem hypocritical, no matter how hard I try. The sin I committed will never disappear."

Her criminal past would always follow her.

After all, the suspicion that she may betray the class someday would always be there.

“Does everyone understand now? This, is the real Ichinose Honami-san. As long as you have this sort of person leading you, Class B doesn’t stand a chance.”

Sakayanagi thoroughly exposed the reality of the situation.

“Take this opportunity to return the private points to your classmates and step down as the leader of Class B. You should at least do that much. If you don’t, the slander about you will not disappear, will it?”

Ichinose calmly closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“What are you going to do, Ichinose?”

Kanzaki spoke as the representative for the rest of Class B, posing the question to her.

The question of whether or not she would continue to lead the class.

A decision that Ichinose would have to make herself.

If this was her first experience with having her spirit crushed, Ichinose may not have been able to endure. She might have decided to give in.

But, Ichinose had already had her spirit broken once before.

Rather, *I was the one who had broken it.*

But now, she had recovered completely.

That broken part of her spirit was now stronger than ever.

“I’ll wrap up my confession with this...”

As she spoke, she turned to face Sakayanagi with a smile.

“I am certainly a shoplifter, and as Sakayanagi-san said, I don’t think there’s any room for sympathy. After all, a crime is a crime, and I have no intention of running away. However, I’ve never been persecuted for it. In other words, there’s effectively no reason for me to atone for my sin now.”

“You have a lot of nerve to say that despite being so shameless just a moment ago. This defiant attitude of yours is quite a big change from what one would expect from a corrupt thief who honestly regrets their mistakes.”

“Maybe so, but I refuse to keep looking back. I won’t let my past control me anymore.”

Turning her smiling face toward her classmates, Ichinose continued.

“Despite being so shameless... everyone, will you follow me until the very end?”

She asked this, and it was followed by a moment of silence.

By no means had her request come from a place of optimism.

She was ashamed of her past and on the verge of bursting into tears. She simply wanted to run away from all of it.

But despite that, she continued to push forward.

She had gone through thick and thin with her classmates for the past year. It was impossible for them to not understand what she was going through.

“You already have our support, right!?”

Shibata shouted with a smile.

At the same time, every single one of his classmates cheered, showcasing the unity of Class B.

This was the extent of the admiration they had for her.

I could feel the weight behind it.

Keisei and Akito also seemed to be taken in by this display of unity, as both of them had delighted expressions.

With the exception of one class in particular, the students from the other classes were also voicing their support.

“Sakayanagi... What now?”

Sakayanagi’s attack had been negated.

Kamuro appeared to understand this as well, which was why she had spoken up. Her question could be interpreted as a request to withdraw.

“Fufufu.”

Sakayanagi laughed.

“Fufufufufufu.”

Then she laughed again, a little bit longer this time.

“I see. It seems you’ve managed to successfully trick your classmates. However, as you said earlier, a criminal’s past doesn’t just disappear. I’m sure that the rumors about you will continue to spread far into the future.”

“Yeah, but I’m not going to run away.”

“Is that so? Then, let’s thoroughly-”

“Alright, that’s enough everyone.”

As Sakayanagi was in the middle of giving a response, two teachers and an upperclassman entered the classroom.

It was the student council president Nagumo, Class B’s homeroom teacher Hoshinomiya, and Chabashira.

“It seems that a few very important people have shown up, but this is a problem that only concerns the first-year students.”

“You’re correct. This dispute *does* only involve the first-years. However, as of today, it is against the rules to spread irresponsible rumors.”

“...What does that mean? I’m not satisfied with this gag order on the rumors about Ichinose-san. Regardless of where they came from, if Ichinose-san was troubled by them, shouldn’t she have reported it to the school herself?”

“You have the wrong idea, Sakayanagi. This problem doesn’t just involve Ichinose anymore.”

Nagumo responded to Sakayanagi's question.

"...What are you saying?"

Just as Nagumo was about to explain, Chabashira intervened instead.

"I won't go into the details, but we've already confirmed that there has been an ongoing exchange of slander amongst the first-year students. There are close to twenty different rumors going around at this point. If this is allowed to continue, it will corrupt the public morals of our school. Rumors are rumors. Regardless of whether or not there's conclusive evidence backing them up, the school doesn't want to see rumors that target specific individuals continue to spread. Therefore, I'll inform all of you right now. Moving forward, anyone found spreading meaningless rumors may be subjected to punishment."

So far, the school had been tolerating the endless spread of rumors, but now they had taken action.

"...I see, so that's how it is."

After hearing Chabashira's explanation, Sakayanagi seemed to understand everything.

"In other words, the school's *finally* taking action."

Horikita drew closer to me after observing the situation and gave me her thoughts.

"This is only an afterthought, but isn't this enough to save each class? Because of the school's intervention, Sakayanagi-san's faction won't be

able to attack Ichinose-san anymore. This should also silence the rumors about Hondō-kun, Shinohara-san, Satō-san, and you that were posted online as well.”

“Right.”

“Sakayanagi-san went a bit too far. She attempted to frame each class with the same strategy at the same time, but it backfired because it attracted the school’s attention. It seems like with this one belligerent move, she managed to outdo herself.”

With that, Horikita fell silent.

Then, for a moment, she continued.

“But-”

“But what?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Horikita didn’t seem to want to say anything further.

“Let’s withdraw here. Now that the school has made their move, our presence is no longer necessary.”

Understanding the situation, Sakayanagi gave the order to withdraw.

At once, the already noisy classroom became even more excited.

Class A had been successfully driven back.

PART 9

Haruka excitedly greeted us as we returned to our own classroom.

“Hey, how’s Class B? It looks like a lot went down.”

“It went in an unexpected direction. Ichinose managed to repel Sakayanagi.”

Akito gave a straightforward account of what had happened.

The truth behind the rumors about Ichinose and the details about the ban the school had placed on spreading rumors moving forward.

“There should be an official warning during class this afternoon.”

“Shoplifting huh? It’s surprising to say the least, but I guess I can accept that. If there’s a past mistake floating around that you don’t want to face, it’s only natural that you would take some time off school like she did.”

Haruka, now fully informed on the specifics of the situation, spoke words of support for Ichinose.

“In any case, the whole ordeal is over with this. We can put all these rumors aside and concentrate on the exam.”

“Isn’t that great Kiyopon?”

“Well... I guess.”

And then, my cellphone rang.

“Who’s calling?”

“A number that I don’t have registered.”

I showed my screen to Haruka and the others. It was a different number from the one that had called me in the dead of night a little while ago.

I got up from my seat, took some distance from everyone else, and answered the call.

“Hello?”

“Is this Ayanokōji-kun?”

I recognized the owner of the voice immediately. It was Sakayanagi.

“How do you know my number...? Well, it’s not too hard to figure out.”

“Yeah. As there are still about ten minutes left before lunch ends, would you mind coming out to meet me for a moment?”

It would’ve been easy to decline, but it also would’ve been troublesome to make time to meet up with her later.

“Where do you want me to go?”

I walked out into the hallway.

“Well, how about in front of the first-floor entryway?”

“Okay.”

I ended the call and headed to the entryway.

I thought that Hashimoto and Kamuro might have come along with her, but Sakayanagi was alone when I arrived there.

“Do rest assured, there’s no one else with me right now. I must say, you’ve really outdone yourself this time, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It seems as though, without me noticing, you’ve gone and made your move behind the scenes. There are still a few unsolved mysteries left, but I’m not interested in talking about what happened back there. That said, there’s one thing that I’ve been curious about. Why did you decide to protect Ichinose-san?”

With that, Sakayanagi stared at me, waiting for my answer.

“Wait. I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“Simply because you saved Ichinose-san, she became defiant… no, she was able to stand back up on her own two feet again. I can’t imagine any other reason for what happened. Perhaps it’s possible that this wasn’t the first time she’s confessed to everything. Perhaps she already told everything to someone beforehand?”

“And you think that someone is me?”

“Precisely.”

It was a completely natural conclusion for her to arrive at.

“Didn’t you use Kamuro to force me to take action?”

“Use Kamuro-san?”

“Before Ichinose’s past as a shoplifter was revealed, she told me everything.”

“That was something she did of her own accord.”

“No, that’s not true.”

“What makes you so sure?”

It seemed like, for some reason, she wanted to see what information I already had.

“She presented me with a can of alcohol as proof of her shoplifting. But, she hadn’t stolen it that day. Kamuro had stolen it when she first enrolled here.”

“And what’s the basis for that?”

“The sell-by date. After I saw the sell-by date on the beer that Kamuro showed me, I went to the convenience store and compared it with the beer there. The sell-by date of the cans on sale in the convenience store and the can she gave me differed by more than four months. It’s difficult to imagine that the can of beer she grabbed just so happened to be four months older than the rest of them. Kamuro said that you had received the can of beer she had stolen in the past, telling her that you would dispose of it. If that’s true, she either gave me a can that the two of you had prepared for me ahead of time, or she got in touch with you after she left my room and got the can from you directly.”

Back then, Kamuro getting in touch with me and speaking about Ichinose's past was all within my assumptions.

"Why would I go about things in such an indirect manner?"

"To lure me out, right?"

"Fufufu. Perhaps an 'as expected of Ayanokōji-kun' is in order here."

"In this case, it would've been easy for me to sit back and do nothing. Rather, that's what I had wanted to do in the beginning."

The one that prevented me from doing so was none other than Sakayanagi herself.

She had brought Ichinose down with her own hands, and then went and offered her a hand of support immediately after.

Of course, she had utilized a very roundabout means of doing so.

"It was all for the sake of getting you involved, Ayanokōji-kun."

Cane in hand, Sakayanagi slowly walked forward, shortening the distance between the two of us.

"It didn't matter to me if Ichinose-san broke down along the way, but if there was even a slight chance that you may decide to intervene, I was hoping that you would seize the opportunity to do so. The odds were only about fifty-fifty, but... I got the outcome that I was hoping for in the end."

In other words, for Sakayanagi, Ichinose's existence didn't matter at all.

“Let’s have a competition, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“What if I say no?”

“While you may claim that it wouldn’t cause much damage, I’d expose you as the mastermind leading Class C from the shadows. You should be able to understand that if I did something like that, you wouldn’t be able to resolve everything with a couple of rumors.”

Even though the school had officially placed a restriction on spreading rumors, Sakayanagi would probably still spread that information without hesitation.

“So how about it? Not willing to accept?”

“What would we compete over? You’re in Class A, I’m in Class C. The difference between us is obvious.”

“I don’t know anything about what the next exam may entail, but how about we compete over the rankings? Should you win, I’ll promise not to divulge your past to anyone moving forward.”

While that condition wasn’t too bad, there was no guarantee that she would keep to her word. I didn’t have any intention of signing an agreement or vocally recording my consent on the matter either.

“You don’t believe me, do you? But it doesn’t seem like you have any other choice but to trust what I’m saying. If you don’t, your past will be exposed under broad daylight. It would become difficult for you to live an ordinary life.”

“Do whatever you want. Just know that if that happens, you’ll never be able to have your face off against me.”

“...Fufu. That’s right, isn’t it? That’s exactly what I’d expect you to say.”

Sakayanagi herself should know that I wouldn’t easily agree to face off against her.

Which was why, so far, Sakayanagi had yet to talk to anybody about my past.

“So what if I wager that I would drop out of school myself? Furthermore, you can have my father, the chairman of the school, act as a guarantor for our contest.”

Sakayanagi gave off an air of absolute confidence.

“Of course, even if you should lose to me, I wouldn’t require for you to drop out as well. I don’t intend to ask for anything special either. I would, however, announce to the school that you’re the mastermind behind Class C. If I don’t have you risk at least that much, you might just withdraw from the contest altogether.”

She looked at me with an expecting expression.

“If you’re really alright with those conditions, I’ll agree to it.”

“Thank you very much, Ayanokōji-kun. With this, at last, my boring school life will come to an end.”

With a content smile, Sakayanagi took her leave.

I decided to make a call to the central figure behind this entire incident.

Not Kei, not Horikita, and not her older brother either.

“I was just thinking it was about time for you to get in contact with me.

Good evening, Ayanokōji-kun.”

CHAPTER 7:

HOW IT ALL WORKS

PART 1

It all began on Friday, February 11th, the day when the letters declaring that Ichinose was a criminal were discovered.

It was after Ichinose had seen the letters, and Kamuro had come to my room to tell me about her past with shoplifting.

I decided to make a move of my own against Sakayanagi's strategy. In order to carry it out, that evening, I called a particular schoolgirl and asked her to come and meet up with me in my room.

And then, the appointed time came. Instead of the sound of the doorbell, a light knocking echoed throughout the room.

As the door was already unlocked, I just opened it up right away.

The faint scent of flowers tickled my nose as cold air came flowing in from the hallway.

“Good evening, Ayanokōji-kun.”

Because it was around midnight, Kushida's voice was a bit softer than usual.

"Sorry for calling you at such a bad time. If you don't mind, please come in."

"Are you sure?"

"It would be cold if we stayed by the front door."

"Yeah. Thank you then."

For a girl to enter a boy's room in the dead of night.

Furthermore, to be completely alone with him. Generally speaking, it would be entirely understandable for her to turn down such an offer.

Despite all of that, Kushida came in without hesitation.

"Ayanokōji-kun. It's a little early, but this is for you."

From the inside pocket of her coat, she took out a box of chocolates that had been tied up with a pink ribbon.

"Are you sure?"

"I'll have quite a lot to give out on the 14th, so I've been giving them out early when I have the chance."

Since that was the case, I accepted it gratefully. There wasn't any reason to refuse.

“So what did you want to talk about? It’s unusual for you to ask me to come by this late at night.”

If it was something casual, it would’ve been fine to talk in the morning or during the day. It was only natural for her to be suspicious.

“There’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Really...?”

A bit surprised, Kushida continued.

“I thought you hated me and didn’t want to discuss things with me anymore.”

“It’s not that I hate you. I just thought that you’d rather avoid interacting with me.”

“Ahahaha! I see! Well, that *is* true.”

She responded, laughing not as the Kushida she showed to the public, nor the Kushida she kept hidden within, but from somewhere in between.

“But don’t you have Horikita-san? Isn’t she far more reliable than someone like me?”

“I can’t rely on anyone else, you’re the only one I can ask for this.”

“While I don’t know if I’ll be able to help, I can definitely hear you out. Though, what do you mean by ‘I’m the only one you can ask’?”

She tilted her head, seeming to not have the faintest clue as to why I would want to talk to her.

“I want some personal information about various first-year students. Information they’d be embarrassed about if it became public. In other words, I want you to tell me their secrets.”

“...What do you mean?”

The smiling expression on her face didn’t fade, but the smile in her eyes vanished.

“You’ve said it before. That you already have enough information to cause the class to collapse. This doesn’t just include Class C, but students from the other classes as well.”

Kushida, who constantly plays the role of a popular person with a good personality, would often have others consult with her to talk about their issues.

She should have a noteworthy amount of information about the students from the other classes, even if it still dwarves in comparison to what she has on the students in Class C.

“And why does Ayanokōji-kun want to know such a thing?”

“Are you aware that Ichinose is suffering because of the rumors right now?”

“Yes. Like how today there were those terrible letters...”

“It’s all for the sake of putting a stop to those rumors.”

“Hmm, well, I don’t really get it. Is that *your* intention, Ayanokōji-kun? Or is it-”

“This has nothing to do with Horikita.”

“Hmmmm? You’re quite compassionate. You did help Sudō-kun back then, after all.”

Of course, Kushida knew about the actions I had taken to prevent Sudō’s expulsion shortly after we had enrolled here.

“However, are you saying that learning someone else’s personal information is related to stopping the rumors?”

“Yeah.”

“I still don’t get it. If you spread rumors that hurt a lot of people, won’t the situation become much more volatile than it is right now? Or is it fine as long as the rumors aren’t focused on Ichinose-san?”

Saving one person at the cost of many. She might have thought of it as that sort of strategy.

While that way of thinking was correct, she was mistaken.

She continued speaking.

“I’m on good terms with Ichinose-san as well. If there’s anything I can do for her, I’d want to do that. Sure, maybe I’ve heard a couple more secrets than the average person. But, that’s also why I’m not able to say them easily. After all, they’re secrets that I’ve been confided with under the premise that I won’t go around sharing them with others.”

Of course, her response was completely natural.

Hardly anyone would be happy to find out that someone had shared their personal secrets with the rest of the world.

That being the case, one might think that it's better not to share anything personal with anyone, but human beings aren't that simple.

They choose to share their secrets with family, close friends, and lovers. After all, everybody wants to share their feelings with someone.

"I can't just betray my friends. Besides, even if I cooperate with you for Ichinose-san's sake, wouldn't they find out that I'm the one who leaked the rumors?"

"Of course. In order to avoid that, it's necessary that we're selective with the rumors we end up using."

Heavy secrets, like those that had only been shared with Kushida, couldn't be used.

On the other hand, if the rumors are simple enough that all of their friends know about them, then they wouldn't hold any weight. The important point was that some, but not many, already know the secrets. We'd have to balance it perfectly.

"Do you think that I would betray my friends and cooperate with a strategy I don't even understand?"

"It won't be easy."

If I didn't know anything about the dark side of Kushida, there would be no room for negotiations.

After all, it was highly unlikely that Kushida, who always plays the role of an angel, would want to assist with a scheme to trap others.

However, because I knew about Kushida's dark side, there was some leeway.

"If you can provide me with the information I want, I'll be willing to do something for you as compensation."

"Compensation?"

"I intend to answer your desires to the best of my ability."

"Are you saying that you'll get me what I want?"

"Put bluntly, that's exactly what I'm saying."

"There's no guarantee that you'll keep to your word. You're allied with Horikita-san, after all."

"Then you should consider this conversation we're having right now as insurance."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't need to spell it out for you, you know exactly what I'm talking about, don't you?"

I briefly directed my gaze toward the pocket of Kushida's outfit.

“Hmmmm?”

She continued to pretend that she didn’t understand, so I pushed the matter a step further.

“Even if I don’t say anything, you should probably understand. A cell phone... Voice recorder... Maybe even both?”

There was no way that she wouldn’t try to take advantage of this conversation.

“So you already knew? That I’ve been recording?”

“After I considered who I was dealing with, I figured that you would at least do that much.”

“But you were sure of it, weren’t you?”

She attempted to change tracks, thinking that I was trying to bait her with a trick question.

“If you had to cut out the parts that are inconvenient to you, it would lower the authenticity of the recording. Ideally, you would want to keep the data intact as much as possible. And for that to work, it would be necessary for you to curb your own behavior.”

Kushida had been carefully choosing her words to be as polite as possible ever since she arrived at my room.

That way there wouldn’t be any fault with her behavior, even in the off chance that something went wrong later on.

“For you to determine it with just that... Not bad.”

Kushida took out her cell phone, letting me see the screen as she stopped the recording.

“Well, the recording is over. Ahhh, how uncomfortable.”

With that, Kushida completely did away with the gentle atmosphere that had been filling the room.

“I was vaguely aware of this already, but you helped Horikita-san back then, didn’t you?”

“I’ll admit that I gave Horikita some ideas.”

“Well, let’s just put that aside for now. I’ll always be able to hear about it when we’re done with this.”

She said, taking us back to the topic at hand.

“So, how do you intend to use another person’s personal information to stop the rumors about Ichinose-san?”

Getting to the point, Kushida switched gears and adopted a listening posture.

“That is- by getting the ever-watchful school involved.”

“Involving the school...?”

“Currently, Ichinose has been keeping silent about the rumors, refusing to take action against them. So naturally, the school hasn’t done anything in

response.”

“Is it okay to make that assumption? It’s possible that the school will still do something to stop the rumors, isn’t it?”

“Sorta. Even if her homeroom teacher knows about her situation, the fact that the school still hasn’t taken action is because Ichinose herself hasn’t been asking for it in the first place. So, we should just escalate the issue to the point where they can no longer quietly sit back and watch. If we do, the school should definitely start to take the situation more seriously.”

Even if the school’s isolated from the rest of the world, the age of being able to cover everything up has come to an end.

If there were constant reports of slander amongst the school’s student body, causing dropouts, or potentially even rumors of suicide, the school would see its social status and honor disappear almost immediately.

Schools would never be able to ignore a problem that may turn into a case of bullying.

Naturally, Sakayanagi’s attacks were just barely toeing the line of what was acceptable.

In which case, I would just have to go behind the scenes and push it over that very line.

And as a result, the whole situation with the rumors would start to die down. That was the plan.

“Not everyone will be able to keep silent like Ichinose-san, so you’re saying that you’ll have other students go and cry to the school instead?”

“Exactly. Plus, even if nobody else reaches out to the school, the end-of-year exams are right around the corner. The rumors should help create an extremely tense, irritated atmosphere. Small fights or quarrels may end up taking place as well.”

“And as a result, the school won’t be able to sit back and watch anymore... is what you’re getting at?”

Select a few people from each class and spread an intricate mix of truths and lies about them.

It’s possible that over half of the students targeted by the rumors will speak out and deny them.

It’s even possible that nobody would end up admitting to the rumors at all.

But, that would only go to show that there may be some truth hidden within the rumors in the first place.

“We would also have another advantage. Given the current situation, Class A would be the first suspect if new rumors show up.”

Because the Sakayanagi camp had spread rumors in order to entrap Ichinose, they would immediately notice the influence of an outside party.

However, even if they notice it, there wasn’t anything they could do about it.

Even if they devoted all of their energy toward denying these new rumors, they still wouldn't be able to deny that they had spread rumors in the past. Due to that, they wouldn't be able to avoid shouldering most of the suspicion.

With this in mind, Kushida appeared to have understood where I was going with all of this.

“But, how do you plan to spread so many rumors? It’s not easy.”

“How will I spread the rumors? With the school forums.”

“By forums, are you referring to the ones in the school’s app? You do know that nobody uses those, right? Besides, if the school is forced into action, won’t they punish the people responsible for spreading the rumors? Even though you can post to the forums anonymously, won’t the school immediately be able to tell who posted the rumors?”

Kushida asked me one question after another.

“Those risks have all been taken into consideration.”

“In other words... In the worst case scenario, you’re prepared to take on the blame for spreading the rumors?”

“Yeah. And should that happen, I wouldn’t say anything about your involvement at all.”

Of course, I had already thought of countermeasures just in case it came out that I was involved, but it wasn’t certain whether or not it would get to that point yet.

In the first place, I never intended to post anything on the forums that could be traced back to me.

“There are still risks in this for me.”

“That’s true. If it’s traced back to me, the fact that I know so much about the internal affairs of other students would seem unnatural. It’s possible that some students will think that I got my information from someone else.”

The one thing I had to be careful of at this point was to avoid conducting myself too perfectly in front of Kushida.

It was important for her to think that I was overlooking a few things here and there.

“In order to make things more acceptable for you, we’ll have to carefully select which rumors we end up using.”

“...Yeah. Ayanokōji-kun’s goal is clear to me at this point. I’ll consider it. My cooperation will depend on our conversation moving forward.”

Her words were another way of saying that she still hadn’t been convinced just yet.

“It depends on whether or not I come to accept your conditions? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Exactly.”

It would be difficult to carry out this operation without Kushida.

While it would be possible to just make up a bunch of lies, that wouldn't be enough to cause discomfort within everyone's hearts.

By weaving a countless number of truths into the mix, it would be enough to make people anxious of their surroundings.

And that anxiety would be the source of the fire that would spread shortly after.

“Then, what are your conditions?”

Of course, if the conditions she put forward were unacceptable, then negotiations would break down.

“Horikita Suzune’s withdrawal from school.”

“Unacceptable.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

Kushida’s greatest desire.

She knew it wouldn’t happen, but she mentioned it just in case.

“Having you dropout would be the same, right?”

“That would be even more unacceptable than having Horikita dropout.”

“Ahaha.”

Kushida laughed, finding my response just a little amusing.

“But there’s nothing else I want.”

“In which case, how about I make a suggestion?”

I decided to offer her some conditions myself.

“Alright. What is it?”

“I’ll give you half of all of the private points I get moving forward.”

“What? Isn’t that the same deal that Ryūen made...?”

As expected, Kushida knew the details of the agreement that Ryūen had made with Class A.

“Yeah, you can think of it as the same agreement. Of course, if needed, I can show you the log of deposits and withdrawals in my account every month so you can be certain that I’m not scamming you. With this, by the time you graduate, you’ll receive hundreds of thousands to a few million private points. It’s an exceptional price for the information you’d be giving up.”

There was a brief silence as Kushida considered the offer.

“It’s certainly not a bad offer. But, unfortunately, I’m currently not in dire need for more private points. It can never hurt to have more money, but I already have plenty.”

Kushida had obtained a very large sum of points during the special exam on the cruise ship.

It can be inferred that, even if she had used those points extravagantly to some extent, she would still have more than enough left over now.

However, at the end of the day, the easiest and most efficient way to negotiate is with money.

“Even if there’s enough to use leisurely, there’s nothing wrong with holding onto more points in case of an emergency. I believe Chabashira-sensei said it as well. That private points are indispensable when it comes to protecting yourself.”

If you think of them as your own insurance, it would be better to hold onto each and every point you could.

“This proposal of yours... No matter how I look at it, you’re putting yourself at a disadvantage, Ayanokōji-kun. If this was an emergency where you were at risk of dropping out of school, I guess I could understand? But, it’s strange that you’re willing to sacrifice half of your own soul for the sake of saving Ichinose-san.”

“I like Ichinose.”

“Jokes like that aren’t necessary.”

I had thought that she would laugh, but Kushida didn’t show any signs of it.

“Then I’ll tell you the truth. It would certainly hurt to lose half of my private points. But, that’s exactly how I’ll be able to protect myself.”

“What are you getting at?”

“I’m one of the people you want to see drop out of school. I don’t know when I’ll be stabbed in the back. In other words, it’s my defense plan.”

“Your point is that if you start to supply me with your private points, your existence will become beneficial to me, is that what you’re getting at?”

“Yeah. Being your enemy is troublesome. I think it’s well worth giving you half.”

It was an arrangement that would be concluded with the provision of private points.

As long as neither of us betrays the other, she would receive a continuous supply of private points.

These conditions were definitely not bad for her.

“...I see.”

After considering it for a bit, Kushida came to a conclusion.

“Alright, I’m on board. The strict condition is that I don’t antagonize Ayanokōji-kun, is that all? Don’t you want to add some kind of guarantee for Horikita-san as well?”

“I’m not that greedy. It would be troublesome if I were to also ask for Horikita’s protection and negotiations were to break down.”

“Those are immensely attractive conditions aren’t they?”

“If you’re worried about making a verbal agreement, would you rather I provide you with something in writing?”

“No, that won’t be necessary.”

Kushida reached into her pocket... and took out a voice recorder.

Two recordings. She had been recording with not only her cell phone, but with a backup recorder as well.

“I have all the evidence I need right here. If you betray me at all... you know what will happen, yes?”

“Yeah.”

If I were to break our agreement, in the worst case, she could bring this conversation to the attention of the school.

It would then be possible for her extort points from me without making the matter public.

“As expected, Ayanokōji-kun is completely different from Horikita-san.”

Give and take.

It was impractical for the other party to believe in you with a relationship built upon emotion alone.

Unlike emotion, invisible to the naked eye, numbers can be seen and verified.

Horikita’s way of doing things was by no means inferior.

There are times when relationships supported by emotion outperform relationships built upon numbers and agreements.

In this case, however, the hurdle for that was extremely high.

The very method of attempting to persuade Kushida to endure her own feelings of malice was a mistake in and of itself.

“But is it really fine for you to give me half?”

“If the amount is too low, it wouldn’t leave an impression on you.”

Of course, continuously handing out so many private points would become a heavy burden for me.

However, *that problem* would be handled soon enough.

“We’ve finished our negotiations, so is it alright if you tell me what I want to know now?”

“Sure. What type of stuff are you looking for?”

“Crimes or even embarrassing information about someone’s past, either would be fine. Generally speaking, something that would cause problems if it was made public.”

“Sure. I’ll tell you properly then.”

Amused by the situation, Kushida began to share the secrets she had accumulated over the last year.

She led with things like crushes and who certain people hated, and then went into students’ family circumstances and past acts of delinquency.

She spoke energetically.

Even at this stage, she was unaware of my true intentions.

Saving Ichinose.

Responding to Sakayanagi's provocation.

Diverting Hashimoto's attention away from me.

The looming threat of Nagumo.

All of these things were nothing more than one piece of the puzzle.

There was only one thing I truly wanted to ascertain from our interaction here...

The quantity and quality of information held by Kushida Kikyō. All for the sake of removing her from the school.

Although her removal may sound simple, it would be troublesome if I were to go about it the wrong way.

It was essential for me to gauge how powerful of a bomb she was holding.

To gauge Kushida's overwhelming network of information.

To gauge the scrutiny of that information.

Who she had heard the rumors from, what kind, and how many people knew about them.

She had a terrifying understanding of the character and personalities of the students around her. It could be that, at least among the first years, there was nobody in the school who could approach Kushida's mastery of information.

This was the outstanding ability Kushida had cultivated, all for the sake of protecting herself and her image as a noble existence.

“I see...”

“Was that useful?”

Of course, the information she had just shared with me was only the tip of the iceberg.

“For Class C, I want to spread the information about Satō and Hondō.”

“That’s fine I guess. Satou-san’s dislike of Onodera is already relatively well-known.”

She inferred that it was only a matter of time until it reached Onodera’s ears anyway.

“I also have a bad personality, but it’d be good for you to remember that’s just how girls are.”

With that, Kushida took out her cell phone and opened her messaging app. Her sheer number of friends couldn’t even be compared with mine, and the number of group chats she was in was enormous.

“For example, there’s this group chat, we’ll call it group A, which was made by some of the girls from our class. There are six people in it, right? But, as a matter of fact, there’s a second group chat, made by the same girls. Let’s call that one group B. Just so you know, there’s one person who wasn’t included in that second group, a girl named Nene.”

Mori Nene, one of the friends from Kei’s group.

“You’re saying that Mori isn’t liked very much?”

“Exactly. If group A contains the feelings they show on the surface, group B contains the true feelings they’re hiding underneath. Sometimes, they’ll come together just to badmouth Nene. I, of course, never take part in something so careless. There may be a smiling, close relationship on the surface, but deep down, everybody has someone they hate. It’s totally normal for girls to come together just to badmouth somebody. Anyway, when it comes to two-faced groups like this, there aren’t just one or two of them. As far as I know, there are dozens.”

Apparently satisfied with saying something she wouldn’t normally be able to say, Kushida stood up.

“It’s late, I’m going home. I’m looking forward to the outcome of our agreement, Ayanokōji-kun.”

Kushida turned her back to me and began to put her shoes on by the front door.

“Kushida.”

“Hm?”

“You’ve been a great help today.”

“Oh no, it was nothing. Well, good night Ayanokōji-kun. Please treat me well from now on.”

This conversation had been my chance to hear about Kushida’s proximity to Nagumo.

However, I deliberately didn’t ask about that matter.

The fact that Nagumo and Kushida had come into contact with each other was something I had learned coincidentally. There was no reason to not make use of it.

Thus, with Kushida’s intelligence as the source, I started preparing the rumors I’d be spreading for each class.

PART 2

February 14th, Valentine’s day. This was the day that, during my lunch break, I decided that I would deal with Hashimoto’s persistent after-school stalking sessions. I had predicted that Kei would give me Valentine’s chocolate, so I opted to take advantage of it.

If Kei were to give me chocolate, it would have to be either in the early morning or the evening after, not during the day while we were at school. As she had only just broken up with Hirata, there was no reason for her to

carry chocolates around in her bag. For her, the mere act of handing chocolates to someone would be enough to cause an uproar in the first place. So, I had intentionally turned off my cell phone the night before.

The chance of her carelessly coming into contact with me was effectively zero. Still, I opted to turn the phone off anyway in order to avoid having to make an excuse about the morning being an inconvenient time. Everything had to be completely natural when we met.

For Hashimoto, the lack of results from tailing me should've begun to gnaw at his patience at this point.

So, I decided to give him a hint that something was going to happen.

And that, was the secret meeting with Kei and subsequent exchange of chocolate. The reason why the meet-up was scheduled at five was because Hashimoto's tailing sessions always lasted until just before six. And, sure enough, Hashimoto was watching, keeping tabs on me with the lobby surveillance cameras as I left the building.

Ever since he had started tailing me, this was his first inexplicable opportunity to make contact, so he boldly confronted the two of us in person. Well, the result would've been the same even if he had simply sat back and watched.

Hashimoto seemed satisfied with the conclusion that Kei might have been the person I had been regularly coming into contact with.

And the day after that, Hashimoto's stalking sessions stopped. He had shifted his attention toward preparations for the end-of-year exam.

I was finally able to move freely.

I went to the school with the Valentine's chocolate I had received from Kei still in my bag.

I met up with Hiyori Shiina at the library. Of course, the majority of our conversation consisted of idle chatter about various books.

However, my true focus was on something else entirely.

Our conversation was just a preface for the countless rumors that would spread the following day.

Rumors about Ichinose aside, Class A may be trying to pull another stunt entirely.

This was the seed that I had planted, and a few days later, that seed began to bear fruit. By purposefully selecting the belligerent Ishizaki and Ibuki as targets for the rumors, it would ideally create a volatile situation. However, that was just a bonus. Even if it had ended up developing differently, it would all turn out pretty much the same way in the end.

The truly important part came afterward. Namely, when and how the messages would be posted on the forums.

I got in contact with the person I had selected to solve these problems, vice president Kiriyama.

A second year Class B student aiming for Nagumo's downfall.

After chatting with Hiyori at the library, I met Kiriyama at the school building after most of the students had already gone home for the day.

I revealed my entire plan, my strategy to save Ichinose.

“I see. So you’re telling me to post the rumors with my own phone? There’d be no benefit in that for me at all.”

“That’s not true. There are benefits in this for you. Acting as my intermediary in this will create a new relationship for the two of us. If I were to keep waiting for you to take action, our relationship would never move forward.”

In fact, Kiriyama had never once asked anything of me.

“Of course it wouldn’t, I seriously doubt your abilities.”

“Yes. Which is why, you shouldn’t only return the favor, but also make the other party owe you one. That way, in the off chance that an emergency takes place later on, it’ll be easier for you to rely on me. Besides, making the post on the forums wouldn’t be all bad for you.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Ichinose Honami is a valuable asset for the student council. It would be unfortunate for you to lose her. If you post the rumors on the forums, you’d be able to ensure her safety by getting the school involved.”

“But if I involve myself with a first-year problem and post the rumors, it would bring the credibility of the student council into question.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“What...?”

“If the credibility of the student council falls, president Nagumo would take more damage than anyone else. If you want to see his downfall, shouldn’t you be welcoming my proposal?”

“How stupid. It would be a huge problem if it was discovered that I was the one who posted the rumors. Not only would I be penalized by the school, but Nagumo might even relieve me of my position as vice president.”

“Can’t you just muddle through such a small issue with some tact? You are competing against president Nagumo, aren’t you? Or, are you saying that you’re already incapable of opposing the student council president?”

“What would a mere first-year like you know...!?”

Kiriyama glowered at me, his eyes full of rage.

“According to the former student council president, Kushida has already established contact with president Nagumo.”

“Why do you..... Horikita-senpai’s really placed a lot of trust in someone like you, hasn’t he?”

“She’s one of the most well-informed students in her school-year. So in other words, the rumors spread on the forums could be explained as a strategy designed for Kushida to leak information to president Nagumo. An excuse like this would also be easily accepted by others.”

The excuse that Kushida had provided the information to Nagumo, who then instructed Kiriyama to use it to save Ichinose.

This new, unexpected solution slowly began to take shape.

“... You’re telling me that you contacted me after thinking that far ahead?”

Kiriyama was lost in thought, imagining what would happen should he actually make the posts on the forums.

But, this still wouldn’t be enough to get his consent.

“If you turn me down here, I’ll be forced to conclude that you’ve given in to Nagumo. Or perhaps... I’ll report to the former student council president that you’re just another person who’s already been won over instead?”





This could've come off as a threat, but it was the deciding factor when it came to getting Kiriyama to cooperate.

“So will you do it?”

“...When should I post the messages?”

“Right here, right now.”

If it was put off until later, he might end up posting the messages with someone else's cell phone.

Of course, that wouldn't change anything, but I wanted to avoid any uncertainties in my future plans as much as possible.

Above all, it was necessary to keep in mind the possibility of Kiriyama leaking this matter to a third party as well.

“Alright. You owe me big time.”

“Thank you very much.”

I showed Kiriyama all of the rumors that I had written down in my phone and had him type them all out by hand.

After about ten minutes of work, the operation was complete.

There probably wouldn't be any students noticing them right away, but that problem would be addressed tomorrow.

PART 3

Thus, all the groundwork had been put in place.

There was only one thing left to do: crush Ichinose Honami's spirit.

After all, it was clear that Sakayanagi would move to crush it herself before long.

Sakayanagi's strategy was working beautifully, as Ichinose's string of absences continued even after she was thought to have gotten over her illness.

It was February 18th, the day of the conflict between Class D and Class A.

It had already been five days since her health had taken a turn for the worse, yet Ichinose was still absent from school.

She should've already recovered from her illness, but had she managed to overcome the trauma to her spirit?

After learning that she was absent yet again, I decided to get in touch with her.

However, if I attempted to see her after school or during a break, there was a high chance someone would notice.

So I decided to go during the middle of the day on a weekday, when the dorm was mostly empty.

I didn't contact her by phone ahead of time.

I didn't intend to give her a way out.

Arriving in front of Ichinose's room, I rang the doorbell.

"I have something I want to say. Can you come out?"

After a while, a response came from inside.

"I'm sorry Ayanokōji-kun. You went to the trouble of coming to see me, but would you please come back again sometime later?"

Her voice was lacking ambition, but, as I had thought, it didn't sound as though she was still suffering from a cold.

"Were those letters that important to you?"

Ichinose didn't respond to that question.

I sat down with my back to the door.

"Will you be coming to school on Monday?"

"...Sorry. I don't know."

With the exception of questions that strike at the heart of the matter, she seemed to be tentatively willing to respond.

"I have some time until lunch break is over. I'll be staying here for a little while."

Then, I just continued to sit quietly until the last moment possible.

"Well, I'll be heading back to school."

“I... just need a little more time. When I’m a bit more put together, I’ll definitely come to school again. So please, just stop coming...”

After hearing Ichinose’s strained response, I went back to school.

PART 4

The weekend passed and it was now Monday the 21st. The end-of-year exam was set to begin on Friday of this week.

But, Ichinose still failed to show up at school.

Meanwhile, Kanzaki, Shibata, and her other close friends were attempting to contact her via text message, phone call, and email.

They had been doing this for a while.

Even so, based on the fact that nobody had come to see her after school, she had probably given them all a warning to stay away in the same way I had been.

I slipped away from the school building during lunch break and went to the dorms, where I made another visit to Ichinose’s room.

I knocked gently and called out to her without waiting for a reply.

“I heard you’re taking today off as well?”

She had asked me not to come back anymore, and yet I came anyway. It was a reckless act that ignored her warning.

This time, there was no response from Ichinose.

I didn't say anything else. I just sat with my back to her door until the end of the lunch break, just like I had done the week before.

PART 5

The same thing happened on Tuesday. The exposition is no longer necessary.

After confirming that Ichinose was absent yet again, I went to her room.

She wouldn't be able to hate one of her own classmates, but I was a student in another class. I had nothing to lose, even if she broke off all relations with me. This was the primary reason behind why I was being so aggressive.

There wasn't much time left before the end-of-year exam.

In this situation, it was possible that these absences would continue even on the day of the exam.

No, even if she showed up on the day of the exam, her classmates would already be suffering from a great deal of stress. It was entirely possible that their scores would suffer from it.

In which case, even if nobody ended up having to drop out, it would still have a large impact on their class points.

It was necessary to have Ichinose come to school on Thursday to bring some peace of mind to the rest of Class B.

Thinking about it this way, the time limit was tomorrow.

PART 6

In the end, the time limit crept closer. In the blink of an eye, it was already Wednesday.

I gripped a can of coffee I had bought from the convenience store in my hand. It was so cold that I could see my breath in the air.

And today, yet again, I wouldn't be pressing the matter any further.

It was because Ichinose herself already knew that this was the last day she would be able to stay cooped-up in her room.

She would definitely take action.

I was certain of it.

“February is ending soon. After we overcome next month's special exam, we'll officially become second-years. There's a proverb ‘when the heat has passed, you forget about the shade of trees’, but is that really true?”

The Deserted Island Special Test. The Cruise Ship Special Test. Paper Shuffle. The school had been repeatedly having us undergo peculiar exams one after another.

“When we become second-years, I wonder if the special exams will become even stranger than they are now?”

“...Hey... Can I ask you something...?”

For the first time in a while, Ichinose spoke up, albeit with a quiet voice, as though she was talking to herself.

“Sure. As long as you’re alright with asking through the door, you can ask anything.”

I welcomed her question with open arms, but Ichinose didn’t ask anything right away.

It might have been the first time she’s said anything in the past few days.

“Why haven’t you been saying anything to me, or asking me anything?”

“Meaning?”

“My classmates... My friends in the other classes... Everyone’s been trying to convince me to return to school, telling me: If you have something troubling you, please come and talk to us about it. And yet, Ayanokōji-kun, you’ve never asked me anything like that, all while coming by to visit me every single day... Why?”

It didn’t seem like she wanted the other students to worry about her.

She couldn’t understand why I was skipping my classes or wasting my lunch break to come and see her every day.

“Compared to someone like me, students who are far more worried about you have already tried to convince you many times now. My human relations are so shallow that if I tried to appeal to you with my emotions, I don’t think it would resonate with you very well.”

I could hear the faint sound of footsteps from within the room.

I had the feeling that she sat with me, the door the only thing between us.

“Maybe, I’ve been coming here every day because I’ve been waiting for you to tell me everything.”

“Waiting for me... to tell you...?”

I decided to step into her personal life for the first time.

“I already know about the crime you’ve committed.”

“...!”

“That being said, I’m still unaware of the bigger picture. Only the part from when Sakayanagi started everything until you took time off school. I already understand how much pressure you’ve been putting on yourself, Ichinose. Though, it’s useless for me to be saying these things now.”

“Why... do you know?”

“That isn’t very important right now. I have no intention of going into the details.”

If Ichinose didn’t want to talk about it, I would simply end the conversation there.

“You’re probably not very good at confiding your troubles in others. You save others, but you can’t save yourself. That’s why I’m here.”

The feelings I had wanted to convey should’ve gradually made their way to Ichinose.

There was a brief silence.

When you want to pour out your feelings, it’s painful when there isn’t anyone you can talk with.

I had seen countless children suffering from this very problem in the White Room.

They eventually broke down and disappeared. A group of people beyond hope of recovery.

“I am your door now. You can’t see my face, and you can’t touch me. I’m just a door. You can let out your weakness to me without anyone laughing at you.”

There was a clunk as I set my can of coffee down on the ground beside me.

“What will you do Ichinose? This is your moment.”

Ichinose Honami’s close friends are modest, quiet people. It’s not hard to imagine that they’ve been trying to offer Ichinose a constant barrage of kindhearted, well-meaning support.

However, that wasn’t going to work. It may be the correct way to go about it for a person trying to support Ichinose, but it was a mistake for someone trying to fix the problem. You had to pressure her to yield with force.

“Even though I’m so pathetic... Is it really okay?”

“Who has the right to deny you of it?”

“A criminal like me... Can I truly be forgiven...”

“Everyone has the right to be forgiven.”

I had reached out to her heart.

The only thing left was to see whether or not Ichinose would respond.

From the other side of the door, Ichinose slowly began to speak.

“I... was a shoplifter. It got difficult during my third year of middle school, and I stopped going to school for half of it. I never consulted with anyone about it. I just blamed myself and shut myself up in my room, just like I’m doing now...”

Ichinose uncovered her wounded heart that she had been frantically trying to keep hidden as she began to say it all.

About what she had done. About the weakness she had been holding within.

How she had only shared all of this with Nagumo. How Sakayanagi had approached her, informing her about the existence of another shoplifter. This was no coincidence. It was clear that Nagumo had told Sakayanagi about her past. Without the chance to even lie about it, she had no choice but to confess to everything.

She had been acting tough, unable to show any sign of weakness.

Confessing your sins. Do you know how terribly difficult of a thing that is?

Many youths, still immature of heart, have shoplifted... no, have sinned in one way or another at least once. However, if this was brought before a large number of people, they would most likely deny any involvement whatsoever. This is natural. After all, it's terribly difficult to admit to your sins and confess them to the public. Many people persecute sinners in the name of justice. And in return, the sinners know the tragic fate that would befall them, so they hide, continuously holding onto their sins without ever speaking of them. They perpetually play the role of a 'good person' as they move on with their lives.

Driven by her guilty conscience, Ichinose spent half a year completely alone.

And after great pains, she was released from her shackles... no, she managed to break free from them.

But it would still follow her for the rest of her life. Haunting her until the very end.

In fact, her conscience was once again standing in her way of moving forward, relentlessly attacking her spirit.

So, she had no choice but to stand up and face it head on.

By the time I had finished hearing everything she had to say, it didn't matter whether or not lunch break had already ended.

Even when afternoon classes had already begun, I just continued to sit there and listen to her speak.

Listening without any attempt to console, nor reprimand her.

Ichinose sobbed quietly on the other side of the door.

I didn't offer her a single word of comfort.

Because that would've been meaningless to offer her at this point.

Her opponent in all of this had been clear from the very beginning.

Herself. It was all about whether or not she would be able to come to terms with herself.

There aren't many people who can stand up and face their sins in a true sense.

However, when the time comes that someone can... they're then able to take the next step toward the future.

This was the entire exchange held between Ichinose and I that took place before she completely opened her heart to her colleagues.

EPILOGUE: THE RETURN

At long last, the end-of-year exam was upon us.

Each and every one of us must have made their own preparations based on the practice test for today.

Sudō, Ike, and Yamauchi all seemed to be performing satisfactorily according to Horikita's report. It looks like she thoroughly drilled preparations for the test into them.

Miyake, Haruka, Airi, and Kei.

I was able to raise the standards of the students around me. Hirata handled everyone else.

Since there were no reports of problematic students, the students from our class should be able to overcome this so long as they keep an eye on their health.

The footsteps that had been hurriedly chasing after me from behind finally stopped beside me.

“Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun!”

Ichinose approached me with a beaming smile on her face.

“Good morning, Ichinose.”

“Today’s finally the end-of-year exam. Have you properly studied for it?”

“More or less. In your case, it doesn’t look like I even need to ask.”

I don’t even need to ask to know that Class B was far more united than we were and had prepared for the test accordingly.

Even Ichinose, who had been absent until the other day, should’ve been more than ready as far as studying goes.

“You were cool yesterday, Ichinose. It was almost enough to charm even a man like me.”

“R-really...? Like Sakayanagi-san said, that was just me being shameless.”

Ichinose hadn’t done anything wrong in the first place.

It was nothing even worth noting, given how her mother dealt with it appropriately. She had just been bearing her crime as an unnecessary burden on her back.

“And it’s all thanks to you, Ayanokōji-kun. For helping me get back on my feet.”

“I can’t be a shoulder for you to lean on after all, unlike the students of Class B. But I thought I’d hear you out. It’s nothing you need to thank me over.”

“Hmm... If it wasn’t for you, Ayanokōji-kun. I think I would’ve ended up self-destructing like last year and fallen apart. In that sense, Sakayanagi-san

completely defeated me this time.”

Sakayanagi had manipulated Ichinose perfectly and drove her to the brink of self-destruction.

It is true that without my intervention, there was no telling what would've happened.

But there were things she mustn't misunderstand.

“It'd be a problem if you were to be overly grateful. I was just the trigger. In the end, you're the only one who can overcome your own past.”

“...Hmm, you're right. I can't take back what I've done. No matter how much time passes, the day where I think my sins have finally disappeared probably won't come to pass. But, I'll live my life, properly facing it head on from this day forward. I'm sure of it.”

It should be fine now. No matter who blames her, Ichinose would probably be able to stand back up. The one change that had come to pass was that Ichinose had grown stronger than anyone.

In the future, she'd become an even more powerful rival for the other students.

But still, there were no guarantees when it comes to life.

“If you're about to lose sight of yourself again, you can talk to me.”

“Ehh...?”

“When that happens... Let's see... I should at least be able to hear you out.”

Ichinose suddenly stopped walking.

“Can I depend on you...?”

“If you’re fine with someone like me, that is.”

“Really?”

“...Yeah, really.”

When she emphasized that, I nodded in slight confusion.

And when I did, she thanked me quietly.

“...T-thank you...”

This was a rather unusual reaction for Ichinose, who was usually always upbeat.

She shook her head, perhaps because even she thought it was strange of herself.

“B-but... won’t you come to regret it one day?”

Ichinose asked me that while peering at me.

“Hmm, that’s right. It would mean we’d be stuck at Class B. If you manage to graduate as Class A, my classmates may end up blaming me.”

“R-right?”

Ichinose scratched her cheek while smiling bitterly.

“Should that come to pass, please keep this a secret from Horikita at the very least.”

“...Fufu. You’re right, let’s do just that, shall we?”

While walking beside me, Ichinose stretched.

She was now cheerful and bright, almost as though she’d been reborn from just a single impetus.

Now then, all that was left is to overcome the end-of-year exam.

Ichinose intently looked toward me.

“What’s the matter?”

“E-eh?”

“You’ve been staring at me for a while now. If you’ve got something to say, I’ll hear you out.”

“You see, the truth is... Ahh! Sorry, Ayanokōji-kun. Can you wait for a while?”

Just as Ichinose was about to say something, she instead looked toward a student in front of us.

That appearance, and those followers of his. It was obvious who it was.

“Sorry, I’ll head over there for a while.”

Saying that, Ichinose left and caught up to the student in front of us.

“Good morning, Nagumo-senpai.”

“Honami, huh? You’re upbeat even in the morning.”

“Because that’s just who I am.”

Nagumo may have been surprised, seeing Ichinose with a smile as usual.

“Don’t you resent me, Honami?”

“Resent you?”

Wondering why, Ichinose tilted her head.

Immediately afterward, she realized the meaning behind that question.

“No such thing, I’m grateful to you, President Nagumo. Thank you very much for recruiting me to the student council. I will keep doing my best from now on as well so I look forward to working with you.”

“I see. It would seem you performed better than I expected.”

For just a moment, Nagumo looked at me. But he then immediately turned his back and walked off.

It was easy to tell what he was trying to say.

He had wanted to break Ichinose Honami and build her back up with his own hands. Then he’d tame her as his own pawn. That look was meant to convey his displeasure at how I had gotten in the way of that.

He must know that, on some level, I had been involved in this incident.

Ichinose bowed to Nagumo then came back to my side once again.

“Hey!”

When she came back, Ichinose called out to me in a notably louder voice. She then opened her mouth wide and tried to continue speaking.

“Hey, umm...”

As she spoke, she reached into her school bag and froze up.

“What’s the matter?”

“Ehh... Umm, hmm... T-that’s strange. I was planning on giving it to you straight up...”

She seemed lost for a while there, moving her hand around inside her bag. But then, as though she had made up her mind, she brought something out.

Then she offered it to me.



“This may be a bit late now but here, Valentines chocolate... W-would you accept it? How should I put it... I’ve never given something like this before but... this is the only way I can express my gratitude, so...”

“You don’t need to force yourself to give something to me, you know?”

The 14th was more or less over but it didn’t exactly feel bad to receive chocolate from a girl.

But it’s not like I had done what I had for the sake of receiving chocolate, so there was no need for her to force herself.

“I-I-I’m not forcing myself, you know? Y-you don’t want it?”

“No... Thank you.”

If I dragged it out any further, we may have started to stand out.

I gratefully accepted the chocolate from Ichinose.

AFTERWORD

Recently, whenever I've been thinking of the advantages of living in Tokyo, the numerous places to eat and drink, shown in media, comes to mind. And I can even go there by myself. But right after it appears on television, it becomes so popular that I can't enter, and that has happened quite a lot. But the greatest disadvantage is how high the prices are. Hello, long time no see.

Thought felt Volume 8 was just getting released yesterday, the release date for Volume 9 is soon approaching me, Kinugasa. This may be sudden, but lately I've been concerned about my health, can't help it.

I am sitting still for 2/3 of my working time so my blood flow gets so bad, my back aches too. When I was young I could take it due to my belief in the potential of my body, but trying to gloss it over doesn't seem to work anymore.

I'm trying to do some maintenance regularly but since there doesn't seem to be any way to fix the problem itself, I somehow feel there won't be a bright future waiting for me.

Well then. The story this time focuses on the Valentine's day and the time right before the end of term exams.

The protagonist is, bit by bit, surrounded by more and more girls. There's a good chance there will be some deep development with some girls during the second year, at least that's what I think, my other self at least.

I will focus on Ichinose who hasn't been appearing in the limelight from now.

There wasn't a special exam this time so it was pretty relaxing(?), but it is getting more serious.

And finally, the special exam for the next volume, Volume 10, will mark the end of the first year arc. There have been times where I've thought: So it's been published for 4 years, yet it's only gone one year?... So I've been thinking of hurrying the pace in the future... maybe (I still don't know).

The words my editor told me at the beginning of the publication of this series still linger in my mind.

"I'm so glad it's a work where time inevitably will flow forward."

No matter how long, the end will come.

I laughed the first time I heard that, but I'm now making a serious face and 'yes indeed', accepted it in my mind.

The next volume I will probably show more about how the class points, and the main characters private points, has developed up until now.

Well then everyone. Let's meet again in volume 10.

MF文庫J

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実力至上主義
の教室へ



初めての贈り物 ～一之瀬帆波編～

MFたべJ連動特典用
限定ショートストーリー

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ICHINOSE HONAMI SHORT STORY:

THE FIRST GIFT

I secretly went to Keyaki Mall that night just as it was about to close.

“Umm.....I wonder which one’s popular.....”

The chocolate shop. I loitered around inside it. Since it’s already late at night, there aren’t any other students in the shop.

“As I thought, it’s gone...”

There should have been a Valentine’s Special corner at this shop but since Valentine’s Day is already over, it would seem the corner has been removed. But still, this shop has plenty of chocolate in stock.

A large variety of chocolates, of different colors and types. The price range goes from several hundred yen up to several thousand yen. The lack of symmetry there is astounding. Even though they cater mainly to students, they must have sold quite a lot considering the date.

“Are you perhaps looking for Valentine’s chocolate?”

When I felt lost, a clerk from the shop called out to me.

“Ahh, yes. I was but.....how could you tell?”

“It’s written all over your face. That you want to give some to the boy you like.”

“Ehh! That’s, umm, that’s not the case! But I owe him a lot or maybe I should say he saved me.....as thanks, I was thinking I’d give him some chocolate.....”

I’ve never given anyone anything before in the first place. The first gift since I was born.

It’s strange how it ended up being Valentine’s chocolate.

“Which one would you recommend?”

“Shouldn’t you just go with the one you prefer? It’s all about intuition. Intuition.”

Intuition, hmm? That might be the case. Rather than have someone else decide for me, it’s obvious the best present would be one I personally think is best.

“Alright then, I’ll have this one.”

“Thank you. Would you like to attach a message card to this? Something like ‘I love you’ perhaps?”

“No need, no need!”

If I handed him the present with a message like that attached, he’ll surely be confused. In the first place, I don’t even see him that way. That’s right. I’m just thanking him. I’ll give him the chocolate I purchased, that’s what I thought.



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とうのあなた購入特典4Pリーフレット

衣笠彰梧先生書きおろしSS
「学生にとっての特別な日」

KARUIZAWA KEI SHORT STORY:

A SPECIAL DAY FOR STUDENTS

February 14th. Underneath the cold winter sky, I came to this place, a slight distance away from the dorm. An invitation from Kiyotaka via mobile to rendezvous here. I had desperately been hiding my ever quickening heartbeat from Kiyotaka during our conversation. To give someone chocolate. If I were to start counting all the way from childhood, it wouldn't be my first time doing so. But whenever I let my guard down, I can feel my face reddening.

“What day is it today? Alright, 5, 4, 3—”

To conceal my embarrassment, I chose to poke fun at him with such a quiz.

“...that was easier than I expected. On the contrary, it’s making me feel like I won’t get it right.”

“Don’t beat around the bush, give me a straight answer, ok?”

It’s okay. I just need to be the ‘cool me’. It’s okay. “Valen—”

“Alright, correct answer.”

I got really embarrassed and even as I covered it up with words, I hit Kiyotaka’s head with the box.

“Is this for me?”

“I actually prepared this for Yousuke-kun but that’s no longer necessary,” I lied. The truth is, I bought it a while back while fretting over this and that.

I bought it just before the shop closed so I doubt anyone saw me.

“For Hirata, huh?”

“What? You don’t like that?”

“No, I was just thinking that meant you’ve spent quite a while preparing for Valentine’s.”

There’s no way a phony, transparent lie like that would work against Kiyotaka but that phony lie is the only option I have here, isn’t it?

If I told Kiyotaka I bought it for him then.....that’d just make me look like a maiden in love!

“I-I’m the thoroughly prepared type. Even though I decided I’d break up with him, there’s still the possibility that it may become necessary, no? Well, there’s no way someone as romantically inexperienced as you would understand that though.”

It’s precisely because I know he’s romantically inexperienced that I was able to make this my escape route. But still, surely even Kiyotaka would have had expectations? After all, he knows today’s February 14th.

“I thought you picked this date because you expected to get something from me.”

That's why I asked him that.

"Sorry, that didn't cross my mind."

Grr..... He has his usual poker face up and my words came bouncing straight back at me. Even though I threw them hard at him straight up, he still kept his cool.

"By the way, did you get any from some other girl?"

I think I'll probably be able to hear his answer calmly.

"No, nothing at all."

In other words, this means I'm the first girl in this whole school to give Kiyotaka chocolate.

"Serves you right. Zero Love Interest Man~"

"But is it really okay? If you give me chocolate, it'll stop being zero, you know?"

"That in itself would make you pathetic. You'd be the guy who needed me to hand him a lifeline."

I wish today would end without this being known to anyone else. And on White Day, I'll be able to monopolize Kiyotaka, won't I?

Just kidding, I mean, this would mean I'm nothing more than a maiden in love.....!

Inside my head, I had fallen into a state of panic.

ようこそ
実力
至上主義へ
の**教室**へ



衣笠彰梧

KINUGASA SYOUGO
トモセシュンサク
TOMOSESHUNSAKU

メロンブツクス限定
書き下ろし SSリーフレット
「神室の思惑」





KAMURO MASUMI SHORT STORY:

KAMURO'S INTENTION

I'm in Ayanokouji's room. For a certain reason.

"Give me something to drink. It's going to take a while."

Ayanokouji began preparing my request for the essentials with a displeased look.

"Then I'll boil some tea or coffee." After saying that, Ayanokouji began preparing it.

I felt suspicious of how defenseless he seemed. Sakayanagi told me to keep an eye on this man, Ayanokouji, but to be honest, I have no idea exactly what he's capable of.

"No cocoa?"

"...I've got some."

"Then I'll have some of that." I once again made another meaningless demand, as though testing him.

"So what did you want to talk about? If it's cold, we could've had this talk in the lobby."

“No one will get in our way here. It’s the ideal place for our talk.”

“What exactly is it about?”

“Are you, by any chance, being wary?”

“It’d be far stranger for me to not be wary. A girl I’m not familiar with, not to mention a student from our enemy Class A, is in my room after all.”

“You’re saying Yamauchi from your class is different?”

When I said that, Ayanokouji gave me a glance.

“Are you curious?”

“Not at all.”

“I see. Then let’s not speak of that matter. It doesn’t matter anyway.”

Right now, Yamauchi is irrelevant. The important stuff comes now.

“That letter about Ichinose earlier. What do you think?”

A letter that states that Ichinose Honami is a criminal.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Exactly what it sounded like. About her being a criminal. Do you believe it?”

“I haven’t a clue. Besides, I’m not interested.”

“Even if you aren’t interested, surely you’ve thought about it at least. About whether Ichinose is benevolent or malevolent, I mean.”

“You can’t just label someone malevolent because they happen to be a criminal. Just like you can’t label someone benevolent by virtue of them not being a criminal.”

I tried to unsettle him. To confirm whether this man can truly be used or not. That is the mission I’ve been given.





MII-CHAN SHORT STORY:

RELIABLE CLASSMATES?

I asked Ayanokouji-kun for advice regarding a certain matter at a cafe corner. But I wasn't able to take the initiative and a long silence followed. I need to do something about it, I need to do something about it. That feeling took priority even over the matter I had wanted to get his advice on. I feel bad for Ayanokouji-kun, who's wasting his time on me...

“Umm, you see...umm, it’s about Hirata-kun.”

I somehow desperately managed to squeeze my voice out. I continued before I end up choking my words back.

“I want you to tell me all about him.....”

I think I explained that badly too but there's nothing I can do about it. Because I can't straight up tell him ‘I'm in love with Hirata-kun’ after all.

“Hirata and I aren't particularly close, you know?”

Even after seeing me panicking, Ayanokouji-kun's tone remained the same as always.

“But Hirata-kun told me Ayanokouji-kun is the most reliable one in the class though?”

“...did he now?”

The impression I had of Ayanokouji-kun was that he's like 'air'. Describing it as 'air' may be somewhat rude but I've got nothing else to go on. He's a boy whose thoughts I find hard to tell after all. Besides, he seems a little scary in a way different from that of Sudou-kun and the others. But—

“Yeah. He says you're the most level-headed one in class. He really sang your praises.”

Hirata-kun, who cares more about his classmates than anyone else and who keeps an eye on his classmates more than anyone else, praised Ayanokouji-kun. I've never seen Hirata-kun talk about a friend that energetically before so that surprised me.

I still don't know the reason for that though but.....

“Recently there's been talk that Hirata-kun and Karuizawa-san, umm... broke up, have you heard?”

“Of course.”

It's not just Class C but the whole school year that's paying attention to this topic. The calamity that befell Hirata-kun and Karuizawa-san. It was unbelievable for me too. But I can't take action on my own.

Because I can't possibly confess knowing full well I may be rejected.

“That's why, umm.....”

Let's get some advice. From Ayanokouji-kun, who Hirata-kun referred to as the most reliable one. I'm a coward but...in order to be able to confess.

“.....d-does Hirata-kun currently have someone he’s interested in?”

Let’s take the first step towards overcoming this cowardice. I definitely can’t look in the mirror, knowing my face is probably turning red. That’s what I thought.



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魔太郎
MATARO

ようこそ
実力
至上主義
の**教室**へ

SS



SAKAYANAGI ARISU SHORT STORY:

SAKAYANAGI'S PREPARATIONS

Today's the 7th of February. This is a story from back when I was still playing with the toy known as Ichinose-san. It was after school, when our class had ended, that I quietly stood up from my seat with my trusty cane in hand. In my case, I always end up attracting attention when I walk around due to the fact that a cane is an absolute necessity for me. Being unable to act stealthily can sometimes be a drawback.

“Are you fine today?”

The one who said that to me would be Masumi-san. She's as languid as ever.

“I believe I've gone over this before but I think I'll make contact with him today.”

I didn't name 'him' but she should know who I'm referring to.

“Ahh.....Yamauchi, right? Is it ok to leave Ichinose be?”

“Let's say there are two people you despise right in front of you. If you can only get rid of one, what would you do, Masumi-san? You'd get rid of the one you hate more, wouldn't you?”

“Well...I suppose so.”

“That’s my answer.”

Right now, rather than Ichinose-san, I’m far more entranced by Yamauchi-kun. I didn’t say that out loud but I’m sure Masumi-san understands.

“Ahh, I see. I’ll be heading back then?”

“Yes. As always, I appreciate your effort.”

Having received no orders from me, Masumi-san immediately left the classroom.

On my way to Class C, I spotted a lone male student walking my way. That male student used to be surrounded by several of his followers until a while ago. But he’s since kept a low profile and now he’s but a shell of his former self.

“Greetings, Ryuuken-kun.”

When I called out to him like that, he looked at me with those fierce eyes of his that haven’t changed. To be honest, I would have liked to call him Dragon Boy but if I did so, we wouldn’t even have a conversation so I avoided saying unnecessary words and simply stopped quietly.

After he was dethroned as leader, I came up with several theories of my own. But now they’re no longer necessary. Since he’s stepped down from the stage, I can afford to leave him be. Do not reject one who comes and do not chase one who leaves. Of course, it’s a different story when it comes to

Ayanokouji-kun though. Regardless of whether he has any intention of fighting or not, he must become a sacrifice for the sake of my pride.

“Are you ready for the end of school year exam?”

“And here I was wondering what you’d say. I have no intention of having a casual chat with you.”

“Please don’t say that. Isn’t it difficult studying alone? If you so desire, why not prepare for the test together with us?”

I made a proposal he would never accept.

“Do you really think you can provoke me with something like that?”

It would appear he’s interpreted my good intentions as malevolence. Ryuuen-kun began walking again and mercilessly barged up to me.

“So you’re leaving me alone to play with Ichinose?”

The rumors that have been spreading seems to have reached his ears as well.

“Speaking of which, she’s currently being assailed by rumors an anonymous person spread.”

But Ryuuen-kun only kept glaring at me as though he has no interest in that. Well, let’s just say it’s my turn for a little while longer.

“If she were a student like you, constantly being badmouthed, then she wouldn’t have incurred much damage, no?”

“What’s your business with me?”

“There’s no reason behind it or anything. I just wanted to have a chat with you. Should I not have?”

“A chat, huh? Then I’ll play along and ask you a question too.”

“How interesting. What could it be?”

That unexpected reaction from Ryuuen-kun pleased me. I wonder what sort of question he’ll ask me.

“I’m swindling large amounts of private points from you incompetent lot every month thanks to my contract with Katsuragi. Why are you dealing with that?”

It wasn’t anything I hadn’t expected but at least it’s a question that won’t bore me.

“Because it doesn’t affect us significantly. For Class A, feeding you alone doesn’t carry any risk. There’s no point in going out of your way to drive you to expulsion. Besides, as long as his contract with you remains intact, Katsuragi-kun will never make a comeback.”

“Kuku.....”

For the first time, Ryuuen-kun laughed.

“To think you’d be wary of small fry like Katsuragi.”

“It’s easy to deal with external enemies but to deal with an ally can be troublesome should a mistake occur. He’s an excellent pawn as long as he

keeps his head down and allows himself to be used.”

It doesn’t mean he’s afraid of being targeted by me. He’s simply trying to provoke me. Getting this sort of reaction from Ryuuen-kun is precisely why I always end up talking to him.

“Please do your best to save up 20 million points while you can.”

If he can escape to the safe zone, at least some of his pride would remain intact.

“I’ll do just that.”

“Ryuuen-kun, may I also ask you a question?”

“If you want to know what a man’s like, I can teach you anytime, you know?”

I’m rather pleased by that provocation that fits Ryuuen-kun so.

“There’s no need for you to teach me. I too, have my own ideal. Or perhaps you’re saying I’m your type?”

If you stab me, I’ll stab you right back.

“I have no problem devouring low-quality products, you see.”

If you touch a thorn, you’ll get pricked. A person like this really is valuable.

“If you’re quite done, I’ll be off.”

Apparently this beast has truly been defanged. Even though he’s someone I needed to be wary of unlike Katsuragi-kun or Ichinose-san. Either way, it’s

one less troublesome enemy for me so it's a burden off my back.

I can focus solely on my heart's desire, Ayanokouji-kun.

"Please excuse me then."

But he had already walked off.

After splitting up with Ryuuuen-kun, I once again headed for my destination, Class C. Because if my target escapes while I play around, it would've only been a waste of my time.

"Excuse me," I said as I peered into the classroom. "Is Yamauchi Haruki-kun here?"

The reply was immediate. From the person himself.

"Ehh, that's me but.....you need something?"

Yamauchi-kun looked at me confusedly. It doesn't seem like he's on his guard at all. "Would you mind giving me a few moments of your time?"

"O-Of course I'm free....."

You're going to make me think if you're this stupid.

Well, what I've prepared is a single ticket.

".....this isn't quite the right place so I'll be waiting for you in the corridor by the stairs."

And just like that, I invited Yamauchi-kun. Heaven or Hell. I'll hand him a ticket that leads to both. He's free to choose which one he prefers.





ICHINOSE HONAMI SHORT STORY:

A SMALL BEING

This is an event that happened during the period following the end term exams some time before the results were released.

My plan was to take a stroll to the convenience store before returning home after the last period of school ended.

During my way to the store, I saw the back of a person I knew.

It was Ichinose; 1st year class B. Following her were two girls who I believe were her classmates. I saw them surrounding Ichinose and talking merrily with her.

Depending on the topic of conversation, their walking pace would slow down making it simple to just pass them.

Of course, trying to raise my voice and chasing after them is not something I would do.

It won't be a problem if only Ichinose was there, but I haven't had a decent conversation with the other girls before. It would be easier for me to just slip away. While I'm not sure about the other students, Ichinose would definitely call out to me.

I guess I should head back more slowly. Not that I had anything planned once I'm home.

While walking on the road towards the convenience store, I suddenly heard the light footsteps of someone running from behind. Before long, some girls called out to Ichinose and ran past me.

The three girls in front turned around towards the voice. Ichinose naturally noticed me.

She probably noticed how uncomfortable I was from my face since she just flashed a smile. She didn't call out to me. As expected of a most considerate model student.

After being joined by the girls, Ichinose and her group began talking again, as if nothing had happened.

«Well then... convenience store next.»

I watched the backs of Ichinose and her friends for a while before leaving them at the store. After buying all the necessities, I went outside.

It must have only been 2-3 minutes, but I couldn't see Ichinose and her group anymore.

Let's go home, I thought as I once again headed towards the dorms.

It was at that precise moment.

«Here, here Ayanokouji-kun!» I heard a voice.

I glanced at the direction where the handwaving came from and among the trees standing a distance away from the road was Ichinose.

«What are you doing over there?»

«Maybe you should come over here then?»

She showed a smile like that of a child playing a prank, as if testing me.

Since she urged me to come closer, I went over towards her.

Yet even after arriving right by her, there wasn't as if anything had changed either.

«Something?»

«Hmm? No, maybe not after all.»

Not following her, I tilted my head which was followed by Ichinose lightly laughing.

«I wanted to talk with you a bit, I think.»

«Right then... you mean here?»

«Here, come on, sit sit! If we hide here we won't be seen by others, surprisingly.»

No, well she may have a point but...

It was midwinter, naturally it was freezing.

«I was trying to be considerate in my own way you know? I was thinking you didn't want to talk surrounded by the other girls.»

It seems like she managed to piece together quite a bit from my expression earlier.

As expected of Ichinose I must say.

Anyway, wanting to progress the conversation I also sat down.

To think the day had come when I would sit here like this.

I must say, the trees really do shade us from view.

It was also a significant distance from the main road so if we talked quietly, few would even notice.

«Aren't you cold?»

«It's fine, it's fine!» Ichinose laughed.

«Hey, how did your end term exam go?»

«Not bad. The whole class should probably be fine I guess.»

«I see. That's good. We are at the end of our first year so wouldn't you also hate it if someone were missing?»

«Class B shouldn't worry right? You are always at the top for the written exams.»

«Of course my own class is important to me, but that's the same for all the other classes too.»

She wouldn't want to lose anyone. Not even her rivals, is what she said.

Normally, people saying that is just saying it for appearances sake. The less rivals there are, the more your own class gains in return.

Ichinose is perhaps an exception. She doesn't want anyone to drop out from the bottom of her heart.

That's an ideal.

But that doesn't mean it's just lip service. In the event there will be an exam in which someone from Class B or any other class needs to drop out, she will without doubt protect her own class.

She doesn't want anyone to be expelled, but she will prioritize her own classmates. That's her position.

«What are you thinking about?»

«Well no... not really. Just haven't come to grips with this situation yet.»

A boy and a girl were hiding in the shades from the leaves while conversing in low voices. This situation.

It would be strange if someone didn't have some weird thoughts about this.

Thus were my thoughts, but I sorted them out immediately again. Ichinose right in front of me was absolutely not having any thoughts about this.

«By the way, Ayanokouji-kun, Tokyo?»

«Eh?»

«You know, this school has a lot of students from within the Tokyo area, but there's also students from outside too.»

Is that so? That's news to me.

«Well, within the city I guess.»

«I guess? So from one of the 23 wards?»

«Well yeah.»

«What middle school?»

«That's a secret.»

«Ah, maybe that was too much? I'm sorry If I made you feel bad.»

Maybe she was thinking I was one of those bullied students who was absent from school or something in the past. Thus her apology.

«No it's fine. It's just, my classmates warned me to not say too much.»

«Ah I see. Just knowing which school someone came from may be too much perhaps?»

She didn't seem to understand so she managed to convince herself somehow or another.

I'm so glad the classes in this school were made to compete with each other.

«By the way Ayanokouji-kun, it's been quite some time since we first met right? That's why, eh well, I thought I wanted to ask things friends ask each other... so that's why, that just now.»

«No, that's alright. There aren't many people who socialize with me so I was just at a loss.»

«Is that so?»

«I'm basically this shady existence in my class after all. No, perhaps I'm really dark after all truth to be said.»

I said negatively, but it didn't seem like Ichinose thought of me like that.

«Rather than dark, aren't you more calm? Or stoic perhaps?»

«That may be true if you think of it in positive terms maybe? That would rather be nice.»

«That's right! You don't feel like you are going in the same class as us, more like, you have the feeling of a senpai?»

It seems like she is praising me, is it alright to feel glad then?

«By the way, would it be fine if came to hang around in your room later?»

«Eh? A-ah, sure...».

It came so sudden, like a flying arrow, so my heart skipped a beat.

«I was wondering how your room was, you know. That's a promise then!»

Thus I and Ichinose made a promise by in a nook by the trees standing along the road.

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