

衣笠彰梧
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7

ようこそ実力
Welcome to the Classroom of the Second-year
至上主義の教室へ 2年生編

MF文庫









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実力至上主義の教室へ
2年生編7**

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Hasebe Haruka's Monologue

WHEN I EVALUATE myself, I consider myself a bad person. Everyone has done something once or twice that they were told 'not to do'.

For example, ignoring a red traffic light. Even if you didn't have any malicious intentions, you probably have some experience with that sort of thing. Another example is accepting the wrong amount of change at the checkout and not giving it back. When a clerk mistakenly gives you more than what is owed, whether it's one yen or ten, people often walk away with it.

Spitting on the side of the road or littering on the street. It may seem like a small thing, but it also falls under the category of a crime.

I wouldn't consider myself a "bad person" just because of things like these. I'm...

It could seem trivial from someone else's point of view. But I dragged my past with me all the way to high school and decided I wouldn't make any new friends. I believed I would be perfectly content if I distanced myself from everyone and entered a world where I wasn't connected with anyone. That's why, when I learned about Advanced Nurturing High School, I thought this school would be able to give me what I wanted.

Before I even realized it, I had made friends again. Kiyopon, Yukimū, Miyachi and... Airi.

I was able to get back the feeling of being youthful. At least, that's what I had believed. Out of nowhere, that feeling was once again stolen from me within a single day.

Who stole it? That's obvious.

Horikita Suzune and Ayanokōji Kiyotaka.

I became a victim of the selfish actions of those two people. I can't forgive them. There's no way I can.

And so...

I decided to get revenge.

Chapter One: Preparing For The Cultural Festival

IT WAS MONDAY, NOVEMBER 1st, the beginning of autumn - and we're faced with chilly weather.

The months seemed to go by quickly, and in two months it would be winter break. The view from my new seat wouldn't last much longer. The fact that I felt a sense of regret was proof that the seating change was a good system for me. I didn't know if there would be a seating change next semester, but either way, I was sure the scenery will be very different from before.

"Good morning. Everyone's here, right?" A few seconds after the bell, Chabashira-sensei appeared in the classroom.

The students, who had been busy chatting with each other, quieted down and looked at the teacher with a familiar gaze. The school's unique system, in which all behaviour outside of class affected the evaluation of the class as a whole, had produced a serious and disciplined attitude amongst the students. It was not that anything had changed significantly in the last week, but I could certainly sense that they had grown a whole lot.

Seeing such an attitude among the students who continued to grow day by day, Chabashira-sensei nodded deeply and began to speak.

"I believe preparations are steadily progressing for the cultural festival, but I have some additional explanatory notes. First of all, I will once again display an overview of the festival as a review, so those who need to should check it." The monitor behind Chabashira-sensei lit up and the explanation of the rules reappeared.

[Outline of the Cultural Festival]

- *Each second-year class is given 5,000 private points per student to be used solely for preparation of the festival. (First-year students receive 5,500 points and third-year students receive 4,500 points)*
- *Additional funds will be given for social contributions such as student council service and contributions through club activities.*
- *(Details will be announced to each class after they are finalized.)*

- *The initial allocation of private points and additional funds are not reflected in the final sales and will be forfeited if unused.*
- *Classes ranked 1st through 4th place will receive 100 class points.*
- *Classes ranked 5th through 8th will receive 50 class points.*
- *No change in class points for classes placed 9th through 12th*

“That's all I've explained so far. You should have no problem understanding what's been said.” Without a single question from the students, Chabashira-sensei continued with her explanation. “I would like to announce that the details of the 'additional funds' mentioned in this overview explanation have been decided.”

Additional funds. The points that can be used for the festival would be increased based on student council service, social contributions, club activities, etc. The time had come to announce the details.

The lack of a confirmed budget meant that the number, content, and scale of the performances could not be finalized. Despite the inconvenience, this was not a problem as long as all classes in all grades were under the same conditions.

“First of all, the total amount of additional funds to be given to this class, and the breakdown of the funds...”

As soon as she said that, Chabashira-sensei operated her tablet and a spreadsheet-based list was displayed. It turned out that a total of 12 people were eligible for these additional funds.

- *Horikita Suzune, Student Council Member Bonus: 10,000 points*
- *Sudō Ken, Club Activity Bonus: 10,000 points*
- *Onodera Kayano, Club Activity Bonus: 10,000 points*

Although 10,000 points was the maximum, only three students were able to earn that amount of additional funding. There were 9 other students who received hundreds to thousands of points in recognition of their contributions.

For example, Yōsuke received 3,000 points for his club activity bonus, and Akito received 100 points. Many students who seemed to be active, mainly in club activities, were mentioned.

In total, this class obtained 39,400 additional funds. In terms of number of people, these funds correspond to the initial points for almost 6 people. These funds would be essential for running the festival.

“I can't give you the breakdown, but Sakayanagi's Class A has 18,800 points. 17,000 points for Ryūen's Class C, and Ichinose's Class D has 26,600 points in additional funds. In other words, this class has the most additional funds among the second-year students.”

So, Ichinose's class was in second place and Sakayanagi's class was in third place - narrowly ahead of Ryūen's class. That was an unexpected result, but one factor could be the student council member bonus. The fact that both Horikita and Ichinose earned 10,000 points for their presence alone was pretty significant.

Other students, such as Sudō and Onodera, were considered to be head and shoulders above the rest in their contributions to club activities, even throughout the entire school year. Since individuals were not allowed to use any of their private points at the festival, in the case of Horikita's class, the total number of class members plus additional funds must be kept within 229,400. Every single point counts. However, we should not be too proud of this result.

Although advantageous in the preparatory stage before the start of the festival, additional funds would be a liability if they are not completely utilized by the end.

The above seems to be the explanation of additional funds, but it should not end there. Several pieces of information needed for the festival have not been made public.

“Now then, I'll explain some details about the guests who will be in attendance as this is an extremely important point for making sales.”

How many and what kind of guests would be coming to the festival? And how much money they had has not been disclosed in detail so far.

“Guests of honor will be people who are involved in the operation of this school and their families, but of course there will be a wide range of ages, from the elderly to toddlers and elementary school students,” she said. “It has also been decided that those who work at Keyaki Mall and convenience stores will also be invited as guests.”

The tablet screen switched to a graph, revealing the number of guests by age. Those in their 30s and 40s followed by those under 20 and those in their 50s.

“The adults are guests of honor and they receive 10,000 points. Minors receive 5,000 points. There are 283 adults and 202 minors. The total number of participants will be 485 in all, for a total sum of 3,840,000 points.”

The ranking of all 12 classes for the entire school year would depend on whether or not we could make sales from the total amount.

“I should also mention that the number of participants includes us teachers. Homeroom teachers are restricted to use points in the grade for which they are responsible, but they are treated no differently than other guests.”

The rule that they couldn't use points on their own grade levels would be essential. As homeroom teachers, they would normally want to drop money on their own class if they could.

"Is it possible to use more than 10,000 points in pocket money?"

In response to Ike's question, Chabashira-sensei immediately shook her head. It was a preemptive question, as usual, and she answered without paying much attention. Although, she seemed to be enjoying such an unchanging Ike.

"No. The guests can't spend more than the given points. The maximum amount is immovable."

This means that the guests weren't provided with unlimited funds. It wasn't a matter of restricting certain rich guests, but it was inevitable that there would be a competition for them.

"The primary method of payment is through a special cell phone app which the school will use to monitor sales in real time. Keep in mind that the app will be disabled the moment the festival ends at 4 pm. You are free to set your own timing for the checkout, but we recommend that you receive payment before the products are served."

If you pay after eating for example, there would be cases where it would be around 4 p.m., so there would be a risk of not being able to collect the points.

"Now that we're done here, anyone with any questions, raise your hands."

A period of time was allowed for questions and remarks, and soon after, Horikita raised her hand.

"If the sales are the same amount, what would the ranking be? I know this is very extreme, but what happens if all classes receive the same amount of 320,000 points and are side by side?"

If we based it solely on chance, the odds that all sales in all classes came out to be the same would be microscopic, but collusion among classes wouldn't be impossible. If all of them were treated as number one, they could equally raise their class points. However, I assumed that some countermeasures had been thought of....

"If the sales are equal, they are treated as the same rank. If all 12 classes make equal sales, as Horikita says, then all classes get 100 class points as first place."

Was this a somewhat lax rule, given that you don't lose class points even if you lose? No. Maybe they've determined from the start that a large number of classes won't be in line for the same percentage.

"However, the total amount of sales can only be confirmed after the exam, and any manipulation of sales by third parties is not allowed. It is impossible for the classes to discuss and make a plan to combine sales before the festival, or to

make an arrangement to divide the sales equally after the festival is over. You know what this means, right?”

If the amount of sales cannot be manipulated afterwards, it is unlikely that all classes would be in first place. More importantly, it is unlikely that they would join hands in a friendly manner, losing a valuable competitive opportunity.

“I don't think an equal number of sales among the classes would be normal. I don't think you need to worry about it.” Not understanding the meaning of Horikita's question, Maezono voiced her doubts.

“As Maezono-san said, if it is a normal fight, there is no need to be concerned about it. But it's not a bad thing to know if it's accepted as a rule or not.”

Horikita had a point. It's not a bad thing to know. It was unclear whether collusion is completely impossible within the current situation. For whatever reason, it was possible for certain grades or classes to collude with each other to create equal sales. There are several possible ways to do this, but if the final sales of the products were made to align among the classes in advance, it wouldn't be difficult to create a scenario in which all sold out products equated to the same sum of points. However, it was necessary to be prepared for betrayal, unforeseen circumstances, and trouble. It would be no laughing matter if you prioritized selling out above all else and as a result, ended up in the bottom of the class in terms of sales. The hurdles to overcome in order to intentionally create a tie are far, far higher than we can imagine.

“Does anyone have any other questions?”

No one raised a hand.

“That's all I have to say about the festival. Next, I would like to announce the results of the second semester mid-term exam that we recently conducted. This time, there are students who achieved results that surprised even me.”

The conversation moved on to the written exam and the announcement of its results. There were a few squeals from the students who weren't good at studying. Depending on how you looked at it, “surprise” could be considered a bad thing. However, given that Chabashira-sensei's expression wasn't dark or stiff, that seemed unlikely.

All at once, the names of the 38 students in the class were displayed, and they were lined up in order from the student with the highest overall score. Keisei took first place. He had a perfect score in all subjects. In second place was Horikita, only slightly behind. The difference in overall score was only 3 points.

The names of the usual honor roll students followed, but the student who surprised Chabashira-sensei was the one who placed 11th, no doubt.

Eleventh place, Sudō Ken. He scored 73 points in Modern Japanese, 76 points in Chemistry, 70 points in Social Studies, 78 points in Mathematics, and 70

points in English.

He scored a well-balanced total of 367 points in all subjects.

The top rankers from this group were honor students such as Yōsuke, Kushida, Matsushita, and Wang. That's why Sudō's ranking was a surprise to everyone.

It was a well-known fact that Sudō was working hard on his studies, but it was unexpected that Sudō, who was also involved in club activities that ran late into the day, would come in at the top of the list.

“Seriously, Ken is ranked 11th... Amazing...”

Ike, who was almost on the same side of the rankings, gave an honest, or rather, stunned response. A crazy turnaround, a leap beyond imagination. The difficulty level of this test was moderate, and the difference in overall score between Sudō and the bottom 20 was only about 15 points, but even so, this result must have surprised many people. Sudō himself should have been running around with joy, but he only made a small gut-punch and didn't seem to be bragging or making fun of others for passing them.

He checked his cell phone to look over the updated OAA.

[Ken Sudō: Academic ability C+, physical ability A+, adaptability C, social contribution D.]

Overall, his physical abilities were outstanding while maintaining a near-average level of academic ability. If he maintained his test scores, he should be able to achieve a B in academic ability in the near future. It seemed that his efforts over the past year had paid off in more ways than he could've imagined. He was also able to improve his social contribution skills from the lowest level to a D. He increased his OAA score as well.

My ranking was 14th. I got a perfect score in mathematics, but I slacked off in the other subjects. It would be fair to say that I cut corners, but in reality, I had a different goal in mind. Showing them a perfect score on the second semester mid-term exam would only cause unnecessary confusion. Instead of reassuring them that there were students who could get high scores, it was many times more important to make them feel that they had to grow up and help the class, as Sudō did.

In fact, Sudō's 11th place result generated a wide range of emotions among his classmates.

Almost everyone was positive. While some students were in the top ranks, others were inevitably in the lower ranks. They were, for lack of a better word, the regulars, but when compared to the average scores of the other classes, it was clear that they were changing little by little. More and more students were trying to improve; and even though their scores were low, they seemed to be steadily and

gradually starting to show results. Of course, not all of them were as good as Sudō. Even when it comes to studying, there are differences in the amount of information that can be absorbed, and there are also large differences in perseverance and physical strength.

Above all, in the case of Sudō, we must not forget that his motivation came from his love for Horikita, who taught him how to study.

Anyways, one could even say, due to the expulsion of Airi from the school, the lower ranked students started working even harder.

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The classroom after school on the same day.

The main members of the group gathered. They were Satō, Matsushita, Mii-chan, and Maezono. The only thing they had in common was that they were the planners of the maid café.

And then there was me and Horikita, for a total of six. After the initial presentation, meetings related to the maid café were mainly held via cell phone in order to prevent information leaks. Given the concept and scale of the maid café, the outdoor idea was crossed out first. In other words, the location of the café - the classroom - was fixed from the beginning, but we were still unsure about the location of the stall.

Students from other grades and classes came to scout out potential stand locations on a daily basis. We were trying to find the best place to open our booth. It would be more effective to include boys such as Yōsuke in the meeting, but unfortunately, they were busy with club activities at the moment.

As soon as we started moving, Matsushita looked at Horikita and I and asked...

“Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun, what will you do about them?”

“What do you mean, ‘what will I do?’”

“They come to school every day, but they don't want to talk to anyone. It means they keep antagonizing us, the whole class.”

“I'm sure it does. Well, I guess they're mainly against me.”

Having her best friend Airi expelled from school, Haruka put up a big wall. Although she was now coming to school, she hadn't broken down that barrier.

“I think Hasebe-san is going to try to do something to the class in the future.”

I don't think Haruka told Matsushita directly, nor was she told through a third party. But looking at Haruka now and sensing that atmosphere, a person like Matsushita would've guessed. "That may be so. But it's also true that, so far, I haven't seen any problematic behavior. She's even participated in the meetings for the festival."

Haruka knew about the maid café opening because she initially proposed the idea of a maid café. There was no reason not to include her in the group.

"Are you saying you condone revenge?"

"Of course not. I understand why she's angry, but that doesn't mean I don't mind trouble brewing in class without good reason."

Disturbance without extenuating circumstances, such as unavoidable special exams, is treated as a complete evil.

Horikita and I both strongly hoped Haruka would not go on a rampage.

"Yeah. But we're not in a situation where that kind of logic would work. It shouldn't take this long for her to recover."

Matsushita repeatedly directed her gaze at me. She seemed to be trying to get a word out of me while keeping the leader, Horikita, on her toes. However, I wouldn't give my own opinion and remained silent at the time. It's clear that Haruka was planning to take revenge for the expulsion of her best friend, but right now she was attending school, taking tests normally, and not doing a single thing to cause trouble for the class.

Even if we didn't know what would happen next, we couldn't question her at this stage.

"There's very little we can do in advance," Horikita said, looking off into the distance. "Preaching to them to stop taking revenge will only get on their nerves. Just..."

"Just what?"

"If she's really looking for an opportunity for revenge, she certainly won't put it off for months."

I agreed with that opinion. It was hard to imagine that she would continue to live her school life maturely for the next six months or even a year. In other words, the most critical time to be on the lookout was...

"I can't deny the possibility that she will do something at the festival."

Matsushita nodded quietly, probably wanting to hear those words.

"I've heard from Ayanokōji-kun that Hasebe-san has no intention of working as a maid. So, I gave her and Miyake-kun a general role while letting them know what was going on. If we withhold information or exclude her from the group, it would be a blatant statement that we are suspicious of her."

If by any chance Horikita and the others did something that showed contempt for Haruka, even if she had no intention of taking revenge, it was possible that the extinguished spark would start smoldering again.

“So you're saying you'll consider certain people on your side, but you'll avoid giving them important roles.”

“Yes. I figured I should do that just in case.”

Of course, she probably didn't have a strong concern about things getting out of control during the cultural festival. Still, as a leader, it was important to be ahead of the curve.

At the festival, many guests would be coming. If Horikita's class got a bad reputation among the guests, it wouldn't be surprising if we were penalized in some way.

“I know you're probably wondering about Haruka and the others, but we're about to arrive.”

Matsushita was so engrossed in the conversation that she didn't seem to notice that we were getting close to our destination. Many of the classes were still wondering where to set up their stalls for the event. You never knew where an important piece of information might be picked up unintentionally.

There were a total of eight classrooms that could be opened in the special building, which has three floors. We were currently on the third floor of the building, and the closer you were to the stairs by the entrance, the higher the cost to set up a stall. The third floor was the farthest away from the main gate and had the advantage of being the most cost-effective. The third floor could be rented for between 1,000 and 13,000 points, while the first floor could be rented for a flat rate of 50,000 points. The nearly 40,000 point difference could be used to purchase food and other necessities. The class was given a finite number of points, and it was inevitable that they'd have to worry about how much to allocate the cost of the stall location and how to come up with the money.

“It's a lot farther than I thought it would be.”

Mii-chan's first impression was still about the distance. I think we could all agree on that.

“What do you think, Satō-san?” Mii-chan asked Satō, who had not spoken up so far today, but she didn't immediately respond. “Satō-san?”

Once again, this time looking up at us, Satō hurriedly replied.

“Oh, um. I was thinking... yeah, I guess I think it's a little far away too.”

“I don't think all of us will be able to make the trip here unless we have a pretty good show.”

We didn't stay on the third floor for long, which was a lower priority, probably because our opinions were generally the same. Then we all came down one floor lower, to the second floor.

"I guess the second floor is better than the third floor! More to the point, the first floor would be ideal," Maezono muttered as she looked at the view outside the window.

"Yes, that's true. But I guess the first floor is still pretty tough in terms of price." Mii-chan stared at her cell phone and made a sour face. "But we should make a decision soon. It's getting pretty full."

Matsushita took a peek at Mii-chan's cell phone and said, "That's right. Two of the five places we picked up are now occupied... However, there are still candidates from the first to the third floor, which I'd say is a bit of a problem."

Would you take convenience and pay a large amount of points, or would you abandon convenience and settle for a low payment of points?

"I still think it should be on the first floor. If we can't get people to come up to the second floor because they are distracted by other exhibits, it's that much more of a disadvantage."

"I think it doesn't really matter if it's on the second or third floor, as long as it makes people want to come."

Maezono, Mii-chan, and Matsushita discussed which floor they should purchase. Satō, who was always high-spirited and often speaks even when she's not heard, had been rather quiet since this morning. Her friends occasionally looked at her as if they were concerned, but she looked as if her mind was somewhere else.

"Sato-san has been like that lately." Matsushita, noticing my concern, whispered over to me.

"Come to think of it, Satō hasn't been particularly energetic the last few days."

"I was curious if Ayanokōji-kun would know anything about that, but I guess not."

I wondered if Matsushita thought I was some kind of Satō whisperer or something. Or maybe she was anticipating Kei's closeness with Satō, but either way, I didn't know much.

"She doesn't seem to be in bad shape, and I asked her if she had any problems, but she didn't say anything definite."

"Sometimes people just want to be left alone, don't they?"

"Yes, I guess. But what can I say, I don't think that's the case this time."

"What do you mean?"

Matsushita, who was biting down on her lip, continued without cutting off the conversation, as if she had an idea of what she was talking about.

“It's like she wants to talk but can't. She's the type of person who keeps things inside.”

After a year and a half of friendship, I wondered how she could even tell that.

“You don't just keep it bottled up inside and that's the end of it, right?”

“That's, well... She can usually talk to me about it.”

“Then I guess we'll have to wait and see for a while longer. If your understanding is correct, I'm sure she'll come to you for advice at some point.”

“Maybe when....”

Matsushita was a little unclear, but since this kind of long conversation was not possible in Satō's vicinity, Matsushita stopped talking. The fact that the sky's the limit was a bit of a concern, but for now, the priority was to decide where to open the stall.

It was time to finalize and move on to the next stage. Just as we were about to finish our inspection of the second floor and move on to the last floor, we were met by another group.

“Yo, Ayanokōji. Are you also looking for a place to open a stand for the festival?”

It was Hashimoto, a member of the 2nd-year Class A, who called out to us. Shortly thereafter, the leader of the group, Sakayanagi, along with Kamuro, also showed up. With all three of them moving at the same time, surely they weren't just out for a light stroll.

“Well, I'm not sure. They may have already decided, or they may not have even decided whether to go indoors or outdoors.”

“No decision? That's an obvious lie. Are you telling me that you're taking Horikita all the way out to the special building to roam around for no reason? Please tell me what kind of show you're going to put on.”

Sakayanagi didn't join in the conversation, but watched on with a wry smile on her face.

“It's no use asking him. He's not in a position to know everything about the class.” Unable to listen in silence, Horikita intervened.

“Then you mean he's simply enjoying his harem?”

He pointed out that I'm the only male of the six and asked Kamuro to agree.

“You must be similar, Hashimoto-kun. Sakayanagi-san and Kamuro-san. You are the only boy, even if the number of people is different. I wonder if it's because you're aware of that you're making strange comments?”

Horikita showed a relaxed response by daring to reply on the same level.

It was a form of getting one over on him, but that didn't help against Hashimoto. Rather, he would change the subject as if the current conversation never took place.

“Satō, you've been spending a lot of time with people like Matsushita, Wang and Maezono.” Hashimoto turned his attention to the four maid café inventors.

The three of them were bracing themselves, but Matsushita stepped forward, looking the same as usual.

“Don't try to get anything out of us.”

“I hope you've understood by now.”

The two girls bit down hard on Hashimoto as Matsushita joined Horikita's glare.

“I didn't mean it like that. It's just...”

The others began to feel uneasy at the implied tone of his words.

“Oops, any more than that would be superfluous?” Grinning, Hashimoto looked at Sakayanagi for the first time since they had arrived.

You don't mind if I talk, do you? he seemed to be asking.

“You appear to want to say something, Hashimoto-kun.” Matsushita, who was standing there protecting the three girls, asked in a slightly irritated tone.

As if he'd been waiting for the question, his eloquent and verbose tone became more animated.

“I'm *worried* about your class, my friend. It seems that you have teamed up with... Ryūen for the sports festival, but do you think you can trust him forever?”

“What do you mean?”

“I just thought you were going to team up with Ryūen again. If you *are* going to team up with him, be careful,” he said, as if he had the heart of an old woman.

Matsushita must have sensed the implications behind his words. She was tempted to ask him if he knew anything about it, but she held her ground.

“We're in a hurry, and I don't think we can play word games forever, you know? Everyone.” She turned around and asked the girls and I.

“Right. Let's get going, we're wasting time talking to him here.”

“She doesn't like you, does she?” Kamuro said, playing with the bad atmosphere in the room. Hashimoto let out a deliberate sigh.

“Maybe. I'm just asking for some reasoning... Anyways, good luck with that.” In the end, Sakayanagi didn't say anything and went into the class we watched earlier.

“That was a little scary...”

Mii-chan, relieved and patting her chest, murmured to Satō, who was standing to her left.

“Huh? Oh, um, yeah. A little bit.”

Whether she heard her or not, Satō's attitude was unnatural here as well.

“Anyway, let's move.”

“Nothing's out of the ordinary. He pretended to be on our side, but he's not afraid to stab us in the back.”

“A sports festival is a sports festival, a cultural festival is a cultural festival. In the end, there are competitions in which our competitors are from other classes. Sakayanagi's class is an enemy to be defeated, as well as Ryūen's class. You wouldn't trust them, would you?”

If we stood around here, we would soon run into Class A again. We all wanted to avoid that, so we decided to look for another potential location.

“Hashimoto-kun said something earlier, did you guys catch it?” Maezono says crisply.

In the process of preparing for the maid café, Horikita and I informed only one member about the deal with Ryūen ahead of time. They must've felt uneasy after being shaken up.

“It's a certainty that we'll cooperate with Ryūen-kun's class in the upcoming cultural festival, right?”

“Yes. When we cooperated with each other at the sports festival, we also talked about working together during the cultural festival.”

The content of the two classes' presentations shouldn't be similar to each other. Avoid similar or competing stalls in terms of location. The two parties should be able to efficiently exchange staff, temporarily loan out staff, and follow up on each other's work. Agreements to prepare for unforeseen circumstances, even if they're only minor arrangements.

“I didn't care so much about it during the sports festival because it went well, but when they said something like that, I couldn't help but feel uneasy... Are you sure you're okay with trusting them?”

“It's true that it's difficult to trust Ryūen-kun personally. That's why I put Katsuragi-kun in between the two of us. I'm sure It'll be fine.”

“I want to believe you too. But didn't Hashimoto-kun seem to know something?”

“Yes, I felt it too. Even if he doesn't betray you, isn't it conceivable that the cooperation was leaked?”

“The ones who know are myself and Ayanokōji-kun. Then there are the four of you who started the maid café. In Ryūen's class, there's Katsuragi. He may have told other important classmates, but I don't see the benefit of leaking it.”

Horikita explained to them that it was improbable for the information to be leaked.

“I agree with Horikita. I don't think they expected Horikita and Ryūen to team up to beat Class A after the sports festival incident. I'm just wary that the next one will be like that. There may be similar contacts and probes in the future, but you shouldn't worry about it,” I casually followed up.

“Yeah, right. I understand.”

Maezono and Mii-chan nodded their heads, and Matsushita and Satō reassured me again.

Afterwards, we returned to the classroom and gathered to make a final decision.

“I think we're going to take a majority vote among the members here on where we're going to open the café. Is that okay?”

“What if the opinions are evenly split?”

“We'll figure that out then. Let's try it once first. Rock for first floor, paper for second floor, and scissors for third floor. Okay?”

Mii-chan recited it in a whisper, perhaps to avoid confusion, and then looked at her palm.

“Here we go.”

The six of us, including me, simultaneously expressed our desired floor with our hands. At first glance, it's a clear decision. The result was four “rocks”, two “papers”, and zero “scissors”.

The third floor was eliminated because of the time and effort required to move to the third floor. I chose paper in order to reduce the initial cost, but it would not be a bad choice to choose the first floor for its convenience. The other paper was Matsushita.

Anyway, this was a step forward as the application for the first floor had been decided.

“I'll apply right away. There are still a lot of classes that are waiting to see what happens, and it would be troublesome if they were taken.”

Using her cell phone, Horikita immediately began working on an application to hold the ground floor.

“So, are we done for the day?”

“No, I have something to tell you first.”

I had been gathering information about maid cafés until recently. I should probably mention that the main target of maid cafés is men. There were many families among the festival's guests, but basically, male customers were the main target.

“I don't think there will be any female customers, but in terms of ratio, there'll be a considerable difference.”

This was what anyone would imagine, without having to do any research.

“I heard that there are butler cafés in the world, the opposite of maid cafés. The butler isn’t a girl, but a dressed up man.”

Matsushita and the others, perhaps not having heard this information before, were surprised and impressed.

“Maids and butlers are both a type of concept café.”

“You know a lot too, Horikita.”

“I’ll at least gather information. You can decide if it’s useful or not after you learn it.”

I should say that was as good as it gets.

“Then let’s move on. The most important and indispensable thing is cleanliness. I think we should take that into consideration as well as the floors in holding the classes in the special building.”

Each classroom was used very differently compared to other rooms.

“Floors, walls, ceilings, and other chairs also vary a bit in damage due to age. I’d like you to check that as well so that you don’t miss anything.”

“That’s important. Even if we do some cleaning ourselves, there are some things we can’t cover up. The cleaner it is, the better it will be for the store.”

Everyone here agreed and began looking around the classroom again. The consciousness that had previously been directed solely toward convenience and the outside landscape would begin to change.

“And also about the uniforms, we shouldn’t push the eroticism too blatantly.” “Eh?! What did you say?” Horikita looked shocked.

“Eroticism. Eros and eroticism have been seen as important elements in art since ancient times. Showing underwear and the like is out of the question, but it’s important, however, not to refuse the hope that it might be visible.”

Horikita probably wasn’t able to get her head around that point.

“Ayanokōji-kun... Aren’t you awfully knowledgeable?”

“Since I’m in charge of running the maid café, of course I can’t cut corners. I studied to be as helpful as possible.”

It was also reassuring to know that there were several students in the class who were very knowledgeable about this kind of topic. Of course, I avoided mentioning that Horikita’s class was going to have a maid café, and approached them on the assumption that I was personally interested. It was a little distressing, though, that some of the students who mistakenly thought I awakened as an otaku offered me an unusual degree of hospitality and instruction, saying that they wouldn’t mind receiving nothing in return if it would increase the number of like-minded people in the class.

“May I continue?”

“Umm, yes, go ahead...”

No one seemed to stop me, so I was allowed to talk about what it was like to be a maid for a while after that. It was important for those of us who actually wear maid's uniforms to understand this. It would also be possible to respond to customers in a conscious way.

“I also thought about a sales strategy. In addition to providing food and drinks, we'll sell the right to take pictures, called Cheki. Using a specialized camera, the price would be 800 points for a photo of one maid. For a photo session with a customer, the price would be 1,200 points. In order to reduce costs, I suggested using a printer to print out the photos after taking them with a cell phone, but the Professor, who taught me this, rejected the idea. He said, ‘If you neglect quality for the sake of profit, no one will pay attention to you.’”

If we made the most of it, the photo sales could be as good as the food sales.

“But you have to worry about holding film inventory, don't you?”

“No, I'm bullish on the film. We have a plan to sell out. The condition, of course, is that we don't release the photos. Also, under Horikita's leadership, the boys have begun setting up a food stall, but the food here should also be linked to the maid café.”

When I finished speaking, Horikita coughed after a moment of silence.

“The competition for restaurants will inevitably be high as there are signs of multiple booths, including the other grades. So we'll specialize in snacks while keeping our prices low.”

“That won't make us that much money, will it?”

“It's essential we use it as a stepping stone to our main goal, the maid café. We can reduce the price of the tickets for one drink, which can then be used at the maid café for those who purchased said ticket.”

We needed to make people aware of the maid café and then get them to come to the special building when the time comes.

In short, it was an effective advertisement strategy.

2

After the meeting for the maid café, I went to Keyaki Mall.

Today, I was going to do a price survey on foodstuffs. This includes items sold in the mall and those available on the Internet. It's important to be able to prepare high quality food at the lowest possible price. If I invited Kei, it would turn into a date instead of a reconnaissance, so I would do it alone today. On the way to

the supermarket, I found a man staring at a map of the building. I was a little bothered by his rather grim face, so I decided to talk to him.

“You were the center of attention today, Sudō.”

He looked back, a little startled, as if he hadn't noticed me until I got closer.

“Eh? Oh Ayanokōji? What do you mean, the center of attention?”

“I’m talking about the midterms.”

“Oh, you mean that? I'm glad to hear that, I guess I got what I expected given the amount of studying I did.”

Apparently, after the midterm, he even graded himself in detail.

“I bet you'd be surprised to see what you looked like when you first entered the school.”

“Haha, no doubt. I think my past self would be yelling like, ‘What the hell? What's the use of studying and memorizing words and formulas? You should practice basketball more instead of wasting your time like that!’”

Sudō replied, imagining himself in the past. I felt compelled to ask Sudō one question, so I decided to act on it.

“If your past self did actually tell you, ‘Don't waste your time.’ What would you say back?”

“Huh? Well...” After thinking for a moment, Sudō formed his own answer. “You can't even remember simple formulas, what are you?”

It was a brilliant and uncharacteristic response, but it's also true that the old Sudō was not a one-trick pony.

“I'm going to become a professional basketball player, so it doesn't matter,” he would reply.

“Ugh, fine! What's the right response in that case? Isn't a professional with brains one step ahead of you? It's a little tricky when you can't reason with.” Sudō laughs bitterly as he racks his brains. “To be honest, I'm getting impatient since it's getting a little more difficult to understand. Up until now, once I got the hang of it, it went pretty smoothly...”

Sudō, who's been making up for his educational setbacks by trying his hardest now, seemed anxious and impatient. It was as if someone restarted from the junior high school level, or in Sudō's case, elementary school level. Now that he's caught up to the average second-year high school student, did he realize that he's in a stagnant period?

Although the 11th place result he acquired this time, which is higher than half of the class, is something to be proud of, I fear that the momentum will come to a halt here. From here on out, it will no longer be a matter of simply increasing study time. Factors other than effort, understanding, efficiency, and talent are probably required in a more complex way.

“Anyways, what’s up? What did you want from me?”

“Nothing in particular, I was just a little curious. Aren't you supposed to be at club activities today?”

I was curious as to why exactly Sudō was at Keyaki Mall at this time of the day. Even though the cultural festival was approaching, club activities were still taking place.

“I had to take some time off today.”

“That's unusual.”

At a quick glance, he doesn't seem to be in bad shape.

“I just had another problem...”

“Another problem?”

“Lately, my eyesight’s been deteriorating to the point where I'm aware of it.” He said and stared off into the distance.

“I've always had a clear vision since I was a little kid, but lately it's been strange.”

So the adverse effects of his dedication to his studies were changing Sudō's physical and mental condition.

For an athlete, eyesight is important. If his eyesight were to deteriorate in the future, it would probably affect his game. Of course, glasses or contact lenses can greatly compensate for this, but even so, good eyesight is better than nothing.

“I'm looking for an optician to measure my eyesight. I've never been to one before, and I was wondering where it was.”

“So you've been staring at a guide map. If you're feeling a strong sense that your eyesight is declining, there's a good chance that your eyesight is actually deteriorating.”

“Even if my eyesight is going to be failing in the future, I'm going to keep studying, man. I mean, I'm dying for basketball and I'm not going to stop. But, while I dream of becoming a pro, I'm starting to think that I might have other options.”

“Other options?”

“Don't laugh, okay?”

“I won't.”

“I thought I could go to a normal university and continue my studies, and even if I could force my way into the pros because of my academics, there's no way they'd use me in the sports world if I'm not good enough. If that's the case, then I can get into the university I want to go to and do my best.”

Studying, which he began reluctantly, brought about a major change in Sudō's thinking.

“You can go to university and become a professional after graduation, right?”

“Yeah, that's right.”

It's not that one has to branch off the path to a profession from high school.

Until now, Sudō only thought about the path from high school graduate to professional, but now he's thought of the option to go on to university. His own path will be further subdivided as well.

“Ah.” Sudō noticed something out of the corner of his eye..

I also turned my gaze to the sight of Akito and Haruka's backs.

“It's not a date, is it?”

“I guess not.”

If one were to look at the rear view from a distance, it would appear as if a couple was walking. But we classmates know exactly what kind of state the two are in now.

“Can we really just leave them alone?”

“It wouldn't matter if we told them anything now anyways.”

“That may be true, but...” Sudō clenched his fists, his teeth grinding. “I wasn't particularly close to Sakura, but I've had similar experiences.”

Sudō used to hang out with Yamauchi so much that he was once called one of the three idiots alongside Ike.

That must be why Yamauchi's withdrawal was particularly painful for him.

“But I guess it's nothing compared to what I was like back then. I couldn't even go so far as to say that I would expel myself in his place.”

For Haruka, it seemed like her school life was equal in value, or even more so, to Airi's.

“If you have any trouble, you can always tell me. Well, I'm sure you don't need my help, Ayanokōji.”

“That's not true. If there's anything I want to discuss with you, I won't hesitate to do so.”

“Sounds good, man. I better head out, see you later, Ayanokōji.”

I said goodbye to Sudō and headed for the supermarket.

3

The next morning, I met up with Kei downstairs in the dormitory.

“Sorry Kiyotaka, have you been waiting?”

“Not really. Shall we go then?”

Kei, who was standing beside me, took my hand without hesitation and we started walking. The act of holding hands and walking side by side like this was not uncommon anymore.

“Yesterday... Thanks for staying up with me until late. I'm very happy.” Kei squeezed my hand while blushing a little.

“But it'd be a problem if we get caught.”

Despite already being past the curfew, Kei remained in my room last night. Fortunately, there seemed to be no witnesses when she left, so we won't be penalized.

“Ahaha, indeed.”

For some reason, Kei's profile looked reliable. Is it possible for her to change this much in half a day?

“Did it hurt?”

“Do you even have to ask?”

“Is it that bad?”

“No, but... how do I put this, I thought I was used to it.” Although a little embarrassed, Kei was delighted.

“In a way, it was my first time so I probably hadn't sorted my thoughts yet. However, I feel reassured that you ignored the curfew and stayed with me the whole time.”

That's true, who knows what would've happened if I hadn't been there.

“I see.”

Kei ascended another step up on the staircase of adulthood after yesterday's experience. Although she had support behind her, she succeeded in standing her ground. It was a big improvement from the time she thought she could never stand anymore.

Learning to get up on your own when you fall was important for Kei, a special case that didn't happen overnight like other students.

“G-Good morning, Kei-chan.”

As soon as we arrived at the classroom, Satō, who arrived early, spotted Kei and got up to run to her.

“Good morning, Maya ~”

Kei, giving me a gaze, excused herself and immediately started closely chatting with Satō.

Although initially somewhat awkward, they soon began their usual chit-chat, or maybe it was even friendlier than usual. The circle of happiness that started with the two of them began to spread to the other girls, even to students that aren't typically involved, such as Shinohara and Mii-chan, who've been struggling for a while.

As a leader, Horikita is gradually starting to show her power and awakening her skills to unite the class, but she's lacking something. The ability to create, attract, and unify a small group. Without a doubt, Kei possesses these qualities. The road to the festival seemed to be going well regarding these matters, which are indispensable for strengthening the class, but suddenly news of an incident with the potential to create a major problem arised.

"Hey, is it true that our class is going to have a maid café?"

Ike bursted into the classroom, and shouted out to the rest of the class.

Maezono stood up in surprise since this was a matter that was kept secret from all but a few students.

The people who came up with the idea, such as Satō, Matsushita, and Mii-chan, all looked at each other.

Only some of the girls who were confirmed as staff and those who were asked to participate were aware of the maid café. Then came Horikita, who was in charge of organizing the festival.

Horikita calmly listened to Ike's story without showing any impatience. If she overreacted, it would reveal to the whole class that they were really going to have a maid café. And it would also be exposed to the other classes.

However, that element was lost when Maezono and the others strongly reacted to Ike's initial exclamation. Since he claimed it was a maid café, it was highly unlikely that he was just making it up as he went along.

"Where did you hear this, Ike-san?"

"Where did I hear? Well uh..." Ike, frightened by Maezono's stiff, angry look, chokes on his words. "Just now, in the lobby, Ishizaki, Suzuki... and Nomura, the three of them were talking about it as loud as they could."

"Hey Horikita-san, what does he mean? It was still supposed to be a secret, right?"

Matsushita, who remembered the contact from Hashimoto, approached us.

"Yes. I thought it was unthinkable, but I guess I was naive."

The answer was clear when Ishizaki and the others were making a fuss.

"Does this mean that Ryūen-kun betrayed us after all? You said it was okay, didn't you, Horikita-san?"

As Maezono angrily confronted Horikita, the classroom door opened and Sudō came in, looking a little flustered.

"Hey! Ryūen and the others are coming this way."

"I guess I'll just have to go greet them. You guys stay inside the classroom and act like adults."

Deciding that the conversation would get complicated if an outsider joined in, Horikita got up from her seat and decided to greet Ryūen in the hallway.

“Yo, it’s Suzune. You wouldn’t believe how badly I missed you.”

Ryūen led the way, with Ishizaki, Albert, and Kaneda following behind.

“I was wondering what you’re doing here with such boisterous students.”

“I have something to tell you guys today. Hey, Ishizaki?”

“Y-yes.”

Ishizaki looked around the room with a slightly nervous look on his face. The students who were told not to leave the class were also observing, perhaps because they were curious about what was going on and couldn't resist.

Maezono, in particular, was glaring at Ryuen without hiding her annoyance.

“It seems these guys have caught onto all the fuss that’s been going about.”

Ryūen, sensing the mood, replied with a laugh.

“I'm honestly surprised. You really don't mind doing the unpredictable.”

“Kuku, predictable behavior is boring, isn't it?”

Ryūen began to explain carefully so that Ike and the others, who hadn't grasped the situation, could understand.

“At Suzune’s proposal, your class and I formed a cooperative relationship at the sports festival. And we were planning to join forces early on for this year's cultural festival as well.”

To be precise, I was the one who initiated the request for cooperation in the sports festival, but that's a trivial detail here.

Horikita and Ryūen agreed to continue working together for the cultural festival going forward.

“We were supposed to make sure that the contents of our exhibits do not conflict with each other. Discuss stall locations. Be able to lend and borrow students and follow up with them as needed. Was that correct?”

“That’s correct. We were planning to follow up with everyone a little further down the road. We were told early on about the content of the stalls and yesterday about the location.” Kaneda smirked as he added details.

“You intended to betray us from the very beginning, but you hid it until today because you were waiting for us to find out where we were going to open our stall. I'm sorry, but we’re going to have to renegotiate to cooperate.”

“That's a pretty big demand for a fresh start, isn't it? You unilaterally found out the location of our stall and even revealed our exhibit.”

“Revealed? Ishizaki and his friends were just chatting with each other. It just so happened that your class and the other classes overheard them. It's pretty rude of them to listen in, isn't it?”

My class slowly began to understand the situation.

“Is what you just said true, Horikita-san?”

Yōsuke asked, since Horikita had not yet gotten around to informing the rest of the class of the ongoing cooperative relationship with Ryūen's class.

"I was going to tell you when everything was finalized..."

The plan was nearly in the final stage, but it was turned upside down at the last moment. Our classmates, including Yosuke, were informed by such a scene.

"May I ask you why, just in case? What's the benefit in betraying us? Did you team up with Sakayanagi-san, or Ichinose-san and the others?"

"I helped you in the sports festival to destroy Class A. You guys won the game and got a taste of the good stuff, didn't you?"

We both picked up wins in the sports festival, but we were 100 points ahead in class points as a result.

"We were on equal terms. The same goes for the cultural festival proposal."

"But at the end of the day, it doesn't matter if we crush class A, if you B's rise to the same position. It won't win us many class points, but we'll win the next festival. We'll have the same concept as you guys."

"Does that mean a maid café?"

It was Maezono who immediately responded to the keyword "same".

"Well, I'll change the concept a little but it is something similar."

It's not so important if the event is leaked. However, the fact that they dare to use the same idea on the same stage would be a fatal blow to Horikita's class, and that must've been clear to our planners and classmates, including Maezono.

First through fourth; they declared competing for one of the four placements that would earn them 100 class points.

"You mean you're going to go out of your way to compete in the same genre? It doesn't sound like it would be beneficial to you."

"Sure, it's probably riskier than the other ideas when it comes to competing for customers. But so what? We have a plan to outsell you and get to the top."

I don't get Ryūen's logic behind coming all the way here to tell us so.

"So, let's have a more intense competition, Suzune."

"Intense competition?"

The commotion began to grow a little louder, and even Kanzaki and other unrelated students from other classes overheard Ryūen's declaration of war. Hashimoto was watching this somewhat amusedly, probably because he learned of this fact before Horikita's class learned of it.

"The one who earns as many points as possible will receive 5 million points from the other class. Wouldn't that be an interesting match?"

"Are you serious? That doesn't sound like a very sane wager."

"If you ask me, it's only 5 million points."

You can't mobilize class points without permission. However, private points

owned by individuals can be freely handled. He proposed a 'wager' using this logic. This was a one-on-one proposal, separate from the 12-class competition.

Even if we don't take the top rank in the cultural festival and lose, if we win the direct confrontation and get 5 million private points, it would certainly be a hotly contested game.

“Well, I would’ve preferred a more flashy battle with a different opponent, but Student Council President Nagumo ran away, saying that he wouldn’t participate in the festival this time. Well, it wasn’t as if he was running away, but as long as we can't find someone to fight, we have no choice but to confront you guys.”

“Don't decide this on your own. I'm not going to accept such a reckless proposal.”

“Are you going to run away too?”

“You broke the contract, leaked it, and then tried to weasel your way out of it. That's an impossible proposition. I can finally see the true meaning of Katsuragi-kun’s words in regards to the avoidance of a penalty agreement.”

“That doesn't matter anymore. Don't you have confidence in your ability to win a fight with me?”

“I didn't say that.”

“Oh yeah?”

“You've done whatever you want so far, and even I can't keep quiet about it. I will certainly consider the bet you proposed.”

“Kukuku, so you say. I’ll be waiting for your answer, Suzune.”

Perhaps having finished his business with us, Ryūen pulled away as if satisfied. As he turned around, his group followed and the others made way for them.

As Ryūen and the others left, students from other classes, who had been spectators, began to approach.

Hashimoto, whose eyes met mine, smiled thinly and shrugged his shoulders. It was as if to say, “Did you catch that we’re teaming up with Ryūen?” He looked as if he wanted to say so.

Although this was already known to the entire second-year students and to the entire grade, the maid café's performance, including Ryūen's surprise participation in the event, will be in a difficult environment.

I wouldn’t be surprised if other classes considering the same idea were now changing plans. But we’ve already started a lot of preparations.

“What are you going to do, Horikita-san? We're pretty well prepared, aren't we..?”

“Is Ryūen really going to turn his class into a maid café?”

Maezono and the others approached Horikita, letting some of the bottled up anxiety and frustration spill out.

“I believe it’s very likely. I don’t think it’s just a threat.”

“How about we shift to a different concept now?”

Yōsuke suggested, considering that option in order to turn things around, but...

“We can’t do that. Part of the budget’s already invested.”

We’ve already ordered as much as we could for the maid’s uniforms and so on. We can’t throw away the costs we’ve spent so far. If we stop, we’d be throwing away precious funds. We need to re-evaluate how we can get around in the future with our dwindling time.

We have truly fallen into a dangerous situation.

“We have no choice but to take advantage of this situation and turn it into an opportunity to get as many private points as we can by taking the gamble!”

That is, of course, if the classmates agree to this proposal. Because in order to have a large sum of money available, the whole class would have to work together to raise it.

4

Excluding some cases, such as Horikita’s class being exposed through an act of betrayal, it’s ostensibly unknown until the day of the event which stall locations each class has and what kind of stand they decided on. However, the bigger the scale of the event, the more preparations must be made in advance for the day of the event.

In fact, each of the classes began steadily working on the places where they were expected to set up their stalls. In the midst of all this, surprising information came to light from the 3rd year Class A, led by Miyabi Nagumo.

Rumors flew that they were going to rent out a large space in the gymnasium and put on an exhibit combining a “haunted house” and a “maze,” as if they had no intention of hiding it from the start.

Perhaps it wasn’t Nagumo’s plan, but the consensus of the class was to let them do what they want. They were handling the festival in a way that made others think that winning was secondary.

Just looking at the props being brought in from afar, one can see that a reasonable amount of money was invested. As if to prove this, the 3rd year Class A finally announced their own pre-opening yesterday. They allowed students who

wanted to experience the maze haunted house and began to solicit opinions. I can't help but feel their determination to present a high-quality exhibition to the guests on the day of the festival.

As someone who's new to the cultural festival, I wanted to experience firsthand what the other classes were going to put on, no matter what form it took. After school, I went to the gymnasium to participate in the pre-open event. Perhaps because the pre-opening was held over several days, there weren't many first-year and second-year students in the gym, even on the first day of the event.

The gymnasium, with its dimmed lights, had a slightly frightening atmosphere. Not long after I got to the end of the line, I heard a familiar voice.

"That's great of the president. I can't believe he's going to show it off to the public so openly."

"If it's this big, it's not easy to keep it hidden. It was a wise decision to release the information early if it was also for practice."

I briefly glanced back and saw that the two approaching me were Ichinose and Kanzaki. Apparently, like me, they came to see how things were going and to scout the area.

"Ah..."

As they were about to line up, my presence naturally came into their line of sight. Ichinose was the first to react, bowing her head and averting her eyes.

Kanzaki silently took one look at Ichinose and I and got in line. An awkward silence was setting, and the line didn't move as fast as I would've liked. The third-year students also weren't able to proceed smoothly, perhaps because it was the first day.

"Yes, that's right. I'm sorry, Kanzaki-kun, but can I leave it to you...?"

It was obviously a random request, but Kanzaki nodded his head in acceptance without question.

"Well, see you later."

Ichinose, who's never capable of rudeness, passed on a few words to me as well and left the line. Only Kanzaki and I were left behind, the atmosphere was heavy. Even a student who knew nothing about the situation was likely to realize a bit of the reason. Especially for Kanzaki, the situation would be clearer than daylight.

"How are you doing?"

I tried asking him something but Kanzaki's face turned grim.

"Do you think I'm doing good?"

There was no way that Ichinose's class, which was slowly dropping class points, could be in good shape.

It would've sounded like a partial provocation.

I filled in my name and received an explanation of the rules. The rules were basically bare minimum manners.

Cell phone use is forbidden in the exhibition, always put your phone on silent mode. No loud chit-chat. Do not stay inside for no reason. Basically, don't touch the production with your hands.

By the time I finished reading the rules, Kanzaki left the line and turned his back to me. He was probably waiting for Ichinose to come back. I wasn't sure when she'd be back but I have a feeling it'll be after I'm long gone.

After signing the agreement and stepping away from Kanzaki, I stepped inside. The walls of the haunted house are naturally narrow and visibility is quite poor. The light, which seemed to have been bought at a uniform store, was wrapped with tape, perhaps to narrow down the light source, so it doesn't serve much purpose as a light.

Recently, I've often used the Internet to research cultural festivals, but I wonder if it's possible to produce such high quality displays. I was honestly surprised at the third-year's advanced technical skills, or rather, the third-year Class A's.

I ignored the ghosts and began observing more carefully. It's not surprising, but the atmosphere was basically created with decorated ornaments, and most of the important and frightening parts were hand-made.

The monster's long necks were timed to the incoming guests as the students lurked behind them.

The fallen warrior that jumped out and drew his sword, of course, was done by someone else.

There were several tricks that were clearly still in production, but in the festival, they'll be completed with improved quality.

Although it may not be as popular with adults, it may be very well-liked by their families, especially the children. If the price is high, people tend to shy away, but if it is desired by children, their purse strings will be loosened. This will be an important factor in further solidifying the policy of the maid café.

We were about halfway down the exhibition when we came to a sign that said, "Take a left."

Just as I was about to follow the sign, a shadow moved in my field of vision. It seemed to be trying to scare me again with a new trick.

"Whoa! Ah ah ah!"

I was supposed to be the one screaming, but the ghost jumped out, stumbled on a step in front of me, and fell over. I didn't help them because I thought it might be staged, but when I saw them screaming in agony, I was convinced that it was an unexpected accident.

In this darkness, it was no wonder such an accident happened...
“Ouch, ouch!!!”
It turned out to be Asahina Nazuna, a third-year Class A student.



“Are you okay, senpai?”

It's a scary image in a way, reaching out to a ghost that shouldn't be alive.

“Oh, thank you for that.”

Apparently unable to stand on her own, she sat down on the ground. I couldn't just leave her there, so I decided to lend a hand.

“Which way's the exit?”

“What? The exit? Maybe this way... or... that way..?”

“If you're worried, let's turn around.”

I remember the way to the entrance, so I should be able to get back soon with a little help.

“Don't worry, trust your senpai..!”

She raised her voice in pain. It was because she tried faking a decisive display in vain. It was a very unreliable deception, but it would be better to listen to a senior.

It would be faster than me feeling my way to the exit from scratch. After a bit of hesitation and a few screams of terror from my classmates, I reach the exit with my scared senpai in tow.

I intended to immediately walk away, leaving Asahina in charge of the third-year booth, but due to the pre-opening, there didn't seem to be any students available.

“Don't worry about me. Thank you, Ayanokōji-kun. I'm sure I'll be fine after a little rest.”

I crouched down to check her ankle.

“Woah what are you doing?”

“Let me see.”

“Oh, um, sure...”

It's too early to say it was just a slight twist, but it's starting to swell. If she doesn't get proper treatment, it could have repercussions later.

“I think you should go to the infirmary. Wouldn't it be hard to be out of the lineup at the festival?”

“Yeah, I guess. Yeah, I think I'll do that.”

She tried to stand up and walk alone, but when she realized the pain wouldn't allow her to do so, she shifted her plan to standing on only her left leg.

However, every time she took a small jump, the impact circulated to her right leg, resulting in a bitter and agonized expression.

“I'll lend you a hand after all.”

“Ugh... but...”

I'm sure her hesitance is partly due to embarrassment, but it seems there are other reasons why she isn't willing to lend me her hand.

“Are you worried Nagumo might see us?”

“How did you know...?”

“Well, I just had a suspicion.”

“If he saw Ayanokōji-kun getting involved with a Class A student, it would probably stir some trouble for you. I can't let myself trouble you, can I?”

It seems she's more worried about me than herself.

“There's no need to worry. I'm sure Nagumo, the student council president, doesn't take me seriously anymore.”

“Is that so?”

“I think he realized that he was being overbearing.”

I decided to lend Asahina a hand and take her to the infirmary.

“Thanks, you know.”

She was a bit conspicuously dressed, which was a problem, but I guess that couldn't be helped. I lent her a shoulder and we made it to the infirmary with a few curious stares. The doctor immediately sat her down on the bed to give her some treatment.

Asahina was instructed to wait a little before leaving. As I was about to leave, she called out to me.

“Speaking of which, Ayanokōji's class was met with a disaster weren't you?”

Missing my chance to leave, I turned around and was left with no choice but to speak.

“Are you talking about leaked information regarding the maid café?”

“Yes.”

This morning, that very scheme was carried out by the hands of Ryūen.

The whole school got to know about the maid café event we were secretly working on. Of course, there are more disadvantages to having your idea known at an early stage.

“Ryūen's class also decided to participate in a maid café.”

Due to the fact we have a competitor, we'll have to compete for the same customers.

“We can only hope that, by having two classes competing with similar concepts, there will be no others following the trend.”

“If you have three or four classes with the same exhibit, it's only going to make the competition for customers much worse.”

Chasing after them will only increase the risk. It's not impossible for us to craft a strategy to attain a one-sided victory, but it won't be easy to beat those of us who are devoting a lot of resources to the event. Soon after, the doctor brought bandages and other treatment tools. We ended up observing the treatment process.

The treatment was over quickly, and the doctor said that if she waited a few days in a rested state, she should be able to walk without any problems. When it became clear that there would be no issue with the festival, Asahina simultaneously let out the pain and relief she was enduring.

“Oh, thank God. I didn't want to bother the class with something like this.”

“The results won't change the placement of the classes, so it's not something you need to worry about, is it?”

If they got last place at the festival, they wouldn't lose any class points.

“That's not going to happen. But there's nothing better than having lots of class points, you know. There are even quite a few of my classmates that are against Miyabi being hands-off this time.”

Asahina continued with her eyes downcast.

“Students who decide not to win need as many class points as possible, right? Even at the cultural festival, if you placed first, that's more private points you can get before graduation.”

Due to the laws set in place by Nagumo, it's only natural that they would want as many private points as possible in order to graduate from Class A.

Meanwhile, Class A can't completely abandon the rest of the classes. They'll need to continue to participate just like other students.

“In case you're wondering, Nagumo is saying that he's going to let the non-A's compete and pick one student from the class that takes first place,” she said.

As a result, the complaints from the three other classes won't be as strong. But even then, they can't be completely suppressed without showing willingness to get as many class points as possible.

The pressure on Class A, which has no interest in winning, comes through with different circumstances.

“You know what we were talking about earlier, right? How Miyabi wasn't keeping an eye on you anymore?”

“What about it?”

“At first I thought that was true. But I think that might be false.”

“Why is that?”

“There was never really a clear winner between you and Miyabi, was there?”

“That's true.”

Nagumo and I never went head to head to settle our dispute for good.

“If that's the case, then I don't think it's over.”

“I don't have the intention to fight him.”

It's simply a waste of time regarding this entire ordeal.

“I don't think that even matters. It's not entirely about you anymore, Ayanokōji-kun. Miyabi could start targeting people close to you.”

Having watched Nagumo by her side for the past three years, Asahina could clearly envision it.

“Like former student council president Horikita, Nagumo likes to compete, doesn't he?”

“Uh, yeah, that's for sure.”

“Has Nagumo ever been clearly beaten by someone or something? Has he ever had a slight setback?”

Although, I'm sure you can guess that by looking at Nagumo's attitude up to now.

“Miyabi's never stumbled, at least not to my knowledge.”

Nagumo's classmates have an unshakable trust in him.

“It would be an unquestionable fact that Student Council President Nagumo is an excellent person. If he wasn't competent, it would be impossible for him to achieve his OAA or become student council president.”

There are more than a few areas where political maneuvering alone cannot help.

“That guy likes being number one. That's why he fought to be the top of this school. In the end, he even became the student council president, so he's really a man of his word.”

“However, if you asked me whether or not Nagumo is the strongest student, I would immediately deny it.”

“How can that be...? He's never lost to anyone in particular.” Asahina was surprised by my words.

“I think it's because he's never had good opponents.” It's not that Nagumo's weak but there's no doubt that his opponents were weak. “I think his greatest misfortune was that he didn't have anyone equally as capable, or even more so, willing to compete with him in his year.”

“You mean he didn't have a good... Rival?”

“That's right.”

Unfortunately, by competing only with lower-ranked students, Nagumo was able to attain number one without much effort. Of course, he may have originally started as second or third best, but he soon overtook the others and became the sole runner.

When he glanced back after finishing the race, he saw that no one was chasing him.

All of them either gave up and walked or stopped altogether because they were incapable of beating Nagumo.

At times, there may have been people around him who were as talented as him, such as Kiryūin, but if they didn't try to catch up and overtake Nagumo, they

were no different than weeds and pebbles on the side of the road. The fact that he didn't experience the extremity and difficulty of competition alongside the frustration of losing from the outset can be seen as the cause of Nagumo's warped thinking.

The fact that he's planning and executing strange revenge tactics against me isn't out of any sense of defeat or inferiority, but only to bring me to the forefront of the stage.

When he asked for a one-on-one match at the sports festival, he never thought he would lose. Of course, he didn't know everything about me, but even if he had seen my full strength up close, Nagumo wouldn't have doubted his victory.

Nagumo had never experienced losing, rather, only winning streak after winning streak.

In the true sense of the word, Nagumo Miyabi is a man who has never known defeat.

"I wish we could just stop fighting in this school."

"Is that so?"

"I just hope nothing will happen to me..."

This cultural festival has blatantly shown the change in Nagumo's behaviour, which was indirectly conveyed to the public. To the masses, it would appear that Nagumo's belligerence and curiosity have simply been suppressed. In reality, this is not true. This is merely the calm before the storm. Nagumo will take action against me or others after this. It may not be enough to expel one or two people. The price for neglecting Nagumo... it wouldn't be unexpected if numerous people get expelled. If we leave a bomb to balloon up to a dangerous level, there's no doubt it'll have catastrophic consequences.

I recalled Horikita Manabu's words, "Nagumo's methods make a lot of people unhappy." That is half true. Of course, I don't deny that I played a part in the seniors' misery, but the original plan was to just mess with Nagumo's emotions and thought process. I wasn't able to achieve the latter. Students who wouldn't have originally graduated in Class A due to Nagumo's methods are indeed getting that chance. Not only third-year students, but also first-year and second-year students have received class transfer tickets, albeit on a limited basis. Although there are restrictions on how to use them, they are products that previously didn't exist. If it had concerned me up until last year, I would've watched Nagumo's behavior with more interest.

"I'm starting to get a little interested in Student Council President Nagumo."

"Did I hear you right?"

"Mhm."

An interest that I've never felt before, not even once, welled up from the depths of my heart.

"I knew you were strange."

After casting her gaze down at her bandaged leg, Asahina gave a small laugh.

"It may have been a coincidence that we met, but maybe that's why Nagumo wants to fight."

Looking back at this "coincidence," it was also a major factor in my making contact with Asahina.

Coincidence.

I was able to formulate a conclusion in my conversation with her.

The coincidences I just mentioned are uncontrollable. However, it does not mean that they are completely uncontrollable.

Coincidences can change the form of the conversation, depending on your point of view and the way you look at it.

Asahina Nazuna, the amulet, the existence of coincidences, and Nagumo Miyabi. This is not bad for a single test case.

Just as success awaits us after a series of failed experiments.

5

Leaving Asahina in the infirmary, I returned to the gymnasium to check on Kanzaki, who I was curious about, and Ichinose, who I expected to have returned. If I stood out too much, it would result in the same situation again, so I walked farther away from the entrance.

The fact that I couldn't see Kanzaki in the line made me wonder if he was inside or if he'd already left. However, by the looks of things, it was clear that he would be waiting for Ichinose's return.

There was a bit of a panic when I exited with Asahina, who was acting oddly, so I don't think Kanzaki, who was waiting for Ichinose's return and my departure, would've missed it. Then I went to the infirmary and took about 15 minutes to come back. I wouldn't have been surprised if Ichinose was still inside if he had been in the vicinity, unless he returned immediately after that.

While making overall observations, I decided to pay attention to the faces of the students leaving.

A few minutes later, Kanzaki slowly appeared from the exit. I wondered if he was still in the gymnasium, but what surprised me was what came after that.

I thought for sure Ichinose was next to him, but Kanzaki was alone. She was not lagging behind, nor did he seem to be concerned about what was behind him.

I thought he was just going to walk away, but then he turned around and saw me.

He then approached me after staring for a few seconds.

“You're back after all. It seems her injuries were not too serious.”

If it had been a big deal, it would've been hard to believe that I was just standing there like this, taking it easy.

I guess that's what Kanzaki deduced.

“Are you wondering why Ichinose isn't here?”

“To be honest, a little.”

“I didn't call her because I was worried about the possibility of bumping into you coming back from the infirmary. Besides, there are still a few days left for the pre-opening.”

So Ichinose will be given time to observe the event, even if she doesn't rush.

To some extent, the direction of Ichinose's class booth seemed to be set in stone. If it's only a trial run, then she may want to be present for it just to ensure everything runs well, but as I said before, there's still time.

“I want to continue where we left off earlier. Your class seems to be doing quite well.”

It was clear that he was referring to the series of events from the uninhabited island exam to the unanimous special exam, and if we went back a little further, to the start of the second-year.

“We're not unscathed. Unlike Kanzaki's class, we have vacancies. We're also carrying a negative that you can't see just from class points.”

“You're not the only ones with invisible risks, but you've made a big difference in terms of the positive points you can see.” Rather than envy, this was Kanzaki's honest opinion. “Classes like yours will eventually have to fight against Sakayanagi's class.”

One thing that stuck out to me was Kanzaki's somewhat optimistic, one-step-back assessment of his own class.

“Have you given up already? Moving up to Class A?”

“I guess so.”

Kanzaki responded in the affirmative rather than the negative. It isn't difficult to guess what he was thinking. Ichinose's class isn't a disastrous one. It isn't at risk of losing a lot of points for tardiness, absences, behavior issues, and the like, because they're a serious crowd that almost never lose class points and rarely make major mistakes in special exams. But in other words, they don't have the opportunity to make big jumps on special exams.

“No one has yet to notice how the class is slowly sinking. It would still be endearing if they were just pretending not to notice, but they’re all genuinely oblivious.”

“Only you seem to be different.”

“That was until a little while ago; there's no point in rebelling alone.”

“You mean you've given up on trying to change their minds?”

“Our class will never make it to Class A.” Here, Kanzaki said it clearly. “If the possibility has been reduced to zero, the only thing left to do is to find another way. If we are going to sink anyway, we should give as many people as possible a chance to escape.”

“So you're going to move to a different class after accumulating 20 million points?”

“Because Student Council President Nagumo Miyabi has actually implemented this and it’s shown to be effective. Concentrating private points on Ichinose is what we’ve been doing. If we execute this plan to the limit, we can move at least two or three people to Class A. In addition, the existence of class transfer tickets was shown for the first time at the sports festival. Of course, it won't be easy to acquire them, but the increase in options is a genuinely pleasing factor.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“I don't know what I'm doing either.”

It was an uncharacteristic response. Kanzaki paused for a moment and began to search for a better answer.

“I didn't have a place to vent. Maybe that's why.”

If there’s a problem in daily life, it’ll be shared among those close to the student, regardless of whether or not they’re within the same class, and a solution is found. However, when it comes to class problems, the only way out is to give up on achieving Class A and transfer to another class. If someone were to say such a thing in class, it would inevitably be met with discord.

It would be impossible to get a consensus in Ichinose’s class.

“You’re the only person I thought was capable of understanding my thoughts without talking out of turn.”

I see. He believed I was the best outlet to express his negative emotions. Of course, that isn’t the only reason. It seems that he also holds resentment toward me, who has a strong influence on Ichinose.

“I don't care what happened between you and Ichinose or what kind of relationship you two have. The fact that you're having such a bad influence that she can't even do a satisfactory observation of the third-year Class A’s exhibit is a

major issue.”

“It’s a little harsh when you put it that way.”

“You’ll have to forgive me. I’m sure you understand how frustrating it is.”

Kanzaki then raised his hand and told me he’s leaving.

The back of the class strategist who had given up on winning looked one size smaller than usual. It’s a little wild to call him back here, but I can’t just let Kanzaki go home now.

“Can we take some time soon? I’d like to have a little talk about the future.”

“Why not now? We can take some time to talk about what’s to come.”

“I’m sorry, but right now I need to do some research on the third-years. Besides, we can’t make any progress if we start talking about it now.”

In order to discuss the future, we need another piece of the puzzle that’ll allow us to step into it.

“If that’s the case, well, okay. Call me anytime.”

6

It was Friday. I came to a place I don’t usually visit in order to meet a certain student.

After knocking, I opened the door to the student council room, and for a moment, Nagumo Miyabi looked surprised.

There were no students or teachers in sight other than Nagumo, and it seemed that he was all alone today, just as I had been informed by Asahina.

Even for him, my arrival must have been unexpected. I wondered if he’d been watching me just a few minutes ago as I could see his cell phone in his left hand.

I’m sure I was an unwelcome visitor, but he didn’t turn me away and, instead, urged me to come in.

“Excuse me.”

The door leading into the room closed with a slam, and a moment of silence passed between the two of us.

“I waited for you because Nazuna insisted on giving you some time, but I’m not going to assume anything. So, are you here for the student council or for me?”

“I have no business with the student council. I’m here to talk to President Nagumo personally.”

After saying that, he sat back deeper in his chair and placed the cell phone he held in his hand on the desk.

“Well, in that case, I can only commend you for showing your face in front of me. Don’t you think so, Ayanokōuji?”

“I think you're referring to the sports festival, but isn't being sick a legitimate right that’s accepted as a reason for absence?”

“Don't give me that shit, man. I saw you at Keyaki Mall the next day and you looked fine.”

“I got better in a day.”

“That's a blatant lie.”

“It might be true.”

It was a bit of a play on words, but Nagumo seemed to realize that further pursuit was pointless.

“Truth or lie, I don’t really care anymore. Anyway, let me hear your reason for coming here.”

His troublesome attitude must’ve come from the bottom of his heart. He doesn’t even try to hide the fact that he wants to quickly end the discussion. However, such a transparent attitude is also evidence that he is hiding his true feelings.

“May I sit down? I think it's going to be a bit long.”

“You told me before you had no business with me, the student council president. If I wanted to, I could choose to have no business with you too, right?”

As the head of the student council, Nagumo was prepared to listen, even to someone he didn’t like. If he doesn’t want to, he won’t listen to anything. Well, it's only natural.

“If you won't listen to me, I'll leave.”

If Nagumo, as an individual, was too lazy to even converse with me, I had no choice.

However, I don't believe that’s the case. If his interest in me completely vanished, that would be a different story, but deep down, I believe the spark is still there.

In other words, he’ll never refuse. It’s precisely because I’m certain of this that I also took time out of my precious day to visit this place.

After a few moments of silence, Nagumo instructed me to sit down. I moved my chair and sat down so that we could face each other head-on.

“Sorry, I don't have anything to drink.”

“No problem.”

I could tell by the way he was looking at me that he won’t be apologizing for anything else. I guess the only thought he had was, “Why did you come here after all this time?”

“I had no idea that the 3rd year Class A would do a pre-opening. It's normal to think of it as a disadvantage to expose the class's exhibit to the public.”

“I'm also getting stories up here that some stupid class had their event exposed.”

“That's an earful, isn't it? I heard Ryūen visited the student council president Nagumo as well.”

“He was pressing me to bet tens of millions of points with him.”

“I heard you refused.”

“Yeah, well, the game with you is over and so is my school life. As a result, I don't give a shit about the cultural festival. So, there's no need for me to give out any instructions. They can go and make memories during their final moments in high school.”

So he switched to such a stance, where all the information regarding his class's booth is open as he enjoys a normal cultural festival like any other school.

Whether they win first place or twelfth, the third-year Class A remains on top. Nagumo probably doesn't care whether those in Class B and below are complaining.

“But tens of millions? There won't be enough, even if he'll gather it together from his class.”

Ryūen's class, which has high income but heavily spends, doesn't have lined pockets.

“That guy told me he would give me the right to expel any student I wanted, even himself.”

Ryūen was going to use the students themselves as collateral for the funds he couldn't provide.

“Last year I would've taken him up on that offer. I'd be dealing with a separate year, but it would've been interesting if we were playing for expulsion.”

Nagumo remarked he already lost his enthusiasm and interest in the school.

“If you want to compete with me, you can do whatever you want.”

“I understand your personal thoughts. But aren't there many students who won't agree?”

“No one can complain to me, 'cause if they do, their Class A status will no longer be guaranteed. When the festival gets closer, I, or rather the student council, will make a not-so-bad proposal. A little help for a class that's struggling to win.”

“I see. You've thought about it a lot, haven't you?”

“Well, I'm the student council president, after all.” After giving a model answer, Nagumo exhaled a sigh and urged, “Come on, tell me what you came here for.”

“All I want is to have a conversation with the student council president. That's all.”

“I don't exactly believe that.”

“You don't believe me? I'm actually a little surprised with my own actions. Until now, I've been trying to keep my distance from Student Council President Nagumo.”

“I know that very well.”

However, he probably didn't understand the root of why.

“Do you know why?”

“I don't know. I'm sure it's not because you're scared of my ability.”

“Unlike the previous student council president, Horikita Manabu, Student Council President Nagumo attracts the eyes of those around him. It's also because you're a little too dazzling for a shady person like me to face.”

“Sure. But that's just a front, isn't it?”

Nagumo lightly dismissed the pretense of respect and urged me to reveal my true intentions.

“I wasn't interested.”

It's a bit of a stretch, but that's what I said. I'm going to speak my mind. While recognizing a certain level of ability, it's all I could say.

That's why I didn't think I needed to get involved in whatever Nagumo was doing.

“If someone else said what I just heard from your mouth, I might've gotten angry.”

“I didn't realize it was rude.”

“Nah, you don't need to apologize. If you feel that way, that's your business. I'm the one who made you speak your mind,” Nagumo stated, but he quickly added, “But still, if it wasn't you who said that, I'm sure I would've changed their mind right away.”

He wouldn't hesitate to entrap the speaker into taking interest, regardless of what they wished for. With Nagumo's power, that wouldn't be hard to do.

“Soon your term as student council president will be over, and Student Council President Nagumo will remain in Class A and graduate. I thought that would be fine. Until just the other day.”

“You think otherwise now?”

“I had a change of heart. I felt that I could face you directly, and that's why I'm here.”

There's no need for checks and balances, feigned flattery, false joy or anger. It's better for the future to say what's on my mind. I told Nagumo, who was waiting for me to continue explaining the main reason I came here today.

“I have a proposal for President Nagumo. Can I make a challenge to the student council president this time?”

Making such a statement probably never crossed Nagumo’s mind.

“I’m not sold, this isn’t like you.”

A change of heart, such an answer was not enough to convince Nagumo.

“I don’t know when exactly this change of heart came, but it’s too late. You ran away from the last chance I gave you at the sports festival. If I may borrow words from your true feelings, you weren’t interested. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s correct. I know it’s a convenient story.”

“Yeah, you’re right. After having given up three opportunities, and now being asked to play a game on the grounds of a change of heart, there’s no way I can honestly say yes.”

Nagumo didn’t change his position and continued to show no restraint.

“And, get this, it’s the same as what you said earlier about the sports festival. You said you were sick the whole time. I’ve decided that’s an obvious lie. Besides, don’t tell me you’ve forgotten about what happened on the island.”

“Then, would you like to replicate what happened on the island? This time, in the opposite position?”

If Nagumo could smack me in the gut here, I could apologize for my behavior. However, I didn’t think that would be enough to convince the opposing party.

Not when the other party is Nagumo Miyabi.

“You aren’t funny Ayanokōji. It wouldn’t ever be the same knockout. There’s a huge difference in value between you and me.”

Naturally, there was no room for a discussion of the proposal. It was obvious that there was at least that much of a difference between Ayanokōji Kiyotaka and Nagumo Miyabi, at least in this school. One was an ordinary student in the 2nd year Class B, while the other was the leader of the 3rd year Class A and the student council president.

The difference between what we’re capable of was so great that even a comparison was unacceptable.

“Well, I’m going to shelve it because there’s no point in getting into it now. Understand this, Ayanokōji. I’m allowed to challenge you to a fight, but you’re not allowed to challenge me to a fight.”

“I understand, but that’s exactly what you’re shelving. I’m right here in front of you right now, and I’m saying that I’m willing to fight Student Council President Nagumo. Can’t you agree with that?”

I intentionally cut my fingertips and dripped blood on the bloodthirsty wolf. But the wolf in front of me didn’t bite easily. He wasn’t defenselessly provocative

as it had been in the past, rather, the wolf was very wary. If he had not thought of me as an enemy before, he already would've had his fangs at my fingertips. He may not have realized it, but that was the proof that he recognized me as an enemy.

"You really are strange. You don't show any sign of timidity when dealing with me. No, it's not only against me, but also against Horikita-senpai."

Nagumo looked out the window as if remembering the days of Horikita Manabu.

His original desire was to fight the elder Horikita, not me. That goal was unattainable, but it was also true that there were no other alternatives.

"Oh, man. If I were to play a game with you, what would you do? It's almost the third semester of the school year, and we already passed the second semester's halfway point. As you probably know by now, I gave all the power to my classmates to compete for sales at the school festival. I can't ask them to give it back now. On the other hand, even if I wait for the next special exam, there's no guarantee that there will be a competition between all the grades."

We could leave it to luck and wait, hoping that there would still be a battle between all grades. Not that such a thing couldn't be done, but it wouldn't be very realistic.

"Above all, you're well aware of the difficulty of competing in earnest between different grades, as you and the former student council president know, don't you?"

Last year's sports festival, training camps, etc., Nagumo Miyabi was adamant about competing with Horikita Manabu. No matter what form it took, no matter how small the match was, he forced himself to do so, hoping to make it black and white. However, Manabu dodged Nagumo's provocations and didn't involve everyone in the match.

"More than anyone else. How hard do you have to work to adjust? Because of you, not just this year, last year too, the match with Horikita-senpai didn't happen."

In that sense, too, Nagumo was not pleased with me.

"Listen to what I'm about to tell you and think about whether a confrontation can be achieved."

With that, Nagumo sat back deeper in his chair to correct his posture a bit. Though many of the special exams the school gave were unknown, we had several patterns to prepare for them. Because no matter what form the confrontation was introduced, there was always a method to execute. When I finished relaying everything, Nagumo remained silent and seemed to be deep in thought.

"I don't know if we can achieve a 100% perfect match, but I think this can become a reality."

“That's true. But do you really think we can implement the plan you're talking about?”

“I'm sure Student Council President Nagumo can already envision the situation. I'm sure you've been observing them day in and day out, right? If that's the case, there's no way you don't know the details.”

“I see. I was planning to shake you up at that time, but instead of getting upset, you decided to take advantage of it.”

“Will you accept my proposal or not?”

We spoke for quite a long time, even for me. But this conversational work is necessary in negotiations with Nagumo.

“I'd be happy to accept your proposal, but...” The reply was positive, but the words had other meanings. “But what's your real purpose?”

“Can't you believe it? I just want to compete with President Nagumo.”

“I don't believe it for a second.”

As if convinced, he replied without hesitation. I was somewhat pleased, but decided to wait for Nagumo's next words.

“Alright, tell me the main issue. I'll think about whether or not I'll accept the proposal after that.”

He let me cut to the other main topic without hesitation.

“I have a favor to ask of the Student Council President Nagumo.”

I gave an explanation based on the content of the request and its specific development. After listening, he sat back deeply in his chair, where he'd been sitting for a year.

“I understand what you're telling me. But that's not a proposal based on your desire to compete with me. You brought up the idea of a match because you had no choice but to control what you wanted to happen. Am I right?”

“Half right, half wrong. It's also true that I myself changed my view of the Student Council President, and that's why I want to compete. However, I also feel that half of it is a hassle.”

“You're an honest guy.”

“That's why I want you to accept my proposal.”

“You're a joke. You asked for a match, and now you're being so brazen.”

“I won't deny that.”

“Do you think I'm going to play along with you and give you what you want?”

“If you refuse, that's the end of it. I will never fight the Student Council President again. Even if you use a classmate or someone in the same grade as me. Not even if you take someone hostage, I will thoroughly ignore them, and you.”

“I doubt it. If it's a random guy, you'd probably leave him for dead, but if it's Karuizawa Kei?”

Here Nagumo tried to sway me by mentioning Kei.

“It doesn't matter who it is.”

Nagumo's smile disappeared as I answered immediately without hesitation.

“It doesn't sound like you're bluffing. It seems like... you really mean it.”

“I'm not an omniscient and omnipotent god. I can't protect everyone 24/7, 365 days a year, whether it's Kei or my classmates. If the student council president, who has the most power in this school and the control of a large student body, wanted to do so, he could have someone expelled from school without my supervision.”

Of course, there was a risk of paying a significant price for the trouble, but I didn't care.

“Whoever you expel, I won't make a move again.”

This was not a tactic.

It was pure sincerity, which was why Nagumo's smile naturally disappeared.

“If I want to fuck you over, which I deeply do, I have no choice but to accept your current proposal.”

“Of course, you can ignore it and graduate without hesitation.”

“But won't you be in trouble if I don't help you?”

“I've already made other plans.”

Yes, there was no need to go through the trouble of disclosing my story to Nagumo any more. But I mentioned half the reason earlier. The urge to fight him was the reason I wanted to have this discussion. Everything would be decided by his next response. It's the moment of final judgment, whether or not the match between us will take place.

“Okay, I'll take your word for it, Ayanokōji. My graduation from Class A is unassailable anyway. It's not a bad idea to end up playing with you.”

Nagumo didn't think for a second that he was going to lose, he couldn't even imagine it. This was the overwhelming confidence of a man who was always proud of winning.

“Thank you very much.”

“But are you sure you want to do this? If I do what you suggest, then... no matter how it turns out, people will be hurt.”

“Of course. Either way, the Student Council President Nagumo would've been involved.”

Nagumo reacted strongly to those words.

“You...”

As I was about to leave, Nagumo stood up and approached me.

“You knew?”

“Even though we were distanced, I observed the student council president. I had an idea of what you’d do after this.”

Even though he already declared he had no intention of fighting, this man always had his sights set on me. It was expected that he’d take action at the right time, before it was too late.

“So you're saying that it’s not only Karuizawa, but also Honami...”

“Like I said, it's the same no matter who it is. Whether it's Kei’s expulsion, toying with Ichinose, Horikita, or anyone else. It would be wise not to think you can sway me like that.”

Nagumo, who laughed snidely, quickly switched to a serious expression.

“I take back my comment about playing around. You are the only one that Horikita-senpai recognized. I've been able to make sure of that.”

“That's good to hear. Well then, I'll leave you here.”

“Yo.”

“What's up?”

“Man, I'll admit that you've got a real poker face. I also understand that you negotiated diligently to get me into your deal. So, let me hear your true feelings for once. Even if I was serious about getting Karuizawa to drop out of school, would you have stood by and watched?”

“For Kei, no, I don't think it's desirable to have a vacancy among my classmates, no matter who it was. I was going to resist as much as possible.”

“That's not an answer. The answer you're giving is to the likeness of classmates. What I'm saying is that I didn't feel any anxiety about the disappearance of Karuizawa, who’s very special to you.”

I looked back. Normally, the answer would be obvious. I’m just bluffing and trying to hide how I really feel from others. I was just going to say something along those lines. But I had a feeling that wasn’t the best answer for Nagumo.

“If she disappears, she's gone, and that's all there is to it. It is neither more nor less than that. In fact, it would’ve been a great help to me because you would’ve made the cleanup easier.

“You have loose screws, Ayanokōji.”

This was the first time I saw Nagumo upset, or rather, muttering his opinion on something he didn’t quite understand.

“I'll call you later.”

I quietly closed the door and left the student council room. Nagumo described me as crazy, but that's not true. I believe people who make wrong decisions based on their emotions are the ones with the bolts screwed on the

wrong way.

It's the same whether the other person is a stranger, a lover, or a family member.

When the time comes for you to fail and drop out, it'll be the end of you.

The first priority is always to protect yourself.

That is the unshakable "solution."

Chapter Two: The Smoke of Rebellion

ON MONDAY 8 NOVEMBER, we were surprised by Ryūen and his friends' entry into the concept café. We had to deal with various issues, but the tasks to be done alongside our friends, who are determined to fight, remains the same.

In response to the bet proposed by Ryūen, Horikita offered a one-million-private-point match with the agreement of the classes. The agreement was that the class with more sales from the festival would receive that number of points from the other class.

Don't mess around, fight head-on and win.

The fact that many of my classmates had such a positive attitude would be a big advantage.

After school, when Chabashira-sensei left the classroom, I took out my mobile phone.

"I have some time. Head to the designated place."

Apparently, they are open to meeting now.

Did the preface I gave the other day about the future help?

"Hey, Kiyotaka. Come home with me."

"Sorry, I've got plans later today."

"Oh, really? I see..... Well then, Maya-chan, go home with me!"

After a quick switchover, Kei turned to Satō, who was still in the classroom.

"You're not going with Ayanokōji-kun?"

"Come on, come on, don't say that. See?"

Satō rushed in, but didn't show any disapproval at all, but rather accepted Kei's proposal with a smile. She then invited a few other girls to join her and happily left the classroom.

Among them is Shinohara, who not so long ago had a rough relationship with Kei.

After getting closer to Satō, Kei seemed to have grown even more mature than before.

Anyway, I was grateful she was there to accompany Kei.

I decided to leave the classroom and head to the special wing to meet Kanzaki, who had called me over.

Because this time it couldn't be by phone, chat, or in public.

On the way there, I saw the teacher in charge of 2nd year Class A, Mashima-sensei, and teachers for the other grades, standing around in the corridor talking.

The unusual sight attracted my gaze, but I didn't stop walking.

“Chabashira-sensei has changed recently.”

As I passed by, such talk could be heard from teachers' conversations.

“She's become more chirpy, or rather, she seems to be laughing more often.”

“Mashima-sensei, you and Chabashira-sensei were schoolmates, weren't you? Well, I'd like to ask you a few questions...”

Apparently the topic of conversation was Chabashira-sensei.

I thought they could stand around and talk in the staff room as much as they wanted, but if the topic is about a particular teacher, much less a teacher of the opposite sex, it might be a no-brainer to go somewhere quiet. It goes without saying that the change in Chabashira-sensei the teachers were talking about had been triggered by the unanimous voting special exam.

No doubt they had the impression that she had come out of her shell, not only as a homeroom teacher but also as a school teacher.

Mashima-sensei then noticed my presence and interrupted the conversation.

I believe this is because they decided that it would be unwise to allow pupils to hear needless remarks.

“Ayanokōji, what are you doing here in the special building?”

This is a natural question, as students rarely pass through this corridor after school for no reason.

“I have a short meeting. There are some things I want to talk about that I don't want to be accidentally overheard.”

When I replied, the teachers, with the exception of Mashima-sensei, looked somewhat dismayed and walked away, perhaps deciding to disperse.

I could have walked away immediately, but I also had a bit of time before the rendezvous.

“Mashima-sensei, just in time. I would like to ask you a few questions.”

The presence of Mashima-sensei, who stayed until the end, must have meant something.

“Me? What do you want to ask me?”

“This is in respect of rules that are not explicitly stated in the festival”

Although he looked slightly skeptical, Mashima-sensei immediately faced me head-on as a teacher.

The school is built on a special set of rules that are very different from those of ordinary high schools.

You're well aware that each student may have a different point of view.

However, this will inevitably lead to some concerns.

“I don't know what you want to ask, but shouldn't you first check with your homeroom teacher, Chabashira-sensei?”

He didn't hesitate to ask for an answer to ensure that the underlying

assumption is correct.

Indeed, it would normally make sense to ask your homeroom teacher to explain the rules.

“Sometimes, depending on the occasion, it is more expedient not to approach Chabashira-sensei.”

“Teachers are supposed to be fair to all pupils. But still, when it comes to other classes in the same grade, it doesn't mean that there won't be any problems at all. I hope you realise that.”

He reminded me that some things are better late than never once you've heard them.

“I judge that Mashima-sensei isn't the kind of person who would fail a student.”

“If that's what you think, then let's not go any further into the wild.”

His tone portrayed more of a do what you want if you're going to trust, rather than a trusting response.

“So what is it that you want to know regarding unstated rules?”

I asked Mashima-sensei, who gave his permission here, for advice on a particular case.

He didn't seem surprised to hear this at all, but rightly so.

Schools also have unstated backroom rules to accommodate various wishes from students.

That's why I don't wonder about the existence of students who think like me.

“Surely you're right. It isn't impossible to exercise it, if necessary.”

“I knew it.”

This is in no way outlandish.

Cases will emerge where the class is in such a situation, or where it is sought in the event of a major inconvenience.

“However, it begs the question if it is efficient. As you know, if it were between pupils, no problems would arise. No, it would be precisely to have their own discussions so that they don't arise. You know what I mean, don't you?”

“Yes. I thought it was something that didn't need to be specified in the rules and could be done independently.”

“Yes. Of course the risks will be different for each, but for whatever reason we will look at that option.”

“I suppose it's only natural to be prepared for contingencies.”

When I replied, Mashima-sensei nodded his head thoughtfully.

“Whether you exercise it or not - or...? Well, it certainly wouldn't hurt to understand.”

Although Mashima-sensei didn't mention it, he may have had a vague idea

of the sales strategy based on what I said.

“It was good to get confirmation. Thank you.”

“It’s no problem.”

This’s one less thing to check for the festival. It would be an unexpected benefit.

After exiting the conversation, I tried to leave, but was stopped by Mashima-sensei.

“Ayanokōji, you heard a little of what Chabashira-sensei said... What happened at the unanimous special exam?”

“You haven't heard? Not from Chabashira-sensei?”

The results were naturally known to Mashima-sensei, but there seemed to be a lack of understanding about Chabashira-sensei's change of heart.

“With or without the expulsions, she started to look forward and smile. In other words, there was an influential event in that special exam that changed her mind, right?”

As I recall, Mashima-sensei and Chabashira-sensei were originally from the same year when they attended Advanced Nurturing High School.

He was knowledgeable about various aspects of the past and was understandably surprised.

“That wasn't the right thing to ask a pupil. Please forget I asked such a thing.”

“I understand. Excuse me.”

After briefly nodding to Mashima-sensei, I decided to go to the special building where we were to meet.

1

The festival was gradually approaching, but there was another issue that needed to be dealt with in parallel. That is to change Ichinose’s class.

The countdown to their collapse was progressing faster than I expected.

Necessary measures had to be taken to avoid this.

This time, the leader, Ichinose, wasn't contacted.

What was needed now, I thought, was to create a difference to the classmates who were unified under her.

However, this procedure should be done with caution.

Who else would naturally be competent enough to take on that role but that man?

“I'm sorry to call you out here like this.”

After school, I went to the designated place as I had been informed, and Kanzaki was already there waiting for me.

His face was grim, and he certainly wasn't in the mood for a light-hearted conversation.

“What do you want from me?”

I had known Kanzaki, from another class, shortly after I entered the school, but we weren't particularly close. Recently, he had been distrustful of my presence, and if anything, I thought he hated me. Well, no, it doesn't necessarily mean that he wouldn't answer the call because he disliked me.

It was because he was wary of me that he wanted to talk to me.

This is more likely to be the case if the rendezvous is located where people do not want to be seen.

“It's time to talk about the future.”

“About the future?’ What on earth... Well, that's fine. I'll let you talk first.”

Kanzaki corrected his posture before we spoke about our business.

While a little surprised at the unexpected first move, I first listened to what Kanzaki had to say.

“I've been struggling for a while now. I haven't spoken with anyone about it. I was just struggling on my own.”

After putting it into words, he corrected himself and reiterated that that was not the case.

“No, to say I was struggling would be an exaggeration, but I was thinking every day about what I was going to do with myself.”

The words were filled with emotions not typical of the calm and collected Kanzaki.

I decided to be a listener until the other side asked for an answer.

“I don't know what I'm going to do with the rest of my school life...”

He may not have stumbled over friendships or dating issues and had his head in the sand.

There's only one goal that students at this school should be most concerned about: promotion to Class A.

“I probably don't need to tell you now, but our class can't win.”

What can you not win against?

Is it the cultural festival or a special end-of-year exam a little further down the line?

No, it doesn't end with such a small story.

The reality is that it isn't possible for Ichinose's class to move up to Class A.

That was a cry from Kanzaki, who came to that realization.

“We’re not far behind other classes in academic, athletic and leadership skills. In fact, I feel that we have some aspects in which we excel. But I have learned that this doesn't always lead to victory.”

He started thinking for himself, understanding for himself and worrying for himself. As one can imagine, it all started with Kanzaki.

“I see your point. So what do you want from me, Kanzaki?”

Anyone could simply listen and convey understanding.

“I need your advice on... Ichinose.”

Why must it be me?

The names of the few people who might’ve been able to find common ground immediately came to mind.

“No, that's not all. I want your opinion on what our class should do in the future too.”

“That's a big deal, isn't it? And you want that from me, who's not even a classmate?”

“...Indeed.”

It was easy to read the psychology in Kanzaki's pained expression.

This man wasn't the type of person who would seek help from others with an easy heart.

It was precisely because he was driven to this point that Kanzaki had no choice but to do so.

No, even that help initially wasn't a consideration.

If you were left on your own, you could have had such a future.

“She never really listens to me. No, it's the same for everyone.”

“I recognised Ichinose as a student who would listen to anyone.”

“That's only when you're on the same side as Ichinose. I don't need to explain it to you now.”

I dared to test him, but I guess that's no longer necessary.

To put it plainly, if you ask for help to save someone, Ichinose will not take any risks, won't betray you, and will stay with you to the end and lend a hand. However, if you ask for help to trap someone in a senseless way, Ichinose will never lend a hand.

Righting wrongs and doing right can also describe her.

It would remain unchanged even if money or other rewards were offered in return in an attempt to convince her.

“I'm not saying she's heading in the wrong direction. But idealism is idealism.”

“There are many occasions when that idealism is necessary.”

“Yes, I know. I'm prepared to go through the trouble when things are going

well.”

In fact, Kanzaki and his classmates have followed Ichinose's lead up to this point and shared her struggles.

“How about now? We kept following Ichinose's policy and lost class points. We're at the bottom of a pit and haven't a clue how to get out.”

“You're sharing a lot. Are you sure I'm not going to let you disclose too much about the inner workings of your class?”

“It's a fool's errand.”

He mumbled to himself, as if to laugh himself blind, as if to spit it out.

“But a plan is a plan, even if it's a fool's errand. Right now, I have no choice but to rely on you.”

He took his somewhat resigned gaze away from me and stared at the empty corridor floor.

“In the unanimous special exam, I argued that we should get class points even if we had to expel our classmates. I voted yes and tried to get my foot in the door, but that didn't work either.”

I didn't know anything about the inner workings of their class, but even so, I could easily imagine how that would play out.

Kanzaki voted in favour of expelling the students in order to improve the class and make them understand the reality of the situation. He continued to vote in favour and tried to change the mindset of the class, but none of his classmates, including Ichinose, agreed with his opinion. However, they didn't blame Kanzaki, who started the rebellion, but admonished him to work hard together with them. Even if he had been removed, something similar would have happened.

“...That's funny, isn't it?”

When I didn't answer, Kanzaki muttered to break the silence.

“What's the point of telling this kind of thing to anyone, friend or foe?”

He understood on his own that there was no way I could give any advice.

It was truly a bloodless act, and now he looked like he wanted to humiliate himself.

“Ichinose is devoted to you. The only thing that could change Ichinose's policy is unique existence, such as you. She could only see it clearly coming from you.”

“I see.”

The only way to salvage the class is to change the thoughts and values of Ichinose, the leader.

The class as a whole is perfectly capable, and that will certainly help them see the light.

“It seems that your desire to change the flow and break out of this stagnant

situation is true.”

Kanzaki nodded deeply, as there was no need to mend things now.

However, he had to think carefully about whether that would really be for the good of the class.

Something that Kanzaki, feeling frustrated, did not see.

The foresight that the class would be saved if Ichinose changes is only a trick.

Even if Ichinose were to change with one word from me, could it really be called growth?

Could an Ichinose, who sometimes makes ruthless decisions, really chase after the other classes?

In order to erase the disadvantages, I would be erasing the advantages that are unique to Ichinose.

Once you turn the wheel in that direction, there is no guarantee that you will be able to turn back.

“I agree that we need to turn the tide. But I disagree with you on the method.”

“We have no other choice; Ayanokōji is the only one who can move Ichinose.”

“I don't know. I don't know, but I think there is someone more qualified.

“I can't think of anyone.”

Kanzaki, who had no idea what I was talking about, raised an eyebrow.

“Actually, there's another student I called here today after I approached you.”

“Who?”

“It's one of your classmates who Kanzaki knows very well.”

“Don't tell me you called Ichinose?”

In a sense, she's the last person I'd want to see here.

“Unfortunately, it's not Ichinose. She's a student who has the potential to turn the tide.”

“I hate to interrupt, but there's no one in our class who can argue with Ichinose except for me. I've seen it firsthand, and I understand it.”

“Isn't that exactly the kind of narrow-mindedness you're talking about, Kanzaki?”

“What?”

“Ichinose's class seems monolithic, but it isn't truly. There are many students who have no choice but to go along with their surroundings since they're all seemingly joined together.”

That was my answer, but it didn't seem to ring a bell with Kanzaki.

Is that understandable?

He would never show his classmates the appearance of being easily made to feel insecure.

“Why is it that Ichinose's class dropped in the rankings and is now facing a major crisis?”

If we follow the error chain, where does it ultimately lead us?

That is what we need to make Kanzaki and his class understand.

“Huh? Why is Kanzaki-kun here too?”

Himeno looked somewhat amused, as if she assumed I would be the only one here.

She was a little earlier than promised, but on the contrary, it was good timing. “Himeno, did you have a connection with Ayanokōji?”

“Sort of, yeah.”

It's safe to say she's someone I've never been involved with.

Not only Kanzaki, but most of the students must have had the same impression.

“I find it hard to believe that Himeno is the right person for the job you're talking about.”

I can almost imagine the image that Kanzaki must've had of Himeno in his school life so far. She would be no different than any other classmate, just one of the girls.

“I'm going to prove that from now on.”

“Wait a minute. It seems like you're talking about me, what is it?”

It was understandable for Himeno to be perplexed when she was summoned.

“That's... No, wait.”

Just as he was about to explain, Kanzaki noticed a discrepancy.

“What do you mean, Ayanokōji?”

“What?”

“You called me out, but what on earth were you going to talk about? It seems that Himeno called you beforehand, but this is just like...”

Kanzaki almost opened his mouth, but then closed it and stared back and forth between Himeno and me.

“What, what is it?”

“I anticipated talking with you about your class today ... Did you think you yourself should bring change to your class?”

“No, I don't understand what it means to think or carry out such a thing.”

I called Kanzaki here and then he gave me the inside scoop on the class before I could start talking.

It became unnatural for Himeno to show up at this time, and then to pass on

the story.

“How far do you see...?”

By starting the conversation with Kanzaki, I learned about my calculations in a surprising way.

As a result, it seemed to have had enough of an effect to surprise Kanzaki.

“Let's cut to the chase. Let me tell you why I called you here today. There is no need for Ichinose to change by my hand. What needs to change is the class consciousness. By changing the consciousness of the class, you can bring about change in Ichinose.”

“...It's futile. I've seen it firsthand.”

“If it was just one person, yes. But if two or three people — all but Ichinose — changed their minds, the results of the unanimous special exam would've been different.”

“It's a pipe dream that everyone's consciousness would change. And even if they had, would it have changed the results of the special exam?”

“I certainly don't think that Ichinose, who cares about the class, would've agreed to expel the students, but whether that would have caused the special exam to fail and penalize you is another matter.”

“Wait a minute; Ichinose-san will protect her classmates even if it costs a heavy penalty.”

At this point, Himeno, who was closer to the sidelines, interjected.

“I wonder if Ichinose really could remain stubborn to the end with 39 people opposing her.”

“She'll go through with it, Ichinose-san. I think so, right, Kanzaki-kun?”

“I think so too, but... I'm also sure she'll be met with inner turmoil.”

Ichinose leads the fight for her classmates.

However, if she received backlash from all of those classmates, I wonder if she'd be able to keep doing so.

Whether she could continue to pitch in against them to the end, even after being made aware that she was doing something wrong, is another matter.

Even if she did go through with it, what awaits her afterwards is Ichinose's own self-loathing.

The only thing remaining would be the fact that she was responsible for the substantial loss of their class points.

“Whether Ichinose, driven by remorse, would've been able to fulfill her duties as a leader is another matter.”

“That wouldn't have resulted in a worse outcome than the present.”

“Oh, would it not? It would've ended worse than what we have now. What do you think actually would've happened then, Kanzaki?”

“What if all my classmates had the same idea as I did, to accept that there would be expulsion?”

I understood that this wasn't realistic, but I simulated it.

“If 39 people continue to cast their votes in favour of the proposal, even though time is running out, eventually Ichinose would break herself and come around to the side of the proposal. And she would have volunteered herself to expel herself...”

The answer that came out of the jam.

The class succeeded in expelling Ichinose and in gaining class points.

However, they also would've lost Ichinose's unifying abilities.

“It's impossible,” he said. “The disadvantages would be too great in the unlikely event of such a development.”

Ichinose leaving the Ichinose class.

It would be a development he had never considered, but for Kanzaki, it was a departure.

“Of course, I'm not trying to say that Ichinose should be expelled. But if there's a change in the classmates, the class will change. I don't want to change Ichinose, I want to change the mindset of the class. And the first ones to do that will be Kanzaki and Himeno.”

“Me?”

“You don't agree with everything Ichinose is doing. Unlike your deluded classmates, you question her just as much as Kanzaki. Isn't that right? What did you think when Kanzaki showed resistance in the unanimous special examination?”

“...”

Himeno was silent and turned over.

“Let me ask you. I want to know what you were thinking too.”

“I thought it was impossible. Classes don't change easily. I'd rather not see others besides myself get hurt, and they're all just saying pretty things.”

She began to talk about what she was feeling.

“I felt that Kanzaki-kun's resistance was simply a waste of time. So I said so ... That I wanted that painful time to end quickly and that I wanted it to be over for good.”

Kanzaki closed his eyes and gave a small nod, as if recalling the moment.

“I'm sure you heard Himeno say that and took it as the consensus for the rest of your classmates, that it was not acceptable to go against Ichinose and abandon your friends.”

Without denying it, Kanzaki nodded deeply.

“But in fact, it was different. Himeno herself is questioning the state of the

class.”

“Then why didn't you say it? You could've said it as many times as you wanted, even if it wasn't during the unanimous special exam.”

The conversation which I, not knowing the reality of the class, can't interfere with began.

It isn't my place to discuss it.

I'm an outsider. There's usually no benefit to me listening to it.

But now the situation had reversed.

Because I'm present, I can get a statement out of Himeno.

In other words, if I miss my chance now, I'll be back to the same old Ichinose class routine.

“Huh...”

Himeno's eyes don't show the color of diverse emotions, unlike Kanzaki's.

“Don't make it sound so easy.”

In the same manner as an exhaled sigh, she also let her gaze escape, as if to flee.

“You don't have to answer, but you know what I mean. There's only strong peer pressure in our class. Even if I think it's white, if many say it's black, it's black. It doesn't matter if I'm right or wrong. In such a class, there's no point in a minority speaking up. It's just painful to be surrounded by people who go out of their way to say what they think is black until they're persuaded to say it's white. That's why I've never said anything and I never will.”

“But if you don't speak, white will forever remain black.”

“That's fine. I accept the black claims that others concluded on their own. But still, the color I think of in my mind will remain white because it is.”

Himeno's attitude was without any high spirits, as if to express that this is the reality of the class now.

“Even Kanzaki-kun would have cracked from your forced insistence, wouldn't he? That's because you believed something was white, but was forcibly dyed black and overwritten. That's a hard thing to bear, isn't it?”

Unnecessary hardship. To avoid this, Himeno chose to be swept away.

No, this isn't only true for Himeno.

It's a story that seems to be shared among the rest of Ichinose's class.

“I wish you would stop expecting me to be like your friend here. I'm sorry, but I can't be as passionate as Kanzaki-kun.”

Himeno took a step back, as if to keep away from Kanzaki, who was approaching Himeno as if he were trying to speak up.

“Are you okay with the class as it is?”

At first, Kanzaki had assumed that Himeno was a classmate, just like any

other.

But then I noticed that he was desperately trying to draw out a conversation with her without my involvement.

“Whether good or bad, it's more important for me to protect myself. I can't be best friends with anyone, but I can't be nasty with anyone either. Sometimes they ask me out, sometimes they don't. I don't want to destroy that level of distance and atmosphere.”

Himeno's insistence that it would be best if things could be kept quiet wasn't a bad thing.

But that would never move the class forward.

“If Kanzaki-kun's argument gains momentum and exceeds the majority of the class, I will join your side, too. That's fine, right?”

Himeno asserted that she has no intention of standing in the minority under any circumstances.

“Damn it!”

The words conveyed her true intentions and unwillingness. If she and Kanzaki rebel, what awaits her is an attack from the majority in the name of pocket change.

It will be repeated endlessly until she abandons her own ideas.

“Can I go now? I won't tell anyone about this. It will only get me into trouble if I do.”

What will Kanzaki do to Himeno as she tries to leave?

If she continues to walk away, she will not bring about a change in the class after all.

“...Wait.”

“I don't want to stay.”

“I wasn't going to tell anyone, but I'm about to make a big decision.”

“What's that?”

“I'm not going to sink with the current class and Ichinose forever.”

Kanzaki put into words the thoughts he had never spoken of before and let Himeno hear them.

“Does that mean you're betraying the... class?”

“I won't deny it. There is no point in staying in a class that can't win.”

If Kanzaki is absent, they won't be able to mount a counterattack.

This is because Kanzaki was probably the only student who can lead Ichinose's class in the current environment.

“I'm not trying to threaten you. But I will tell you that much.”

Even if Kanzaki were to leave the class by some means, it would not affect Himeno personally.

But she would at least know that the class would lose a chance to improve. Himeno became upset. Obviously, her reaction is different from her previous scoffing attitude.

“So you're okay with that, Himeno?”

“That's not fair. That's a threat.”

“That's one way to look at it.”

A sign of betrayal that may be overheard by Ichinose and his classmates from Himeno.

Aside from Ichinose, his classmates may try to block Kanzaki's movements so as not to give him the right to move to another class, a risky exposure.

This was Kanzaki's gamble. Whether he was serious or bluffing is irrelevant.

“——Do you really intend to change classes?”

“It may not be pleasant, but Ayanokōji is right. I want to believe that changing Ichinose with our own hands is the only way to save the class.”

“But I am...”

Biting her lower lip, Himeno closes her eyes tightly.

If she sides with the isolated Kanzaki, it is inevitable that Himeno will be looked at with white eyes.

Kanzaki knew that this wasn't what she wanted.

Still, someone had to do it.

“Even... I'd like to... win if I could.”

She had not given up the possibility of changing classes and winning in no small measure.

However, the key is still removed.

“Then we have to act now. Am I wrong?”

If Himeno didn't move even here, there would really be no more moves for Kanzaki to make.

Even if he didn't want to choose, he would have no choice but to change his policy to win by transferring to another class.

On the other hand, Himeno, who cannot say black is black without a majority, will be decidedly defeated.

“I understand what you're saying... But still...”

“You're not going to say that there is still a possibility of winning with Ichinose's policy, are you?”

The words from Kanzaki, who had gone ahead of her, stung Himeno strongly.

His lips closed heavily as he didn't continue with the words he was in the middle of saying.

“Don't you want to graduate from Class A, Himeno?”

The words pierced Himeno's heart like a spear. Painful and bleeding.

"If I could graduate from Class A, I would too!"

A loud, taut voice echoed through the hallway.

Kanzaki was taken aback and rendered speechless by the volume of Himeno's voice, which must have been several times louder than expected.

"But if we don't do it now, there's no way we will be able to, no matter how we think about it! It can't be done!"

Himeno shouted, exploding with emotion.

"Even Kanzaki-kun knows that!"

"I know that! I know that, and that's why we have to do it now! I don't want to lose to the other classes!"

Although his voice wasn't as loud as Himeno's, Himeno was also alarmed by Kanzaki's loud voice. Seeing Himeno's and frightened appearance made me even more convinced.

For the first time, Himeno showed her true self. I knew that there were probably more than a few students in Ichinose's class who were only socializing with her on the surface.



After a year and a half, many of the students in Horikita's class have had their weaknesses exposed.

Those who put themselves first as honor students and are unconcerned with others being expelled.

Those who are unable to study or discuss issues and immediately resort to violence.

Those who parasitize off of powerful individuals in order to get to the top of the hierarchy.

Those who plot to expel their peers in order to erase their past.

Those weak-minded students have fallen to the ground, and then climbed up. Some of them are now showing incredible growth.

“...So Kanzaki-kun is like that. I was surprised because you’re always so calm.”

“...I'm with you. I didn't know you had those kinds of feelings.”

Ichinose’s class wouldn’t have had the obvious hardships of Horikita’s class.

The students would find grazes from a fall, and they would be cared for and protected from both sides so that they would not fall again. They would repeatedly take the place of the student who had hurt their hand.

Eventually, the students understood. They must be careful because they worry about them.

Why did they fall? Why did they hurt their hand?

The truth is, there is more pain, but they hold on to it in silence so as not to cause worry.

The result is Ichinose’s class, which is made up of only superficial relationships.

It's time for them to truly become friends.

After a period of silence, I said to the two of them, “But what should you do?

“But what do we do? How can we move forward? Even if Himeno changes her mentality, it would be meaningless if it does not lead to the next step.”

“There is no need to rush for an answer. The two of you are going to search for it now.”

“Search... for what?”

“A student who, like you, keeps their true feelings inside.”

Even if you can't find it alone, your perspective will expand many times over if you both talk about it together.

The addition of one's point of view will lead to any number of new discoveries.

“If you found...another person, what would you do?”

“It's simple. Then you'll find three. And then make it four. Just keep on going.”

Before long, a small spark will turn into a big flame.

And Ichinose was aware of it.

The class was about to change.

“It's not too late. Be strong. And defeat the class led by Horikita in the final exam.”

If they do that, they will still have a sliver of hope to ascend to Class A when they move on to third year.

“...What are you going to do, Kanzaki-kun?”

“You have to be prepared to work harder than you can imagine. But...I's not a story that can't be done.”

Having seen the real-life example, Himeno, he could never again claim that he is alone in the class.

On the other hand, Himeno would have been able to confirm Kanzaki's strong will up close.

“We have the same desire to graduate from Class A. Until now, I couldn't tell anyone, but...”

Whatever the circumstances, Himeno's thoughts were conveyed to Kanzaki.

“Yes, yes. I guess our goals haven't changed at all since the beginning.”

From this point on, the two of them took a childlike step forward.

“You know... After listening to Ayanokōji-kun's story, there's a girl I'm a little curious about. Would you like to go see her after this?”

Kanzaki nodded vigorously at Himeno's suggestion.

I'm a third party, so this isn't my area of expertise.

“Ayanokōji, I'll pay you back for this debt in the final exam.”

Winning and earning the right to challenge for Class A is how you repay the favor you owe today.

“Horikita's class is tough, Kanzaki.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Sorry... but I'm leaving, I don't want to waste a single minute. No, not even a second.”

Himeno nodded, then took out her cell phone, turned away from Kanzaki and started walking away.

There was a side of me that was worried about whether or not those two could change, but it looks like they may be more successful than expected.

They may really beat Horikita's class in the end-of-year exam.

Either way, it doesn't hurt my plans, but it's one more thing to look forward to.

Chapter Three: A Love Letter

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 9.

This morning, I ran into Horikita at the elevator on my way to school. After exchanging a quick hello, we left the lobby and walked together out of the dormitory.

“Have you heard? The day before the cultural festival, the third year students are going to do a rehearsal just like the real thing.”

“Yeah, I heard they're inviting first years and second years to participate as well.”

This is the information that was posted on the school's bulletin board last night, as if to inform all grades. The source of the information was the student council president, Miyabi Nagumo. This was probably what Nagumo meant last week, when he said that the student council would make a not-so-bad proposal.

The form of participation was for us to choose. It could be an actual food service or just a mock-up. It's just a proposal to make adjustments for the following day's festival altogether.

“The student council has already received participation letters from many classes. I'm sure the classes that have been keeping this under wraps will want to get a third-party evaluation before the festival.”

“So you're saying more classes are taking it in a positive light.”

“I think the fact that the 3rd year Class A rented the gymnasium and opened their presentation to the public was a big factor.”

They announced their performance without concealment, and actually demonstrated it. Additionally, the way they incorporated the improvements that came to light from that process became a well-known fact among the students enrolled in the school. There must have been a certain number of students who wanted to make this festival a success and enjoy it as students, not just as a competition.

“I'm sure the student council's decision to pay for consumable materials and other expenses was also an additional incentive.”

Even if you are only going to hold a preliminary festival, it will cost money. A separate budget from the one provided for the festival would need to be set up, and the source of funds would naturally be in the form of collecting private points from individuals.

It would not be surprising if some classes forgo the event if they had to pay out of their own pocket for the rehearsal, but that was exactly what the student council was for. If the student council covered the expenses, they'd have no reason to refuse. It had already informed them that if they bring in receipts, they would be reimbursed from the student council's budget. Of course, there was no limit, but there was a quota of several tens of thousands of points for each class.

"We're going to join in, aren't we?"

"Of course. The whole school knows it's going to be a maid café. It won't hurt to do it."

"That's true. And with what happened to Ryūen-kun and the others, too."

Horikita gave me a meaningful look, to which I nodded lightly and replied.

"Let's see what they have in store for us."

It was a great opportunity to see how Ryūen would develop the concept.

"You don't think we'll lose?"

"I don't know."

"You look pretty confident."

"I'm not confident. I'm just doing everything I can."

"That's true. Even so, don't you usually feel insecure?"

Apparently, Horikita is concerned that she might lose, even though she is fully prepared.

"Maybe I'm scared about losing."

Defeat doesn't only mean losing class points. But it's just as bad to fail to earn class points. Wanting to avoid stagnating is natural when you're on the momentum of reaching Class A.

"Maybe last year you wouldn't have been so anxious."

"That was just foolhardy. I didn't see anything around me back then."

Now, Horikita was starting to broaden her horizons a little. That's why she couldn't help but think about losing.

"As a class leader, it's not a bad thing to be prepared for both winning and losing patterns. I'm just one of the pawns. I'm just making irresponsible statements."

Well, it's Horikita's shortcoming and strength that she cannot easily dismiss that statement. If it was Sakayanagi or Ryūen, they would've listened and dismissed it; if it was Ichinose, she would've taken it as if it was the only thing that mattered.

Horikita has both of these aspects.

"I know, but... Sometimes."

I patted Horikita on the back with the palm of my hand.

"What are you doing?"

“It's too early to get used to winning.”

“I'm not going to...”

She looked a little angry, but she also realized that I hit the nail on the head.

“It was a conceited notion, not the result of anything I've done well myself.”

The uninhabited island, unanimous exam, those weren't victories supported solely by straight-up competence.

“You mean...?”

“What?”

“I'm trying not to take everything you say seriously, but you've been very cooperative lately, which is even more annoying. I don't know how to process this in my head.”

“Then please don't cooperate with me at all in the future.”

I tried to walk quickly away, but she grabbed me by the shoulders.

“That's a no-go.”

I tried to break away, but was immediately grabbed and brought back.

“I'd like to stop by the convenience store before going to school, would you like to join me?”

“Convenience store?”

“I'm preparing for the day before the school festival, and I want to make the most of my lunch break today.”

“I don't mind joining.”

A few minutes in a convenience store wouldn't be a problem. I followed Horikita to the convenience store and stepped inside.

There I ran into Kōenji, who was just about to pay for his items. He had only two things: a bottle of soy milk and a white meat salad. It was a very light meal for lunch, but I wondered if he was going to have it during his morning break. Since Kōenji is rarely seen eating, his private life remains a mystery to us.

“Good morning, Kōenji-kun.”

Horikita called out to him, but after paying for his things, Kōenji only smiled lightly and didn't exchange any words.

“I heard that Kōenji is the only one not assigned work for the cultural festival.”

“He told me he wouldn't do anything. I'm sure I won't change his mind.”

Horikita didn't seem particularly concerned either, and went to the cash register to select a quick meal. She refused the plastic bag offer and tucked it away in her own bag.

“You didn't have anything to buy?”

“They don't have anything I need, and I don't have an abundance of private points.”

November warmed my wallet to some extent, but I had plans to cash out soon.

“You're no longer paying contributions to Kushida-san, right?”

“Not really, since I haven't been charged for it.”

“Would you really pay if she charged you?”

“Do you think she will charge me?”

Horikita replied to me with distaste, muttering, “No, I don't think so. I don't want her to come back to haunt me.”

However distorted, Kushida underwent a profound change. And it's heading in the direction of growth, I have to believe.

1

After school that day. Ichihashi approached Horikita with some hesitation, who was sitting in front of her.

“Um, Horikita-san... Can I have a minute?”

She rarely speaks to Horikita since she doesn't have strong connections with her. Normally, one would think that it would be about the upcoming festival... However, the item in her hand implied something different.

“What is it?”

“Actually, I have a favor to ask you. You have student council work later today, don't you?”

“Yes. As I told the class a while ago, I have student council work to do. I can't help you with the festival.”

“Yes, well, that's not what I meant. Can you please send this...?”

With these words, she presented a letter. A glimpse of a heart sticker clasped the envelope's mouth.

“What's this?”

“It's a love letter...”

“Eh?”

No wonder she looked puzzled, unable to comprehend the meaning for a moment. Even though we live in an age where diversity is accepted, it's understandable that a love letter from a girl to another girl would be upsetting in other ways besides matters of the opposite sex.

“Oh, It's not like it's from me to Horikita-san or something. Actually, one of my friends asked me to give it to Nagumo Miyabi, the student council president.”

“To the student council president? But isn't that something you should give in person?”

If you're going to confess your feelings to someone you have a crush on, face to face is naturally the expectation.

“She asked me to deliver it to him because she was too nervous to give it herself. But I don't have the courage to hand it to the student council president in person either...”

Nagumo's a more social person than, say, former Student Council President Horikita Manabu, but he was still a senior student and representative of this school. It would be quite a hurdle for someone who has no contact with him to approach him. Horikita, on the other hand, was different. It was easy to imagine them conversing about student council business on a daily basis.

“I understand the situation, but...”

“Please. She's been struggling with it for a long time now, and... she's finally found the courage to do so.”

If it had been the Horikita of a year ago, she might've refused this request. But building relationships with classmates is important to her now. In order to make up for the lost trust in the unanimous special exam, there was no way around it.

“Okay. I'll see if I can somehow find an opening and give it to him for you. Is that okay?”

“Uh, yes.”

Ichihashi answered, but she looked a bit brusque.

“Is there still a problem?”

“Um, well, there's a little problem with this love letter.”

Upon receiving the letter, Horikita noticed that there was no name written on the front or back. This meant that the sender was unknown until he looked through the contents.

“Can I assume that it is written inside who this letter is from?”

“I don't know... If it were normal, I'd imagine it would be written. That girl, if she was just happy to tell him how she feels, she might not have written it.”

In other words, neither the deliverer nor the receiver would know the sender of the love letter.

“That's a little hard to accept. Of course, I'll explain when I give it to him, but if I'm not careful, he might mistake it for a letter from me.”

Saying she received it from someone else despite it actually being a letter from herself — the possibility of Nagumo taking it like that cannot be said to be zero.

“Well then, can't you ask someone else? Like a boy you know in the student council or... No? I'd like for you to give it today somehow.”

“That's easy for you to say...” Despite her concern, Horikita thought for a moment and nodded.

“I'll do my best, but there's no guarantee that I'll be able to give it to him, okay?”

“I'm glad you accepted. I'm sure she'll be very happy.”

Although reluctantly, Horikita agreed to deliver the love letter to Nagumo. Normally, she would've asked her who the letter was from, but Horikita wasn't interested and didn't try to dig deeply.

2

Because of the unexpected request, my steps were a little... Heavier, if not quite heavy.

“Why won't she just give it to him?”

It was a mistake to accept. How could I, an irrelevant person in this affair, have such a task? I should turn back and tell Ichihashi-san to give it to him in person.

“That would be the right thing to do.”

When the thought of escape crossed my mind. I suddenly remembered the time when I tried to give a letter to my brother who had decided to go to high school. I was a fool in the past, not realizing that he'd been cold toward me and desperately wishing to return to the old days when we were close. I thought that if I couldn't talk to him face to face, I could just put my feelings in a letter. But the pen in my hand didn't move as smoothly as it did in my head.

For days and days, I thought and wondered, writing and erasing over and over again.

How could I convey my feelings?

How could I make my brother happy?

I struggled with the act of writing the letter itself. And in the end... I couldn't give it to him. My brother left this school and I can no longer see or contact him.

“I wonder what happened to that letter...”

As I dredged up my memory, I recalled putting it in my brother's desk drawer.

“What if my brother goes home and sees it?”

I stopped in the hallway and felt my heart rate suddenly hasten. If my brother saw a letter like that now, he would laugh at me.

“I should forget about that.”

Even if I get jittery here and now, I can't get rid of the letter and pretend it never happened. Now all I can do is hope that my brother doesn't find it.

Remembering my brother's back from outside the window, I decided to put my hands together.

“That's right.”

It's not easy to write a letter to someone you love. And if you have to hand it to them directly, the hurdle is even higher. Even now, if I were asked if I could write a letter to my brother, it would be difficult for me to give an immediate answer. I don't know who she is or where she is from, but her target is the Student Council President Nagumo Miyabi. I understand her feelings of timidity.

Somehow, I found an excuse to give it to him and arrived at the student council room. When I opened the door, all the members of the student council were already there except for Student Council President Nagumo. There were three boys present, Yagami-kun, a first-year student, Aga-kun, also a first-year student, and Kiriya-senpai, the third-year vice president.

However, it would not be possible for just any boy to do what I need. I couldn't simply entrust them with the task of handing out love letters, which isn't even a responsibility for the student council.

However... I was relatively close to Yagami-kun. I talk to him quite regularly. I knew I was taking advantage of my position as a senpai, but I couldn't turn my back on this letter. Yagami-kun was sitting down and chatting with Ichinose-san.

I reached for the love letter in my briefcase, hoping to get the troublesome matter out of the way quickly. But just then, Student Council President Nagumo appeared in the room.

“The meeting will begin immediately. Take your seats.”

The voice of Student Council President Nagumo was as dark and heavy as he appeared. I felt the air instantly become tense and tight and put my hand back on my bag.

There was no way I could say that I was asked to hand over a love letter under these circumstances.

“Ichinose, if you have anything to report, let's hear it.”

“Yes. It seems that it has been decided that all classes will participate in the rehearsal the day before the festival.”

“It was decided in almost half a day? It seems that the student council president's decision was correct. However, if the decision was made by the student

council, I wish you would have informed us a little earlier.” Kiriya-senpai, the vice president, made a thorny remark.

“It's just an idea. I thought starting a little earlier would make the juniors happy.” Student Council President Nagumo replied without any particular apology.

Such a scene from the student council meeting was becoming a regular occurrence.

Basically, the student council-led things started with an idea from Student Council President Nagumo. Sometimes they were born from a comment made during the meeting, and other times they were created without our knowledge.

Then there was a sudden silence, and Student Council President Nagumo had his arms crossed and his eyes closed. It was obvious that he was holding back his anger.

“Um, what's wrong, Nagumo-senpai...?”

“Listen, I heard a strange rumor.”

“Rumor...?”

“It's not proven, but there was a guy, Kishi, who said that I was betting a lot of money to get certain students expelled from school.”

“What? What do you mean?”

It's no wonder Ichinose-san asked back. I, too, could not immediately understand the meaning of what Student Council President Nagumo said.

“Who told you that nonsense?”

“Someone from your class, Kiriya.”

Student Council President Nagumo threw such words to Vice President Kiriya with his eyes closed.

“From my class?”

“It's just a rumor from my friends, though it wouldn't be strange if you were aware of it.”

“Sorry, that's news to me. I don't understand why you would bet a lot of money to get someone expelled in the first place.”

Usually, students use large sums of money to move someone in particular to an “A” class. If that's what he was talking about, it's certainly not hard to understand, even for me. Especially for third-year students, the odds were stacked against them, and if they were invited to join President Nagumo's class, they were practically guaranteed an “A” class. It's possible, for lack of a better word, for the Student Council President Nagumo to have secretly offered private points to those he has close relationships with, giving them the right to move to his class.

“It's just a rumor. But I'm not willing to sit idly by and let the accusations against me go unchallenged.”

Indeed, as student council president, such rumors could damage him one way or the other. It's understandable that he was visibly in a bad mood.

"The student council will be suspended for a while."

"Suspended...?"

Ichinose-san was surprised by this unexpected proposal from Student Council President Nagumo.

The student council used to meet like this once a week and repeatedly discuss various topics. The only exceptions were during test periods and some special exams. It was unusual to suspend them during the regular school year.

"We're done discussing the cultural festival, too. There shouldn't be any problems."

"Are you going to look for the culprits?"

"Of course, we'll look for them thoroughly. The next meeting will be held after the festival."

We then continued discussing the day before the festival, and we departed shortly afterward. I got up from my seat and headed toward Yagami-kun.

Perhaps sensing my approach, he raised his gaze away from his notebook, stopped his hand, and closed it. He's the secretary of the student council, so he was keeping the logs. The other students left the student council room ahead of me, which I was grateful for.

When we were alone, I decided to call out to him.

"May I have a word?"

Yagami-kun turned to me after looking a little surprised.

"I'm sorry, were you still in the middle of writing it down?"

"No, I just finished. Don't worry about it." He placed his hand lightly on top of the closed notebook and smiled at me.

"Is something wrong, Horikita-senpai?"

"Yagami-kun. May I ask you a slightly unreasonable favor?"

"What is it?"

"I want you to give this to the student council president. It's a love letter."

I took out the love letter and presented it to Yagami.

"That's very rare these days. Most of the time it seems to be done through chatting or phone calls..." When he received it with a surprised look on his face, I hastened to add.

"Just to let you know, it's not from me."

"I see. I thought it was a love letter from Horikita-senpai... Or should I just give it to him as such?"

"No, that's not it. A girl in my class asked me to give it to him."

"There is no sender name. Whose love letter is it? I'll let him know."

“I can't tell you that. She wants to remain anonymous.”

“It's an anonymous love letter...?”

“She asked for me to pass it on as a member of the student council, but there's the issue of anonymity, and if I give it to him, he might think it's from me, right?”

“That's quite possible. To be honest, I still have a little bit of doubt that Horikita-senpai didn't write it.”

Yagami-kun smiled a little funnily, but to me it wasn't funny at all.

“I'm just kidding. Given the look of disgust on senpai's face, I know it's not true.”

I sure hope so.

“Actually, it would've been smoother if I had given it to you before Student Council President Nagumo arrived...”

“Even if you gave it to me, I don't think I would've been able to hand it over. It didn't seem like the kind of atmosphere to give a letter.”

“Yes, that was inevitable.”

Under the circumstances, no one could talk to Student Council President Nagumo.

“I'm sorry to ask you to do this, but could you please deliver it as soon as possible? I'm sure they think I'll deliver it today.”

“In that case, I'll visit the dormitory later.” Yagami-kun stared at the love letter intently while looking a little perplexed. “Is this really a love letter?”

“Probably. I think she said she put her feelings into it, but I can't be sure.”

I couldn't peel off the seal to see what was inside.

“If I gave it to him as a love letter and it turned out to be different, I think it would be disrespectful to the student council president.”

“That might be possible.”

“I'll put it somewhat vaguely, saying that I received the letter from someone.”

“Yes, I think that's a good idea. Thank you.”

I thanked him for his honest acceptance.

“By the way, even in this day and age, it's hard for a secretary to work with handwritten notes, isn't it?”

There is nothing wrong with using a computer to work nowadays.

“Tradition is also important. It seems that the notes have been kept on file ever since this school was founded. If we suddenly switch to digital, it'll create a sense of discomfort.”

Yagami-kun turned around and stared at the bookshelf. Certainly, there are many records revealing the story of the Student Council's history. It wouldn't

necessarily be bad if the student council files were replaced by a disc, but Yagami-kun made a good point. Perhaps this is exactly what we should continue if we value tradition.

“I also hear that it is better to have hardships while you are a student. If you get used to easy life early on, you may suffer later on.”

Yagami-kun showed a slightly mature response, not like a first-year high school student.

“In that sense, this love letter is similar.”

It is true that nowadays it is not uncommon to confess one's feelings using one's cell phone. But I can understand that there is a certain meaning to conveying your feelings through your letters.

“Even so, today's Student Council President Nagumo really didn't seem to have a lot of time to spare, did he?”

“Yeah. He's betting a lot of money to expel the students, isn't he? As I recall... What was his name...”

As if remembering something, Yagami-kun opened his notebook and showed it to me. The first page that was flipped through was from the middle of last year, and looked like something a current third year student would have written in his sophomore year. Then the font changed and switched to the most recent notes.

I instantly recognized this because the notes, which seemed to have been written by Yagami-kun, were written in a perfect, orderly manner that showed his meticulousness. And the writing was so polished that it was hard to believe it was handwritten.

“There it is. He said that this Kishi-senpai might have spread a rumor. Do you know what class Kishi-senpai is in?”

Yagami-kun asked me with the same expression as usual, showing me the meeting records. But my brain was pulled into another realm all at once.

These characters.... They look very similar to that letter which had almost slipped from my memory.

Was he the person who presented me with the letter during the uninhabited island exam? I held my gaze, which was about to blur with agitation, and reached the notes of today's meeting. I looked at Yagami-kun from a broader perspective and saw that he was still looking at me with the same smile.

It couldn't be... But... No, it can't be.

Amidst a whirlwind of emotions, I think as I continue to feign looking down at the notes.

“Horikita-senpai?”

“Sorry, I don't know, but you should be able to figure it out pretty quickly if you look at the OAA.”

“Sure. I'll look it up right away.”

“I'm sorry, but I just remembered something I have to do. I'll leave you to it.”

“Oh, really? I understand.”

I looked away from him and quickly turned as if to run away.

“Well then, I'm sorry, but I need you to take care of my letter to the student council president.”

“Yes, senpai. Thank you for your hard work, Horikita-senpai.”

If he stared at me then, I probably would have asked him. I knew in my gut that I had to avoid that. I exited the door connecting the student council chambers and slowly closed it.

Just before it was about to close, I saw Yagami-kun smiling at me through the door's slightest gap. He looked at me with a smile, as if he was testing me.

It was as if he was challenging me with a question, “Did you notice?” It was as if he was trying to provoke me. Otherwise, he wouldn't have taken the trouble to open the notebook and show me the handwriting.

The door slammed shut.

I couldn't deny the possibility that the handwriting was coincidentally the same. Since a certain amount of time had passed since I saw those letters, my memory is blurred.

Even so, the handwriting was similar enough to make me certain of the reason for the resemblance. If I assume that he was the person who wrote me *that* letter... Then that person had been standing by my side for a long time while behaving in a nonchalant manner.

At the same time, it seemed to me that this assumption was very realistic.

Chapter Four: Meeting Before The Festival

THE DAYS GO by quickly, and Friday came, November 12. The day before the festival after school arrived.

All classes have been preparing for the festival. Today after school is the rehearsal led by the student council. It will be an important test for tomorrow's performance.

All classmates, except for a few, started moving at once to begin preparations. There are a total of four booths in Horikita's class. The first is the well-known maid cafe, where the main sales are tea, coffee, and other drinks in addition to photo shoots with the maids. The latter sales method is particularly time-efficient, and the unit price is set high, so if there are a large number of applicants, it will be a great source of income. The second and third are outdoor stalls selling powdered food (takoyaki, okonomiyaki, etc.) and Western-style pasta and bread stalls. The stalls generate sales on their own, and the maid café also takes orders. When an order is placed, a student in charge of delivery goes to the stall and brings it to the customer. In order to take advantage of the maid café's originality, a limited food menu is also prepared, which is a slight modification of the existing menu offered at the food stall. And finally, the fourth and final event is an outdoor quiz competition for children, which was added on short notice with the extra budget.

"You guys didn't make Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun come?" Maezono asked as her eyes followed Haruka and Akito, who had just left the classroom.

"There's no point in forcing them to do anything. Let's consider this a good opportunity to test whether 35 people, excluding Kōenji-kun, Hasebe and Miyake, can be left alone without any problems."

But those three are not the only ones who are not willing to cooperate. Kushida hardly interfered with any of the festival's activities in the weeks leading up to the event, and she's been going home immediately after school without helping out. She knows that she will be in charge of serving the customers as a maid at the festival, and she has gone to Horikita several times to come up with ideas. Some of them have even been adopted, although they are minor elements.

However, she did not participate in any practice sessions with other maids to make sure they were all on the same page.

"I'd like to do some final checks for tomorrow's event and also practice my activities for the day. Do you think you'll have time today?"

Satō called out, somewhat bravely, trying as much as possible not to let her guard down. Kushida, who had just gotten up from her seat, stopped and turned around on the spot.

“I'm sorry, Satō-san. I have something I really can't miss after school.”

This was not the first time Kushida has said that.

“Listen, you keep refusing me like that. When are you seriously going to cooperate?”

The atmosphere was turning sour, and Horikita was about to get up from her seat, but Yōsuke, who was standing beside her, stopped her as if he had anticipated this.

I don't know who was right. However, it's impossible to create a smooth class if we interfere in everything. Sometimes things have to be resolved by the people involved. It can be said that this is an uncharacteristic behavior of Yōsuke, who usually pays more attention to his words than anyone else... Probably because he felt that unnecessarily showing Horikita's special treatment towards Kushida to the class was a bad move.

Of course, Horikita understood this, but she also had a dilemma that she couldn't leave alone.

“Don't worry, I've got the festival in mind, and I'm not going to drag the class down.”

“But, Kushida-san, you haven't practised, not even a little. I can't trust you with the important role of a maid.”

Today's rehearsal will be the perfect practice. Satō, who had been reluctant to participate, seems unable to back down today. Likewise, Kushida had been even more reluctant and it doesn't seem like she will budge today as well.

“Then why don't you remove me? I don't think there are any other decent candidates.”

A merciless remark, but a fair one. Even taking Kushida's appearance into consideration, a student who isn't currently playing the role of a maid wouldn't be able to serve as a substitute.

“I'll see you tomorrow at the festival. Bye.”

Although her tone of voice was the same as the gentle Kushida, her actions could be taken as cold. She refused Satō's proposal until the end and left the classroom.

Did she simply not want to spend time with classmates who know her true nature? Or was it really that she had something she can't miss? Obviously, the atmosphere in the classroom deteriorated, but that can't be helped.

“Hey, Horikita-san. Tomorrow's the festival, but I still think we should remove Kushida-san after all...”

Matsushita, unable to bear the sight of Satō's downcast and frustrated face, went directly to Horikita "I know what you mean. But I don't intend to remove her at the moment."

"But it's a lie that she has to do things every day, isn't it?"

Indeed, Kushida's behavior as of late has been quite puzzling. It can't be helped that she's been keeping her distance from the others since the unanimous special exam, but even so, her uncooperative attitude has been conspicuous.

"That may be so. I don't know why she doesn't participate in practice either."

"Then..."

"Don't worry. She's thinking about the festival and the maid cafe in her own way. Just believe in Kushida-san."

"Well, I guess you could say that we won't get anywhere if I don't believe in her..." Matsushita looked unconvinced, but nodded and turned to follow Satō.

Matsushita, perhaps because she was one of the founding members this time, was also making a lot of efforts. Although it's true that Kushida's non-participation in practice is a cause for concern, Horikita's expression showed no signs of impatience. Rather, it seemed as if it was peeking out with justified confidence. That was probably why Matsushita backed down.

Since she didn't seem to be asking for help, let's watch and wait.

1

On the first floor of the special building, stall number "Special 02".

Students decorated this space, which was usually used as an empty classroom.

The girls mainly did the work, with the boys assisting them. Interestingly, the girls were by far the best at this type of decoration. It's probably safe to leave the setup to them with Horikita in the lead. Preparations for the concept café were steadily underway in the back of the special classroom on the second floor.

Unlike our maid café, the concept of Ryūen's class was "Traditional Japanese style." The food and beverages were also completely different from ours, including Japanese sweets and tea.

While preparations were underway, we found a unique presence. There was a girl sitting alone in a chair reading a book dressed in the kimono.

"Hello." When she noticed me, Hiyori lifted her book and, for some reason, hid everything but her gaze.



“It's been a while. I heard you haven't been showing up at the library lately.”

“It's not that I haven't been. I've just, you know, changed my hours a bit.”

I thought it was odd for a bookworm to disappear from the library, but I guess she just changed her visiting hours.

“It seems you'll be working as well.”

“I specialize in checkout. I'm not very good at interacting with people. I'm also not very good at moving around, and I practiced carrying food on a tray, but it didn't work out.”

In short, she's not very good at anything in general. However, working as a cashier isn't hard and if she can handle it smoothly, it'll be fine.

“By the way, Ibuki-san will be joining us.”

“Ibuki? I had an image that she would never wear this kind of costume.”

“I heard that she had a match with Ryūen-kun for complete exemption from helping at the festival.”

“And she lost.”

Hiyori smiled a little funny as if she was remembering that time.

“So, where is this Ibuki who lost?”

“She's not participating today. She said she absolutely hates wearing it outside of the festival.”

I can understand that feeling, but I hope she can serve her customers well when she goes out on the spot. Well, Ryūen would deal with such matters in a flexible manner.

I wanted to check on Ryūen, who owns the restaurant, but I couldn't see him. I wondered if he left the rehearsal preparations to other students.

“It seems that Ryūen-kun went to check Class A.”

“Class A?”

“Because they haven't disclosed what kind of presentation they were going to put on.”

Indeed, the details of Sakayanagi's class had been unknown until the day before the festival. It's not strange to want to find out what they will be doing. As long as all the classes were participating in this pre-opening the day before, there was no doubt that they would be preparing to open a stall somewhere.

“I'm going to go over there for a bit too.”

After talking with Hiyori, I decided to look for Sakayanagi's class.

“Um, Ayanokōji-kun...”

“Hmm?”

“Ryūen and the others went up to the third floor, so I think that's where Sakayanagi-san probably went.”

“I see, that saves me the trouble.”

She seemed to want to say something else, but Hiyori immediately shook her head from side to side. Three second-year classes concentrated in a special wing, and yet they are on different floors?

“I’ll be showing up at the library again next time, so please do so as well, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Yes, I will.”

I raised my hand to say goodbye, and then walked up to the third floor. The third floor of the special wing is the farthest from the school gate and the hardest to reach. There were three classrooms available here, but until the previous day, they were not popular and had not been rented.

“I didn’t think that Sakayanagi’s class would rent everything there, though.”

As it’s currently an exclusive floor, the 2nd year Class A students roamed the third floor corridors as they pleased. At first glance, it’s hard to imagine what kind of display they are trying to put on. There were only several cardboard boxes scattered about, their contents not visible, and the students were still in their school uniforms. Since it’s impossible to cook indoors due to fire regulations, that field disappears.

“Surprised by the unexpected?” Hashimoto, who was supposedly keeping an eye on the students coming, approached and called out.

“What’s this all about?”

“You can’t even understand what you’re seeing?” Hashimoto laughed quietly, perhaps amused that I didn’t grasp it. “Well, that’s understandable. But I can’t answer you easily.”

I guess they intend to finish the preparations the day before, but have no intention of making them public. As if to symbolize this, a sign was posted on the stairs leading to this floor.

It read, “Due to an issue, the second-year Class A will not be presenting their activities today.”

“That’s what it means. I’m sorry you had to come all the way up here, but I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Even if I persisted, we would still not be able to find out the details of the exhibit.

“It looks like Ryūen will be leaving soon, too.”

Ryūen came out of a classroom in the back and walked toward us with his hands in his pockets. After a quick glance at me and Hashimoto, he walked straight through and headed downstairs.

“Or are you going to do the same as him and take a closer look, even if you know it’s useless?”

“I'm going back.”

“Good luck. You'll have to wait until we open to see what happens.”

I was on my way back to the second floor when I noticed that Ryūen had turned his back to face me and stopped. I turned my gaze and stared directly into his eyes. Ryūen raised the corner of his mouth slightly before opening it.

“Tell Suzune that it will be our class that wins tomorrow.”

“I bet the Japanese attire cost more than the maid uniforms, didn't they? If you're going to challenge her to a match, at that point, you could have just worked together.”

“It's simply my taste.”

After replying with words that could be taken either seriously or jokingly, Ryūen started walking away. Without paying attention to Hashimoto's presence from the upper floor, I also turned back to the maid cafe.

2

Surprisingly, many boys from other classes rushed to the restaurant as soon as it opened. There seemed to be more onlookers who wanted to catch a glimpse of the girls in cosplay rather than eating, which was fine with us. It would be good experience for the maids, who are not used to being the center of attention.

Even Matsushita, who was usually very calm, moved a little stiffly and looked nervous. Sato and Mii-chan's movements seemed to be much more sluggish than during practice.

Immediately afterward, the sound of plastic bouncing on the floor spread throughout the classroom. It was caused by Mii-chan slipping a glass of water on the tray. The person in question froze at the heavy event that seemed to split the air. In the midst of all this, it was Matsushita who immediately moved.

“I am terribly sorry.”

After gently patting Mii-chan on the shoulder with a calm tone, she instructed her to bring fresh water. Then she brought a rag to clean the floor.

“You're doing very well, Matsushita-san, I can't believe it's your very first time as a maid.”

“Thank you.”

Horikita, who was standing by and watching, was also impressed by Matsushita's outstanding actions.

“You're also participating tomorrow as a maid, right?”

“Basically, as a manager. I'll also serve customers depending on the

situation, but I'm honestly not sure.” Unlike usual, Horikita answered somewhat timidly.

“Well, no one thinks you're good at putting on a smile, so good luck.” I said turning to Horikita.

I'm sure she's not worried about the service itself, but offering a smile can be a challenge.

“You look pretty comfortable.”

“It's almost like the work over here will be done by today.”

It's like 90% prep and 10% production, and all we have to do tomorrow is the paperwork.

“Maybe I should reassign you to the stalls too.”

“Don't reassign me just because of a personal gripe.”

Horikita started to say something nasty, but quickly backed down because she wasn't serious.

“For now, it looks like Matsushita-san will be fine, and I'll be leaving for a bit.”

“You're going to observe?”

“I want to see with my own eyes what kind of entertainment there will be.”

Take your time. I would meanwhile work on making room for tomorrow's waiting room.

About an hour later, Horikita returned to the maid cafe.

“I'm back. How are things going?”

“There were a few minor mistakes, but now we're all settled in and getting used to everything.”

“Thanks for the advance preparation.”

Without this rehearsal, we might have been in danger if we had just gone out and winged it. I knew that practicing without attendees was completely different from actually doing it with a third-party audience. Matsushita, who had been working at full capacity since the opening, rounded up and came up to me.

“Good job Matsushita-san. I'm honestly surprised how well you performed.”

“Thanks. Everyone's getting better. We should be able to start tomorrow in good shape.” Matsushita said, though her expression was a little stiff.

“What's wrong?”

“I think there might be more sabotage, that's what I'm a little worried about.”

“Sabotage?”

“When Ryuen-kun's class came over to the maid cafe, I was afraid they'd bring Ishizaki-kun and the others over and say there were bugs in the cups or something...”

Horikita and I exchanged glances for a moment, then quickly turned our attention back to Matsushita.

“Don't worry about that. It's not in their best interest to interfere in the practice stage. Besides, since there is a rule that students can't be guests in the activities, they can't do such a thing.”

“Ryūen can't use his usual tactics in the presence of so many eyes at the exhibit. There is no need to worry.” I added to Horikita's explanation.

The smile returned to Matsushita's face as she was almost simultaneously told by both of us that there isn't anything to worry about.

“Somehow, when the two of you say it, I feel a different sense of relief.” She patted her chest in relief, as if she had been somewhat preoccupied.

“You should take a break too.”

“I guess I'll do that.”

Matsushita started to walk away and left the classroom, wobbling slightly.

“Did you notice that?”

“Huh?”

“No, it's nothing.”

Perhaps because it was a minor discomfort, Horikita, who was nearby, did not seem to notice anything in particular.

I hope I'm just imagining things.

“So how did it go? What did the other classes put on?”

“I don't know if there will be another festival next year, but I learned a lot.”

Horikita examined the completed room before leaving to check its condition.

“It looks fine. In another hour, we'll start cleaning up, and you should take another look too.”

“I'll let you do that.”

With permission, I decided to parade around the entire school. Kei appeared as if she had been waiting for that moment and took me in arms.

“Let's go together.”

“I'd rather not but I don't think you're going to leave me.”

“I won't leave you.”

“You're free to go with me, but remember that we are only scouting.”

“Yes, yes~”

While Horikita responded seriously every time, Kei seemed to be at ease from start to finish. Well, it's not every day you get a chance like this. In fact, even taking a look at the maid café, it seemed as if most of the others were enjoying the cultural festival in a normal way.

3

First-year students and some of the third-year students were putting on a number of performances that resembled festival stalls. Some of them involved technological intervention, such as target practice, ring toss, or dropping marbles on a handmade platform to win prizes at multiple goals. The collection of prizes made the scene look a bit like a festival hall.

“Oh, it's Yukimura-kun and the others!”

Kei was the first to point and found Keisei, Sotomura, and the other boys busily preparing for the event. Perhaps because they had practiced baking food in their dormitories, they seemed to be doing it with a certain degree of dexterity. Let's not interrupt them by talking to them carelessly.

“Shall we try our hand at ring toss?”

“I'll try! Oh, that stuffed animal is kind of cute. I might want one.” Kei shouted and pointed from behind a student who was experiencing it first. It was a cute prize, a colorful bear.

Unfortunately, however, the ring toss was a demonstration. Even if they succeeded in the ring toss, they wouldn't receive any prizes. Even though the student council had a budget for the event, the number of prizes were limited.

If students took the prizes home today, it will be difficult to replenish them. On the other hand, the shooting game that the 1st year Class B was putting on across the street seemed to be offering sweets as prizes, and they were giving them away if guests were successful. The prizes were cheap, starting at 10 points, and even the most expensive ones were worth about 200 points. I guess tomorrow there will be prizes other than sweets, but this way, the test would be as good as the real thing.

“Try it, Kiyotaka!” She urged me to try it and lightly pushed me in front of a table where five shooting guns were placed in a row.

I was interested in the target shooting game, so I was willing to give it a try. You're given five bullets per game. The gun seemed to be a type of toy called a cork gun, which was filled with cork and fires. Each of the guns lined up on the table seemed to be more heavily built than I had expected. The bullets, however, were distorted in shape, and it was doubtful that they can be shot with precision. I had never held a gun in my hands since I was born. I have a vague image of it from movies and TV dramas, but I am not sure if it's really true to the actual thing.

I can't even look at an example because there were no other students

participating in the event. So, from my imagination, I grabbed the gun in the middle of the room and held it up.

“Aim for the most expensive one.”

In order to drop the highest priced assortment of candy, I need to shoot down a large weight. I wonder how powerful it really is. Let's give it a try first.

The first shot was fired while receiving enthusiastic cheers from Kei. With a light “pop” sound, the cork bullet was fired and approached the weight I had set as my target.

However, the bullet passed through a few centimeters to the left of the weight without delay. My perceived aim was that it should have hit the target with pinpoint accuracy, but the trajectory was completely different. Then, I shifted the muzzle a few centimeters to the right and fired a second shot. I thought I had corrected the trajectory perfectly, but this time it passed diagonally to the right and missed.

“This is pretty hard...”

As I was loading the third shot, the other students began to join in one by one. I decided to watch the other students and try to further correct the trajectory. However, the students firing their guns were struggling to aim as well as I was. One of the students fired a bullet that hit a weight from the first shot. It did not fall down, but he succeeded in pushing it back.

Continuing to observe to see if there was some trick to it, I discovered that it was not due to my skill, but due to each gun, which looked the same, having a different performance. The millimeter-by-millimeter discrepancies in the manufacturing process and the quality of the bullet cork itself. Various things combined to create an unexpected trajectory with each shot. It was a very interesting system, but at the same time, I understood how difficult it was to shoot and drop the target.

As a result, only the last shot was able to hit the weight that I had originally aimed at, but it was not an easy target to hit, and my first target shooting ended in a disastrous failure. However, I now understood the tendency of the gun itself.

Now, if I could only predict the trajectory of the bullet when fired based on the shape of the cork, I could try again... That's what I thought, but then I noticed a sign that said “Only one challenge per person today” and gave up.

“Ain't no way. The big bad Ayanokouji himself is a shitty shooter?”

Just as I put my gun back, Hōsen came out from behind the stall, laughing with a funny smile on his face. Hōsen's first year Class D stalls specialized in “games.”

“This is surprising. I didn't expect you to put on such a show.”

The idea was that these trivial prizes from target shooting and ring tossing

were means to return adults to their inner-child.

“When I was a kid, I used to make a killin’ with the adults at these kinda stalls.”

What kind of childhood was that...

“I really wanted to do more serious gambling, but the shitty school turned me down ‘cause of the rules or whatever. Really though, target shooting? It's the same thing as gambling. This kinda gambling is designed so that the house can win about all the time. It's a one-time cultural festival, so ain't no way they'll know they're getting ripped off.”

He took out his lighter and put it on the shelf, then came over to this side of the table and picked up the second gun from the far left. The bullet fired from the projectile gun he held up flew straighter than I had imagined and hit the lighter. It shook, but showed no sign of falling over.

“If they ain't able to take the limited prizes, it won't be a problem.”

“Wouldn't that keep the customers from coming back?”

“Nah, not if we add value to the shitty prizes and hand them out regularly.”

Hōsen had a plan. If the participation prizes were not attractive, adults might shy away. What appeared to be a participation prize peeked out of the basket. They had prepared a large number of student photos, both male and female, using a printing press and laminated them in various patterns for handmade prizes.

“It's a good way to show off as an adult that you gotta memory of participatin' in a cultural festival.”

The fact that many politician-related people will be attending means that some will communicate their participation in the festival as a kind of charity or community activity.

Announcing that the students were given pictures of the festival would also help to create a positive impression. After parting ways with Hōsen, who was surprisingly thinking things through, I returned to Kei, who was waiting for me.

“I couldn't win it.”

Kei grinned happily and poked me in the stomach area with her elbow.

“You look pretty happy even though you didn't get any prizes.”

“Because I got to see Kiyotaka's cuteness. I'm super satisfied as far as I'm concerned.”

“What do you mean, 'cuteness'?”

I had no good points at all during that time.

“I was happy that it wasn't like an anime, where you hit it on the first shot. I realized again that you can't do everything.”

That's true. My approach was based on experience. Unless I had some

material from my past experience to draw on, there was no way I was going to do well on my first shot, toy or otherwise.

“That's cute, huh? I feel like you usually want your boyfriends to be cool.”

“I've been shown enough of that.”

She didn't blame me, but rather, Kei's emotions seemed to take pleasure in the fact that I didn't take the prize.

As I strolled around looking for other interesting offerings, I spotted Ishizaki.

“Yo, Ayanokōji!”

“Looks like something kind of unusual is being put on.”

“Yes, it is, isn't it? It's an idea of mine and Albert's, you know.

“Wow, how did an enforcer like you get permission from Ryūen to do this? You couldn't even set up a birthday party.” Kei stared at Ishizaki suspiciously.

“I wanted to make it happen! I made a proposal just like you told me to do, and I got kicked out of it...”

He held his abdomen as if he was remembering that moment. It was coincidentally on October 20, the day of my and Ryūen's birthdays. Ishizaki planned a birthday party for both of us. However, in order to make it happen, he needed to persuade Kei, and her condition was that Ryūen must apologize directly to her for what he did on the rooftop and bow down to her.

Naturally, Ryūen did not accept Kei's harsh conditions.

“But I'll get my revenge next year! You'll just have to wait for me!”

“No one's going to wait for you. So, what kind of booth are you putting up?”

“Who cares? Do you care? Okay, you guys go ahead and give it a try.”

All that was provided was a desk and cardboard. The disposable chopsticks and cups on the table gave the impression of dining, but is it really?

“What is this?”

“You'll just have to wait and see.”

Ishizaki then instructed Albert to take out tools from a cardboard box.

They were a bag of protein and a bag of citric acid. Both are familiar to those who take them during muscle training and other activities.

“This is chocolate flavored protein. Well, just take a light lick.”

Two small bite-sized paper cups were prepared with Ishizaki's chocolate-flavored protein.

“I don't want it.”

Kei refused to drink it as soon as it was served.

“Oh, don't be like that. It's just protein.”

“I've never had protein before, and I don't want to. I'm not trying to get

muscular.

"You can't build muscle just by drinking protein shakes." Albert stepped forward and mumbled English.

"Huh? What?"

"Don't worry about that. You can't build muscle by just drinking protein shakes. That's right. Since we're here, why don't you two give it a try?"

To be honest, I was a little curious to see what Ishizaki would do.

I took the initiative, picked up a paper cup, and drank the protein. It may have been made by a different manufacturer than the one I used to drink, but it tasted a little like the old days.

"Well, I'll drink it for you then, just in case... it's bad."

Kei, on the other hand, who drank protein for the first time, frowned as if it didn't taste good.

"Tastes bad? Well, it's not undrinkable, right?"

"It's not undrinkable, but I don't really want to drink it."

"Well, you need a palate cleanser."

Water was handed to me, perhaps to rinse out my mouth. By the time I finished drinking it, Ishizaki was ready to move on.

"Next, this way."

With that, he prepared a citric acid drink, this time in another paper cup.

"Well, it's citric acid, I guess."

"I think I like this one better."

We muttered our impressions of the citric acid drink to each other.

"Well, that's the last one. The two you just drank aren't bad, are they?"

"I didn't like the protein."

"You're good, Karuizawa, how about Ayanokōji?"

"Yes, it wasn't bad at all."

Hearing this, Ishizaki laughed happily.

"By the way. If you add citric acid to this chocolate-flavored protein, you get a very strange taste."

He handed me the mixed protein and held it close to my mouth. It seemed like killing two birds with one stone, since both the protein intake and the citric acid intake are not bad.

"Now drink both of them at the same time."

"I'm kind of scared."

"Well, let's drink it."

We tipped our paper cups and started drinking. But the moment I put it in my mouth, I involuntarily stiffened at the taste spreading from the surface of my tongue.

“Shit!” Kei screamed next to me and spat it out on the spot. She then made a vomiting gesture while thrashing about, strongly appealing the others.

“This, that, that tastes like vomit! Eeeeeee!”

I remembered that taste too. When I was taught martial arts, I was hit with a powerful fist to the abdomen, and the stomach acid that rose from my body alongside the food I was digesting came up. The smell and taste that spread in my mouth, it was something close to that.

“Hahaha! Yes! That's funny!”

“Not funny! Water!!!”

Pushing away Ishizaki, who was laughing exasperatingly, Kei drank from the water bottle

“This is, how can I say this, certainly a mystery drink.”

“Even the quintessential Ayanokōji is a bit taken back.”

Not only was it not tasty, but it honestly didn't taste edible. The tension plummeted.

“I'm going to surprise my customers tomorrow. For 500 points a cup, I'm going to offer them a magical experience.”

“I'm amazed that Ryūen allowed you to do this.”

I'm more surprised about that as well.

“He said, 'Do whatever you want with your points. We're doing something else tomorrow.’”

I see. So Ishizaki is just going to rent the extra space for himself. Then the expenses would be minimal, and, well, it's no wonder that about 10 guests would at least be curious about the experience.

“Ugh, a fun date turned into the worst...”

After that, Kei just kept giving Ishizaki resentful glances until she left the place. Their relationship, which seemed to have improved a bit, may be back to square one.

After finishing our reconnaissance while genuinely enjoying a few of the activities, I returned with Kei to the maid café. The classroom was filled with students, who seemed to be enjoying talking to the maids as they pleased. When one of the students occasionally deviated from the moral line and persistently called out to them, Sudō intervened, forcibly interrupted them, and asked them to leave the room. He suited the role of a bodyguard and was in charge of dealing with trouble.

The two-hour festival simulation would soon be over. I discussed with Horikita whether or not we needed to make any changes to the final staffing for tomorrow.

As I, Sudō, and the other boys started cleaning up, Onodera showed up.

“We're done here, too,” Onodera said. “I wish I could have seen everyone's maid outfits.” Onodera, who had been sent out to the outdoor stalls, made a disappointed sound as soon as she returned.

“You wanted to see the maids?”

“I like cute things too. Besides, I'm not the kind of person who looks good in a maid's uniform, my legs are too thick.”

“You don't know if it looks good on you or not until you try it on.”

“With the limited clothes we have, I'm sure they won't even fit my size.”

Onodera then replied with a wry smile, saying that it was impossible for her. Because of her commitment to swimming, Onodera has a well-trained body, including broad shoulders and legs that are more developed than most girls. If we were to provide her with a size-fit maid uniform, it would inevitably be made exclusively for Onodera. Sudō crouched down and moved his gaze closer to Onodera's thighs.

“Wait, hey Sudō-kun!”

“They're the legs of a well-trained athlete. Well, it's certainly a little different from what you'd call a maid.” He placed his finger to his chin and said exactly what he thought.

“I'm so embarrassed!” Onodera blushed and ran out of the classroom like a rabbit.

“What's with her?”

As I watched the two of them interact, I could feel the obvious change in Onodera up close. The two of them were not only the same, but they were also very close to each other. However, Sudō didn't seem to have noticed this, perhaps because he had never shown any affection to Onodera before, or perhaps he had never even sensed the presence of affection before.

It would be nice if both arrows were facing each other, but as it was, both arrows were going the opposite way. I haven't learned much about love, but I do know that the basic rule in these situations was to keep a warm eye on the people involved. However, that was why my curiosity and urge to see the result of a different pattern came over me. If I go against the “rules,” will they no longer make it as a couple?

“Don't you understand? Why Onodera behaved like that? The same feelings you have for Horikita, Onodera has for you.”

“What?”

I said it in a slightly roundabout way, so Sudō didn't immediately understand. However, Sudo wasn't so rock-headed that he couldn't understand what

I was saying at all.

“Huh? Onodera... me?”

“Yeah.”

“No, no, that ain't it.” He seemed to have thought about it seriously, but denied that it could be true.

This was also a natural reaction.

“Onodera might not have been interested in you at first, but you’ve been showing remarkable growth these days. It wouldn't be surprising if she became aware of you as a member of the opposite sex, right?”

Little by little, Sudō's face turned grim as he began to reorganize his thoughts.

“What the hell... why me?”

“Of course, there’s no guarantee. If you want to know the truth, it might be important to observe Onodera carefully and try to understand her.”

“But, hey... I...”

Nothing else needed to be said to understand the situation. Right now, Sudō's feelings were strongly directed toward Horikita. That was why I wanted him to show me how he'll change from this unnecessary comment of mine.

Will he move closer to Horikita or sway toward Onodera? Or will he change into an unexpected third party?

“No. I'm getting a little confused, I'm going to go cool off while I go see the food stalls.”

You'll have to think long and hard to come up with an answer.

“Kiyotaka-kun, was that... okay?”

Yōsuke, who was standing by, seemed to have heard my conversation.

“I don't think you should have interfered.”

“Is that so? Well, I’m sorry if that was careless of me. I’m still learning how this works.” I apologized to Yōsuke with a blank expression on my face.

A little while later, it was time for the preliminaries to end.

“Good work, everyone. That's all for today. If there are any reassignments for tomorrow's show, I'll call you from my cell phone by 9 pm.”

After all the cleanup was done, all preparations for tomorrow were complete. The students were already on their way home for tomorrow's performance.

Only two people remained in the classroom, me and Horikita.

“I've been thinking about it a lot, but it just doesn't feel right for you to be a maid,” I said.

“I don't want to do it, but it would be nice to have more hands, wouldn't it? It would have been a little easier if your girlfriend had cooperated.”

“I'm sorry, but it's out of my jurisdiction. I've left it to Kei's will.”

It seemed that Satō and the others, including me, had approached Kei, but she refused to wear the maid's uniform.

I haven't heard what the reason was, but I guess it was because she didn't want to change clothes rather than because it was too much trouble or because she wasn't suited for customer service.

Not everyone understood Kei's body and her past.

"I'm just kidding. It's not something you force anyone to wear. If you're unwilling to wear it, it won't make you look good to tomorrow's guests."

"Here, look through this. I've made some adjustments based on today's simulation."

I handed the notebook to Horikita for a final check.

"Thank you. It looks like the schedule you've put together is going to be fine."

Horikita looked up from her notebook, "All festival participants are required to take a one-hour break before the end of the festival after notifying their homeroom teacher."

During this break, they are forbidden from assisting with any of the stalls and must coordinate their workers, whether they are busy or not.

4

In the middle of the street leading to Keyaki Mall, a man and a woman were facing each other. The preliminary preparations for the festival had already begun and there were no students to be seen in this vicinity at all.

"We can finally talk, Yagami-kun."

"I didn't think you would barge in on us while we were preparing for the festival."

"I wouldn't have caught you otherwise. It seemed as if you were avoiding me."

Even after making contact, Yagami forced Kushida to move to this location, refusing to discuss the situation on the spot.

"It's just a coincidence that we didn't meet. By the way, it seems you visited my room several times. sorry, I was away."

Both continued their dialogue without losing their smiles. If someone were to witness the two of them from the sidelines, the scene would appear to be one of friendly banter.

"Were you really away? Or were you using the answering machine to harass

me?”

“Staying away? Why would I do that? There seems to be some kind of misunderstanding.”

“There’s no misunderstanding.”

Irritated by Yagami's refusal to let her grasp the reality of the situation, Kushida stepped forward on her own.

“You cut me off because I was useless. That's all, isn't it?”

In a unanimous special exam, Yagami expected Kushida to expel Horikita and Ayanokōji. Since she failed to live up to that expectation, and since there was no contact between them, it wasn't surprising for Kushida to judge as such.

“Do you remember that I contacted you on the night of the unanimous special exam?”

“Yes. Of course, I remember.”

On the night the exam ended, Yagami called and learned from Kushida's mouth that Horikita and Ayanokōji had not dropped out. Shortly after that, the phone was disconnected, and Kushida had not been able to talk to Yagami since then.

“I will be honest with you. I thought Kushida-senpai hated me. That's why I haven't had the courage to face you lately, and maybe I've been unconsciously avoiding you.”

“Stop it. It's no use lying to me like that now. Pretending to be a junior who has a liking for me only gives me the chills after I learned part of your true nature.”

“Excuse me. Now, could you tell me again how that day happened?”

Kushida was beginning to understand. The freshman in front of her was just having fun playing with her. He knew all about the unanimous special exam, and he was about to open his playful hands again.

“I won't answer.”

“Why not? At least we know that Kushida-senpai acted to expel one of those two students. But as a result, Sakura-senpai was expelled instead of Kushida-senpai. What I want to know are the details of it.”

“I did nothing in that special exam. So, Sakura-san, who was the lowest in OAA, was inevitably cut. That's it.”

The class details in the unanimous special exam was not leaked to outsiders. So, Yagami wanted to know the details. She tried to push the story forward with the idea that Sakura Airi was only selected due to a lack of ability. But Yagami kept smiling and gently placed his hand on Kushida's shoulder.

“You shouldn't lie.”

“Lie?”

“Since after the unanimous special exam, Kushida-senpai's behavior routine had changed significantly. I have already investigated and understood that you have distanced yourself from your classmates, although you seemed to be getting along with students in other classes as usual. In other words, that unanimous special exam exposed a certain degree of your own true nature.”

Externally, Kushida had been smiling at her classmates. But there were limits since her classmates were more distant than ever. A small group of girls used to hang out a couple of times a week, but now it's down to zero.

“I don't know what you're talking about. I'm still getting along with my classmates as usual.”

Kushida implied that Yagami just so happened to miss the times she was hanging out with her classmates. Kushida tried to push it that way, but Yagami kept smiling.

“It's no use trying to hide it; Kushida-senpai allowed her class to discover all about her past. And it was definitely Ayanokōji-senpai who pushed her into that corner.”

Yagami spoke eloquently, as if he had been watching Kushida and the others fight in class. The fact that he mentioned Ayanokouji instead of Horikita's name was clearly unusual.

“You're imagining things on your own. It doesn't fit at all.”

“You're free to misrepresent it, but... What on earth do you want from me if you have nothing to say? I have to help with the festival, so I'd like to get back as soon as possible.”

“I'm tired of hanging out with you, Yagami-kun.”

“You're tired of...?”

“I'm tired of being your friend, Yagami-kun. That's all I wanted to say today.”

Kushida abruptly offered to end her relationship with Yagami.

“You want to end your relationship with me. I understand that feeling. Since Kushida-senpai's past and character are now known in the class, there is no point in pressing Horikita-senpai or Ayanokōji-senpai to be expelled now.”

“I'm not going to correct every single thing anymore. If you want to interpret it as you see fit, go ahead.”

“You're an interesting person, Kushida-senpai. What you just said was the truth. Besides, Kushida-senpai herself is beginning to think that it's okay to throw herself into this environment. So, she wants to end her backwards relationship with me and look forward.”

She wanted to look forward. Those words stuck in her mind.

“Aside from Ayanokōji-senpai, have you made peace with Horikita-senpai?”

“I won't answer that either.”

“By the looks of it, you've been heartbroken. I'm a little disappointed, Kushida-senpai.”

Kushida resisted the urge to retort, but anger welled up within her, and she continued hating Horikita as much as ever.

“I am...!”

“Oh, that's okay. You don't have to say anything else. I can tell by looking at you.”

His dismissive attitude lacked some of his former politeness. Kushida couldn't help but feel a little creeped out by this, but she couldn't afford to show any weakness here. Rather, she was clearly more tolerant than the average student, perhaps due to her repeated contact with unusual people like Ayanokōji, Ryūen, or Amasawa.

She was surprised and felt a sense of realization when acting tough.

“This is the end of us, Yagami-kun. We have nothing to do with each other, right?”

“Rest assured. You're worried that I might go around exposing Kushida-senpai's past, right? That's why you came to check on me while giving me a warning, right?”

“That's right, if Yagami-kun exposes me, rumors about me will go around the school.”

“Then will you listen to what I have to say?”

“I'll tell them everything about Yagami-kun, about how you used me to get Ayanokōji and Horikita expelled from school, about how you're a devil with a kind face.”

Yagami didn't know if this was a threat. Still, using the weapons she has now is the only way Kushida can defend herself.

“You have threatened back. Then I will keep that in mind. Are we done?” Whether it works or not, Yagami broke off the conversation and walked away.

“I'm the leader of the 1st year Class B. I'm busy with various cultural festival stalls, so I'll see you then.”

“Don't forget, Yagami-kun, that as long as you keep your promise, I will keep mine.”

Yagami smiled at last and disappeared out of sight with light steps.

“I hope this is the end of it.”

While she held such wistful thinking, she also realized that it wasn't the end. So what should she do?

Should I just wait with my fingers in my mouth, or should I set up and strike?

“No. I can't stop Yagami..”

Up until now, Kushida had challenged and lost to various opponents, including Horikita.

She now realized that she was painfully alone.

I realize that I am alone. But even so, the situation has changed drastically.

The other side is definitely licking Kushida's chops. Not just on the surface, but from the bottom of their hearts.

Even so, she prided herself on being able to read such things.

“Before I fight that guy, I have something to do.”

She knew that the problem that needed to be solved goes above just Yagami. She had no desire to go back to being a gentle honor student, but she must show a solid contribution to maintain a firm position in the class.

Kushida Kikyo knew how to survive by herself.

5

In the middle of the night, I received a phone call.

“It's very unusual for you to call me, Sakayanagi.”

On the other end of the line, Sakayanagi let out a little chuckle.

“Indeed you may be right. May I have a few minutes of your time now?”

“I wouldn't be answering if it wasn't convenient.”

“I see. Then let me cut right to the chase. Ayanokōji-kun, you will attend the cultural festival as a matter of course, won't you? My father seems to be concerned that there may be people from the outside who will come to bring you back.”

“The chairman of the board called me a little while ago. He told me that I should consider taking this time off from the main event again, but I politely declined.”

I probably would have attended the last sports festival, though, if not for the fact that I had to give Sakayanagi a break.

“Aren't you afraid? No, that's a foolish question, I'll change the question a bit. Are you perhaps assuming that the people involved will not move to recapture you?”

Otherwise, Sakayanagi said, she doesn't see the point of me purposefully putting myself in harm's way.

“It's simply a question between actual harm and potential harm. There's other opportunities coming up, such as the school trip. If the harm would go away after these two festivals, I would act differently. However, there's no guarantee

that there won't be spectators at next year's festival too. It's easy to stay in your shell, but the opportunities I will lose by doing so are far more troublesome."

"So you want to experience your remaining school life and what is normal for a student as much as possible." She replied in agreement with my way of thinking.

"Besides, I have other objectives. I don't want to waste them."

"If that's the case, I have nothing further to say; I think it's best that Ayanokōji-kun does what he wants."

I was curious about the festival, but I knew it was not polite to ask about it. Was she simply trying to win that showcase, or was she trying to crush the competition? Or does she have some other goal in mind? If I asked her, she might answer, but that would lead to a different story.

It was up to Class A to make whatever choice they make, and no third party had the right to decide what was right or wrong.

"But unforeseen circumstances are things that can happen at any time. Even if the festival is safe, you never know what may happen next. If you have any trouble, please feel free to contact me anytime."

"That's very kind of you."

"We can't have Ayanokōji-kun disappear before we have a rematch."

"I'll take care of myself."

"I'll see you soon then. Good night."

Avoiding any idle chatter, Sakayanagi ended the call with a mutter.

Chapter Five: The Festival

AFTER A LONG period of preparation, the festival finally arrived.

The festival began at 9:00 a.m., and students were required to arrive at school by 8:30 a.m.

Furthermore, the gates to the school opened at 6:00 a.m., so if necessary, preparations can be made early in the morning. Horikata and I met at the lobby of our dormitory at 6:00 a.m. to go to school. This was because we have to make a final confirmation in advance, in order to avoid any inconvenience during the actual event.

As soon as I joined her, she turned her attention to the box I was holding in my hands.

“Good morning. Is that cardboard by any chance the one you were talking about?”

“I'm sorry for making you come up with an unplanned budget.”

“It wasn't a big amount, so the impact is minimal. We second years should've been given 5,000 points each to spend as we see fit.”

We also rubbed elbows with students from first to third grade who came in early with the same idea, although not as many. I stopped by the classroom once to drop off a box of hand-me-downs and then came over to the maid cafe.

“Did you receive the call from Matsushita-san?”

“I checked. It must be hard for her since she's one of the leading figures who led the maid café to this point.”

Matsushita contacted me early in the morning and reported that she had to take the day off due to illness.

“But it's a wise decision.”

If she had only a slight fever, she might have been able to go, but she had developed a cough and other symptoms, so she could not perform a job that required customer service. Additionally, even if she were reassigned, Matsushita, who was not feeling well, could not be entrusted with a heavy workload, and if the cold spread, it would affect the class during the festival.

“Besides, this is the kind of preparation we need to make in advance.”

It's not enough to just reassign personnel; it is necessary to know where to fill in the missing personnel.

“Speaking of which, did you hear? It's rumored that Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun may have been the ones who leaked the information about the maid cafe.”

“Sounds like it. But we could’ve foreseen that at an early stage, couldn’t we?”

This information came down from Kei, who was in close contact with the girls and had already heard about it.

“I guess so. But I wonder if it was really a good idea to leave it alone.”

“Rumors are rumors. Haruka and Akito didn’t actually leak the information.”

Horikita’s self-loathing at not being able to help Haruka and the others peeked out.

“You shouldn’t show your weakness so easily. It will only give them an opening to take advantage of you.”

“You’re always so calm as if you’re a stranger to the situation.”

I noticed that Horikita was looking at me as if to check my expression. The observation continued for five or ten seconds, and then I noticed that her face had changed to a difficult expression with a wrinkle between her eyebrows.

“I have a few questions...do you usually interact with the first-year students?”

“First-year students? No, I don’t. I talk to Nanase or Amasawa once in a while, but that’s about it.”

I feel like I shouldn’t say that I interact with them, since I rarely ever go see them myself.

“Is that what you wanted to ask?”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“Speaking of interaction, what about you? You talk to first years in the student council, don’t you?”

“Well, I do. I’m getting a little bit more involved with the juniors.”

The student council had gained three people from this year’s first years; the second years only had Ichinose for a long time. There was a distinct lack of quality, if not quantity, of talent. The most recent addition was Horikita, but it was likely that the number of members was adjusted to fill the gap.

There was no limit to the number of members in the student council, but it was said that there were generally eight to twelve members. At this school, there are currently three third-year students, two second-year students, and three first-year students. It would seem that they were following past conventions.

“At first, I thought it was useless. I would rather be in my room studying than doing student council work because it would better benefit me. To be honest, that feeling hasn’t gone away.”

Student council work wasn’t the only thing that seemed like such a waste of time. Whether it was club activities or friendships, it was basically a series of futility.

Some may go from club activities to becoming professionals, or from friendships to future jobs, but for many, these will be nothing more than memories of the past.

On the other hand, if you work hard at your studies, it is likely to lead you to a great future. It would be the most solid and safe option a student could take.

“There’s a lot to be learned in futility. You’re beginning to see that.”

“Your brother was student council president, too.”

“My brother’s case is different from mine. He was able to carry out his student council duties flawlessly while also achieving impeccable results in his schoolwork. I don’t think he ever felt that the student council was a burden, nor did he suffer from a lack of studying.”

Even if we’ll never know the actual truth, there was always plenty of room for Horikita to study. I don’t think there was any way she didn’t put in a lot of bloody effort, but she didn’t let it show in vain.

“I’m grateful to you, if only for the results. Joining the student council has helped me see things I couldn’t see.”

She was honestly thankful, or so I thought, but she still went on with her words.

“It made me realize how great my brother is again, and I have to do a lot of extra work.”

“I wish you had just been honest and thanked me.”

“You have to accept some complaints.”

“I agree and sympathize with you that academics are a difficult goal for you.”

I know that I am not inferior to Manabu in terms of pure academics and physical ability. But if he was in the same grade as me, under the rules of this school. It’s a long shot, but you never know what kind of fight it would have been.

At the very least, he held enough power for me to consider him a dangerous enemy.

1

As 9:00 a.m arrived at the maid cafe in the special wing of the school, an announcement was made to all students at once.

Guests stepped through the main gate and the opening of the festival was announced.

“What do I do, I'm getting nervous...”

“I haven't had any contact with outsiders since I entered this school.”

I heard a conversation with Ike, who was standing shoulder to shoulder with Shinohara. I guess being in a closed environment for so long certainly created extra tension.

Meanwhile, Satō and the other maids continued to discuss the shift change due to Matsushita's absence.

Although the burden on each of them would inevitably increase, the time adjustment was nearing completion. Satō, dressed in her maid costume, clasped her hands together in anxiety, but quickly slapped her own cheeks between her palms to regain confidence.

“We can do it, we can do it!”

“Maya-chan will be fine. I'll back you up too.”

Kei, who was helping behind the scenes, cheerfully encouraged her.

“Yeah, I'll do my best!”

Since overcoming a big hurdle, the two of them have really grown closer. Their relationship as best friends won't be broken in the slightest from now on.

The only other member I had to worry about was...

I looked around and observed the other students. Sudō and some of the male team members were not listening to the announcements and were having their final meeting with Yōsuke.

We had to keep our feet on the ground about what to do when it gets crowded or in case of trouble. After giving out all the instructions, we realized that we were short two students. Immediately after, Horikata and I looked at each other. We must've been thinking the same thing. She approached and spoke to me in a whisper.

“Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun seem to be missing.”

“I guess it's not like they're in the restroom.”

The other students seemed to be too busy minding their own business to have noticed yet.

“I knew there was something going on at this festival, but”

“If it's just simply slacking off, I guess I'm rather grateful.”

For Horikata, who had not calculated them as a force to be reckoned with from the start, there was no need to get worked up if they just didn't help out. However, if they were to sabotage the project, that would be a different story.

“But it also adds fuel to the fire because of the rumors.”

“If you leak information and then skip the festival, well, that's enough blame, isn't it?”

“I've been keeping an eye on it so far, thinking only time will tell, but I still think we should do something about it early on. We should at least dispel the rumors.”

“I understand what you're saying, but we should focus on the festival today.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Even if we can erase the rumors, we can't erase the fact that those two have slipped out. Besides, there is still a possibility that they could embarrass the class in some other way at the festival.”

With multiple sources of anxiety, a poor response could lead to unnecessary animosity. Taking sides is certainly only for when Haruka and Miyake are determined to not be the enemy.

“I agree.”

Horikita was a bit nervous, but she cleared her throat to get rid of her thoughts.

“I'm sure you'll be able to handle Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun just fine.”

I replied with a glance, and decided to start greeting the guests.

2

“Welcome!”

Satō's cheerful voice echoed in the classroom, or rather the maid cafe. At the same time, the first guest to enter the store was a man who appeared to be in his 40s.

A total of six maids waiting in the store responded all at once as they had been trained to do.

“Let me show you to your seat.”

Satō's voice was cheerful, but her movements were stiff, since she wasn't entirely comfortable yet. Still, thanks to the rehearsal the day before, there were no major mistakes, and after showing the guest to their seat, she took the menu list and cold drinks to his table.

The only way to get back to the practiced routine was to repeat the process and let the get used to the guests. Then, slowly but surely, the number of guests began to increase. The age range was similar, but sometimes teenage boys and girls who appeared to be the guests' family members began to shyly walk in.

“A good start, huh?”

It wasn't suddenly full, but it was nice to see that the seats weren't all empty. My cell phone was constantly receiving calls and reports from my classmates

scattered around the school. Which exhibits were attracting the most people and which were deserted.

Since the sales of each class were unknown until the end of the festival, we had no choice but to gather information personally. Fortunately, all students were required to take a one-hour break, so there were always a certain number of students who were not busy.

That is why, of course, our class was always being scouted as well.

After watching the room for a while, I decided to take a look at the hallway. It seemed that many guests had already made their way to the special wing, and as far as I could see, the guests outnumbered the students.

If that man was behind this, it's possible that he's already in view.

I don't think he would be looking for me on the day of the event without having done his homework, leaving no stone unturned. But so far, I haven't seen anyone suspicious. Besides, with so many adults, students, and children in the area, it would not be easy to make contact with me.

For now, the focus should be on the current students rather than on them. Yoshida from Sakayanagi's class was peeking into the maid cafe without trying to hide.

There was no sign of student's from Class C at the moment, but they would likely come to check the situation at some point soon. The classroom door opened vigorously, and Ike and Hondo came out in a hurry.

"We took the order as fast as possible! I'm going to the food stall to get it now!"

"That's fine, but please be a little more calm."

Some of the guests were surprised by what happened.

"Oh, right. Sorry!"

It was not an ideal situation for customers or potential customers to watch a flurry of restaurant personnel run to get their food. With a warning, the two looked at each other, nodded, and began to move, albeit at a rather fast pace.

With this being the first delivery, we couldn't afford to be late.

Today, this kind of back-and-forth repeated itself every time an order was placed.

"Ayanokōji."

I turned around when my name was called and saw Kanzaki approaching me.

"Looks like you're already thriving."

We had gone through the preliminary phases, but Ichinose's class's offering was, as I recall, sweets-based. They dealt things like crepes and chocolate bananas.

"What about you?"

“The kids love them. But the adults are not as receptive as we thought they would be, so we're not sure if we can aim for the top spot in terms of sales.”

“You may have a hard time, then.”

“Probably, but my priorities have shifted so I'm not entirely concerned about this festival at the moment.”

Apparently, the first step towards change with Himeno may have worked.

“I'm going to the gym now. I want to learn what I can from the third years for the future.”

“I see. See you later.”

After seeing Kanzaki's walk off, I decided to return to the maid cafe and start working. I didn't have much to do until “noon” arrived, though.

In a small partitioned off corner of the classroom, I stood by to deal with any problems that could arise. I'm also in charge of taking pictures of guests who want to have their picture taken. Within a few minutes, after the first photo shoot, the guests who had been watching began asking to be photographed in rapid succession.

I'm not saying that there weren't adults out there who would like to make some fun memories with high school students, but it was better to assume that the guests were taking advantage of the festival's purpose and dropping money on us.

In a sense, it seemed that quite a few of them decided that this was also their job.

Nevertheless, conversation and laughter gradually spread throughout the maid café, and it began to show aspects of a lively, ubiquitous café.

“New customers, please show them around.” Horikita's inorganic voice reached the classroom filled with laughter. Satō immediately approached to serve the customer and began to lead him to an empty seat.

“Sato-san will show you around. “

“Well then, if you'll follow me....”

Being one to shy away from showing affection, Horikita was in charge of outdoor advertising. Although she was dressed as a maid to attract customers' attention, she did not smile in person.

If this were a real maid cafe, Horikita would have been fired during her training period after passing her interview.

Then again... the idea that Horikita would interview for a maid cafe was unlikely to happen.

3

Less than two hours into the festival, the maid café was maintaining its customer base as planned.

The important thing was how well they could handle the goods we stocked. Especially since the film we stocked cost about 70 points per roll.

So far our stock seemed to be holding out well, and I, the instant camera and photographer, had been busy flying around the classroom. The instant camera, which cost nearly 9,000 points, was not a cheap photographic equipment to have invested in, and I had to buy another one in case my current one broke down.

“I got one shot~!”

The maids' voices echo through the store, and I move out of the waiting room, camera in hand.

It seems that this time they wanted a photo shoot with Mii-chan, and Ichihashi, who was in charge of the bill, promptly received the points on her cell phone and completed the payment.

“Yes, cheese!”

After taking a two-shot of the laughing Mi-chan and the customer, I checked the film that popped out of the instant camera.

“Of course...”

I knew it was suspicious at the moment I took the shot, but I had released the shutter just as Mii-chan's eyes closed.

“Ugh, sorry Ayanokōji-kun.....”

“Never mind. I'll take another picture.”

It was a souvenir shot, and while I didn't mind if the guest's expression was a little problematic, I couldn't give him one with a mistake in the maid's expression. This was not only a consideration for the guests, but also for the maids, such as Mii-chan. As a girl, there was no way she would accept a badly taken photo.

That was why, even though each picture could be taken for 800 points, two, or in some cases three, sheets of film were needed.

The second shoot went well, so I handed over the photos that were ready to be developed. After the shooting was over, I quickly went back to the waiting room. Well, I have been repeating this kind of thing endlessly since this morning. But still... this festival, with so many people connected to politics, was the perfect opportunity for that man.

I knew that he would try some kind of trick to set me up, no matter how many people were around. This must have been the same for Chairman

Sakayanagi. However, as noon approached, there was no sign of any change.

I'm reminded of the conversation between Tsukishiro and the mysterious student who had visited me during the athletic festival.

"But no matter how good you are, you are still just a child. You should understand that that person has already factored in that strength of yours and sent me to you."

"After eliminating Tsukishiro, all we have to do is eliminate the white room students and peace will return. I came here to advise you because I think you are making such a mistake."

If we were to tie these matters together somewhat forcefully, it would be natural to think of capturing me by force with adults who are not students through the cultural festival.

In fact, they decided to use Tsukishiro to forcefully hold the festival, so it should be so. Would they miss this great opportunity by letting me evade them?

"Missing an opportunity..."

Of course, the festival was not over yet. But what if they had not made any moves at this point?

That would not be mere negligence, but....

"Ayanokōji-kun, what should I do, I seem to have run out of Darjeeling!"

Seeing Mii-chan rushing in with a panicked look on her face, I interrupted my thoughts.

Let's focus on the problem at hand for now.

We had prepared several kinds of tea, but the Darjeeling, which used high-end tea leaves, sold out immediately. We had discussed and narrowed down our stock to the minimum number, but the sales were unexpectedly high. On the other hand, inexpensive tea bags sold poorly. Since it was impossible to buy more on the day of the show, we could not restore our inventory now.

"Put a sell-out sticker on all the menu boards right away. I'll write corrections on the signs that are posted outside."

"Uh-huh."

I grabbed a pen and immediately corrected the sign with the menu at the entrance of the restaurant. Both were cheap props from the bargain bin, but they would work.

"There we go."

I wrote the words "Sold Out due to popular demand" next to the Darjeeling. Although this is an unexpected sellout, it was a way to showcase the popularity of the maid cafe.

Immediately after, an arm reached out from the left side behind me. What came into view was not a school uniform, but the fabric of a suit.

“Take this without turning around.”

A white paper, folded in half, swayed in the slight breeze coming in through the window. There may not be any contact, or so I thought, and just when I thought so, this happened. It would be easy to ignore the order not to turn around, but I silently accepted it.

The person who approached me at such short distance without giving me any sign of him was not an ordinary person.

“May I ask your name?”

“That's needless prying.”

As soon as I grab the paper, his left arm disappears from my sight. I held that position for a while, and then I sense another presence approaching.

“What's wrong, Kiyotaka-kun?”

Yousuke seems to have come out of the classroom, concerned that I didn't come back right away.

“Sorry, I was approached by a guest who got a little lost and had to be dealt with. Any trouble?”

“Orders are starting to not turn out well. The stalls seem to be doing better than expected.”

“I see, the turnover is getting out of control. I'll be right there.”

After confirming that Yōsuke had left, I unfolded the paper I had been holding in my right hand.

[I'm here to pick you up. Decide for yourself what to do. I'll wait for you at the front gate.]

He even politely included his phone number.

I decide what to do? If they are really giving me a choice, did they really think I would choose to leave?

It was unclear how much significance the note had. All I could say for sure was that the person who handed this to me was connected to the White Room.

Have they decided that they can't use direct force and will leave it to my judgement?

But the fact that no steps had been taken so far may have something to do with that sentence. Either way, there was no point in worrying about it. I rolled up the small piece of paper, put it in my mouth, and swallowed it.

Paper originally comes from a plant, and its main ingredient is cellulose. It has no enzymes to break it down, so it cannot be digested and gets ejected as it is. It is not a problem if a third party picks up this note, but it can be a disadvantage to have it in my possession. If it was a festival where you were stuck in a bad situation, it was better to do this quickly and easily because there was no further issues.

4

Three hours had passed since the festival began.

It was noon, and new guests were arriving to replace the families who had gone to the school first thing in the morning. After receiving a report from Ike and the others, who had gone out to scout the area, I was walking near the entrance when I heard a voice saying,

“There it is!”

Ike pointed to where several girls from Ryūen’s class were shouting.

“We, the 2nd year C class, are currently competing with the 2nd year B class for sales at the concept café! If we lose, someone might be held responsible and expelled from school!”

The air was clearly alien to the many students who basically continued to serve their customers with smiles and cheerfulness.

A large number of guests stopped in their tracks at the sight of the saddened faces and raised voices.

“Please, can we ask for your cooperation! Please help us!”

One after another, they handed out the flyers they seemed to have been producing. I approached a boy of junior high school age who seemed to have received one of them and asked him if I could take a quick look at it.

On it, offerings for a kimono concept café on the second floor of the special wing were detailed, but it didn’t mention the menu or any other price. Instead, it put the confrontation front and center, strongly emphasizing that this was a battle they absolutely could not lose.

“Nah what? This is bad, right?”

The girls’ earnest appeals couldn’t have been left unspoken. In all likelihood, Ryūen was probably threatening his classmates with expulsion.

“Is he seriously trying to get someone expelled, that Ryūen guy?”

“I doubt it. If a forced expulsion is a penalty, that means he threatened to expel them without their consent. It would be a problem. In fact, if the student who was threatened told the school, Ryūen’s position would be jeopardized, and a sharp drop in class points would be inevitable.”

“Then that means he’s lying! Let’s go there now and make them stop!”

“Impossible. His classmates strongly fear the chance he’s telling the truth. Besides, if you listen to the words out loud, all they’ve said is that they might be expelled from school.”

So there was no material to determine that he was lying to the guests as well. The fact that they don't just settle for a fair confrontation is typical of Ryūen, who comes up with one bold strategy after another.

It was safe to assume that they were working more towards beating us than to be among the top four.

“If we lose, they'll take away 1 million private points, right? Oh no!”

I would love to tell the head-holding Ike not to worry, but it was important to show the public that he was seriously frightened. The importance of the confrontation became more clear.

“What do you want to do?”

“If they want to do this, we'll just fight back with a similar strategy.”

“You mean threaten to expel someone too!?”

“No, not that way. We're going to show them that we're also putting all of our effort into the concept café competition as a second year B class. We are ready for that.”

“What? And what do you mean ready?”

“Open the cardboard box I brought for you.”

I had Hondo and Tonomura take the box down to the ground and remove the duct tape. Out of it came a bunch of flyers.

“This is...! It's a flyer just like theirs!”

“I was planning to put up flyers to drive the guests to the event if necessary. They beat me to it, but I'm sure it'll be effective nonetheless.”

The flyers prepared by Horikita's and Ryūen's class were quickly circulated throughout the school, and word spread that the two classes were competing against each other.

This way, it was also self-evident that they were making big bets on the one-on-one match-up. Knowing about this confrontation will give the illusion that both classes were taking similar risks. It doesn't create the need for me to go out of my way to threaten my classmates.

“I'm going to call the girls who have free hands now and ask them to spread the flyers all at once.”

“Okay, okay! I'll let them know right away!”

The process was to have them use their feet directly and have Hondo and the others communicate the information to their classmates. Then, in addition to the predetermined points for distributing flyers, we notified the boys who were running the stalls to let them know that we were confronting Ryūen's class as well.

“Did you hear Horikita's class and Ryūen's class are playing for a lot of money?”

“I heard that the leader of the losing class is getting expelled?”

It seemed that word of the one-on-one match was beginning to reach the ears of ordinary students who had nothing to do with it.

Speculation led to rumors, and rumors led to speculation.

"I'm going back. Let me know if you need anything else."

Ike and the others who delivered meals were always on the lookout for changes in the situation. They nodded their heads in assurance, and I left them to it as I headed back to the special wing. On the way there, I spotted a Japanese-style girl holding a leaflet in a corner of a largely empty corridor.

"Shisase!"

The way she handed the leaflets to the occasional adult passing by reminded me of the lethargic adults I sometimes see at the Keyaki Mall handing out tissues without much enthusiasm. They were just handing out a predetermined number of leaflets in an unobtrusive manner.

"Can I have one?"

"Shassu."

They may not even be aware of our presence, or perhaps they were just thanking us in a small way. She offered me a small thank-you and a leaflet. But as I took it, her eyes locked onto me.

"Geez."

"You've been handing out flyers in a place like this, Ibuki?"

"Go away."

I was looked at by someone who didn't want to be looked at, and she looked away with a disgusted expression on her face.

"I'd heard about you, but I guess that means you're keeping your word."

I had heard that she would dress in a kimono after losing the match with Ryūen, but it suited her better than I expected.

"Costume for a horse and cart, huh?"

She stared at me intensely, but I was relieved that she didn't seem to understand much of what I meant.

"It's nothing."

It wasn't easy to get rid of all the flyers when you're handing them out in an unpopular place.

"Maybe you should move to more places. I saw Yamashita and the others handing them out over there."

"You're kidding. Why would I team up with those guys?"

Although I already knew her answer, she immediately rejected me.

"Why don't you take all of this?"

"That's a tall order."

"Fuck, I think I'll just stuff them in a garbage bag and throw them away."

She looked down at the stack of flyers she didn't like and swore. The reason she didn't do so, though, was probably to make sure she avoided punishment in case they lose.

When you win, you force your opponents to do so, but when you lose, you run away. If you continue to do that, you won't be able to compete with Ryūen or any other opponent in the future.

"By the way, what did you confront Ryūen with?"

"I would have preferred a tie-up, but he suggested we play a card game."

"Card game? You mean like poker or something like that?"

"Well, it's similar."

The content of the game itself was not important, but the fact that it was a suggestion from Ryūen was what caught my attention. Maybe Ibuki was successfully entrapped. Regardless, at least Ibuki wasn't getting in my way any more.

"I'll spread the word later about what you've been working so hard to promote here."

"Don't spread it. I'll kick your ass."

I quickly dodged a sharp kick as her costume shook.

"Damn it."

"Oh, by the way, the greeting at the café is 'Welcome home, master.' Try it out."

"I'll say it if you'll take my kick to your face."

"I think I'll have to pass."

She raised her leg slightly to threaten me, so I shrugged and left.

By the time I returned to the maid cafe, the somewhat relaxed atmosphere that had prevailed earlier in the day was gone, and the largest crowd of the day had begun to form a line.

Horikita joined the lineup, guiding the visitors.

"It looks like you've started handing out the flyers without any problems," she said.

"Yes. From this point on, yours and Ryūen's class should start to outpace the others."

"Everything is going according to your plan, isn't it?"

I'm not the one who added the unique color to it, though. Horikata and I nodded to each other and returned to our respective positions.

5

The maid café was on the road to success. However, the fact that Ryūen made his movements known at an early stage may have backfired on him, and there were no other classes other than Ryūen's class that followed suit, effectively attracting customers. This in itself was a welcome development, but a problem that had not occurred during the rehearsal arose.

The problem was that there were too many customers due to the confrontational attitude that had been adopted between Class B and C.

The classroom seats were filled to the limit, and cramming in more would only make it more suffocating. The only solution was to make the visitors wait in line, but maid cafes do'nt have a fast turnover to begin with.

It was essential that students dressed as maids also enjoyed conversing with the adults. Usually, in such a situation, we would consider handing out numbered tickets and asking people to come back later. However, in a cultural festival, this was not a good idea. What would a customer with 3,000 points left in his/her pocket do if he/she received a numbered ticket and was asked to come back in an hour? Some customers would do so dutifully, but most would drop their money at another place during the waiting time.

The next thing you know, you've spit out almost 3,000 points, and you have no more money to drop at the maid cafe, so you leave without stopping by. This is a development that happens in the real world. That was why we wanted customers who had lined up once to keep lining up until they entered the store and spent their money. And if possible, we even wanted to absorb the points they plan to drop elsewhere.

“That's not good. Customers are starting to leave the line.”

The prospect of taking a risk and getting a big payoff was now a warning sign.

“Ayanokōji-kun, can I get out of customer service for a while? I have an idea.”

Kushida called out to me as I was about to walk to the end of the line.

She must have been curious to see what was going on and came to check on the situation.

“What are you going to do?”

“The waiting customers are just bored, and they're showing a strong interest in the maid café. But they're probably hungry, too, and it's too much to ask them to leave.”

“I guess so.”

Since it was also right around lunchtime, it was obvious from the adults now in the classroom that many of them were there for food and drinks. Kushida picked up one of the bags filled with homemade cookies that she has been selling , prepared for souvenirs and started walking down the hallway with it.

Then, with a smile, she called out to the now bored customers.

“Sorry to keep you waiting”

She then pulled a cookie out of the bag and started handing them out to the waiting crowd. She may be aiming to fill their bellies just a little, but there was more to it than that.

Once they receive something in return, they may feel guilty about leaving the place.



If Kushida were to leave her current post, it would not be difficult for someone to run away from the line with some guilt on their back, but she stayed and continued to talk to them with a smile on her face.

After receiving the cookies, it was no longer easy to leave the line, even though they were impatient.

There were some disadvantages to Kushida leaving the hall, but the customers who had already taken their seats were certain to spend some money. For now, it was more important to bring the money-generating presence beyond that point.

She could see what was going on in the restaurant better than anyone else, and she also knew how to make the most of herself. What could she do to get as many people on her side as possible?

She knew how to get close to adults of the opposite sex, engaged them in conversation that made them feel good, and sometimes even held their hand or did other skinship with them. They showed not the slightest resistance or aversion to this behavior. The other girls had been working hard all day, but Kushida was the only one who had managed to do all of these things perfectly.

Even when she was accounting at times, she made as few mistakes as possible, even when she stumbled over a calculation. This was truly a gift, as she had never participated in any real-life practice sessions.

“Kushida-san's abilities are quite something. This is her element, I guess.” Yōsuke nodded his head in respect as he looked at her workmanship. “It seems that Kushida-san and Horikita-san, who have been facing strong headwinds, will also have some tailwinds.”

They've done such a good job, I had to admit that to some extent.

“People are creatures that resent easily, but on the other hand, they are also creatures that admit easily. Especially when you are young, evaluations are like the two sides of a coin. From the front to the back, and now back to the front again. But the more you're pushed around, the more you'll feel like a tired presence.”

“Still, I'm fine with it, as long as Kushida-san is able to fight alongside everyone in the class.”

“I'm really impressed by what I'm seeing.”

“I think it's a cumulative process. During the preparations for the festival, Kushida-san visited Horikita-san's room late at night several times. I think they were practicing.”

So, in addition to her own talent, she was practicing well behind the scenes.

If Yōsuke's reading of Kushida's life was correct, it was a reminder of Kushida's greatness. It would also confirm Horikita's confidence that Kushida was in good hands. We then went back to the waiting room and spent about 30 minutes

pulling the camera around.

“Um, Ayanokōji-kun, where is Kushida-san?”

Mii-chan came out of the room, looking busy.

“Kushida?”

“There's a customer who wants to take a picture with Kushida-san, but I can't find her.”

Kushida-san, who was supposed to be organizing the line, had disappeared? Yōsuke and I immediately looked down the hallway, and sure enough, Kushida was out of sight.

“Excuse me, have you seen a girl standing in line here?” Yōsuke called out to the guests in line.

“Oh, you mean the girl who was handing out cookies? It looks like she was approached by a girl from the same school and followed her about five minutes ago.”

“What was she like?”

I asked about the person who approached her, as if interrupting a conversation.

“Um, a girl with her hair tied up in two knots.”

Yōsuke didn't seem to have a clue, but I had a strong idea.

“I'm sorry, but I need you to take care of the store for a bit and direct me to another maid the way Kushida did.”

This was the kind of trouble no one expected. That's why I knew immediately that it was a problem I had to deal with.

6

It was difficult to locate a particular person at a festival where many people, young and old, were present. And if you can't predict where someone was going, it was even more difficult to find them.

While operating my cell phone, I sighed in admiration at the overwhelming network of information. I was amazed at how fast and accurate it was. Within a few minutes of making the call, I was able to get their location information.

Not in the direction of the Keyaki Mall or the dormitories, but behind the indoor pool facility. When I arrived there, I found Kushida's back facing me, dressed in an out-of-place maid's outfit.

“So don't make me say it again...”

Kushida, who was probably having a heated conversation with her friend,

was shouting at her.

“Wow...”

Meanwhile, the other person immediately noticed me and told Kushida to stop talking.

“What? Why is... Ayanokōji-kun here..?”

“Of course he’s going to look for the ace when you’ve disappeared.”

That’s true. Although I let the substitute maid take over the queueing example set by Kushida, I’m not sure how much longer she can maintain the same pace as Kushida.

“I thought I had taken her to a secretive location, but I’m surprised you found this place, senpai.”

I was actually keeping an eye on her the moment she stepped out into the line.

“Unfortunately for you, I’ve created an alliance with someone I can rely on now. No matter where anyone goes, I’ll be sure to know where they are.”

Even Amasawa doesn’t seem to have any idea who it was, but she didn’t inquire any further

“She was going to go right back after this, right senpai~?”

“Yeah. She’s right. I’m sorry I slipped out without telling you, but I also wanted to talk to Amasawa-san for a minute.”

“Then you could have just stood there and talked, that’s no reason to leave for 10 or 20 minutes.”

“That’s...”

Kushida knew that the first priority was to keep the line moving and the customers happy. That’s why Kushida was working on abandoning her customer service duties. She wouldn’t have left her seat unless it was something serious.

“Whatever there is between the two of you, we’re busy with the festival. Can you talk about it some other time?”

There was no need to go to the trouble of choosing today as the day for the exchange.

“You are not the least bit surprised to see me and Kushida-senpai together, are you? Did you know about our history?”

“No.” I really didn’t know that they had ever had any deep connection before. “But today, with this timely contact, I understand everything.” Even information that seemed unnecessary was derived in my head on its own.

Why was Kushida so adamant about expelling me from the school in a unanimous special exam, and why did she take a reckless gamble?

If a student from the white room was behind it and forced her to do it, it was not unreasonable.

I also began to see why she was acting as she was at the festival, where she would be easily traced. Kushida's behavior also matched up with her behaviour after school, when she headed somewhere after declining invitations from her classmates to join them.

“Kushida-senpai will pay you back later, so can you give me a little time?”

Amasawa in front of me still didn't realize that I was vague about my answer.

“Sorry Ayanokōji-kun, could you please excuse me. I'll be back as soon as I can. I also really need to talk to Amasawa-san.”

“I see what you mean, but it's not going to happen. This is enough, Amasawa.”

“Senpai's eyes are so naughty, aren't they? You're looking at me like I'm naked or something~”

Amasawa pressed the tip of her finger against her lips in a seductive manner, but the tone wasn't sexual. It was an action to hide her wariness that I can see right through her.

“Kushida, you have a weakness regarding your past with Amasawa and one other person. That's why you forced the class to get into an uproar so that Horikita and I would be expelled from the unanimous special exam. Or maybe they were working on something before that.”

“Eh?”

I must have been right on target; unable to confirm or deny, Kushida simply looked surprised.

“Let's stop now, senpai. This is a time for me and Kushida-senpai.”

“I'm sorry, but it doesn't work that way. Kushida is a necessary part of the class, even before her work as a maid.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You may be right, but I'm not so sure about the other one.” As she replied, Amasawa's demeanour changed for the first time. Without warning, Amasawa, with an eerie smile on her face, grabbed Kushida's wrist tightly.

“What?!”

She then pulled her close and stood behind Kushida with her right hand locked in place and forcefully closed Kushida's mouth with her left hand.

“Perhaps you have an idea who the other student is, senpai?”

Kushida's words were silenced before she could ask the question since Kushida knew that person firsthand.

In other words, she knew who the other white room student was. So, Amasawa anticipated Kushida's reaction and took measures to ensure she didn't unexpectedly utter that person's name.

"You know, Kushida-senpai, if you say anything bad, I'll have you expelled, okay?"

Kushida's face contorted in pain, probably due to the tight grip on her right arm.

"This is not like you, Amasawa. You seem like you've been cornered pretty hard."

"Wait, senpai, I didn't say anything, did I?"

"Every single action speaks for itself."

Kushida, enduring the pain, would not understand the nature of this conversation. And Amasawa herself didn't know how much I understood.

"Let's talk about it again later, just the two of us next time. Please pretend you didn't see this and leave, Ayanokōji-senpai. If you do that, I'll let her go in about ten minutes."

"What if I don't say yes?"

"If you don't say yes, I might cripple Kushida-senpai here." She said and squeezed her right arm even tighter.

"Ngh!"

"I'm a pretty girl, but I can easily break an arm or two."

"Then let's give it a try. Let's see if you break Kushida's arm first, or if I can stop you."

The distance between me and Amasawa was about 5 meters.

"Are you serious?"

"Are you serious about breaking her arm? Or are you saying that you don't think I can stop you?"

"Both."

"Then you're wrong about both. You really shouldn't forget who I am."

Laughing, Amasawa loosened her grip on Kushida's right hand, even if only slightly. At that moment I kicked the ground and dove in just as Amasawa switched to a motion to break her arm.

My right hand slid down Kushida's arm and reached her wrist as my left hand went around her mouth to her back, I grabbed Amasawa's right hand.

"No way..."

It must be a defensive instinct. In an instant, she abandoned the action of breaking Kushida's arm and shifted her attention to me, and tried to make a left fist with a tight grip.

However, I didn't give Amasawa any chance to make any further movements, and caught her, blocking her from moving towards Kushida.

Just as Amasawa had done to Kushida earlier, I went behind her and twisted her body to the ground with her arm behind her back.

"Fuu~!"

The forceful hold on the ground caused Amasawa to lose her breath for a moment and gasp for air. Her breath caused a slight dust cloud to rise.

"Oh my, that was... a little unexpected."

"Did you think there wasn't much difference between you and me?"

I could tell by the look in her eyes. Amasawa's pride, which was always high, was deeply wounded.

"You mean I was wrong about your abilities?"

"Probably."

Amasawa's fighting skills, which she had learned in the white room, are real. The fact that she and the other student had been in the white room for a long time and had learned to fight in the white room was a real advantage. However, whether they can compete with me on equal terms was a completely different matter.

Even if the opponent's skill had increased from 5 to 20, or even 30, it meant nothing because my score was still 100.

"Since when did you think you could beat me?"

"From the moment we met."

"If that wasn't a line from Ayanokōji-senpai, you'd be rubbing salt in my wounds."

"I'll tell you this, you seem to think that the other student might push me out of school, but did you ever wonder why I never asked for the other student's name?"

The smile slowly faded from Amasawa.

Up until now, I had never willingly sought out a white room student on my own.

"That's because I didn't think they would be a match for me from the start."

"You're serious, aren't you, senpai?"

"It's not you who doesn't understand that, right, Amasawa?"

If you had only half-heartedly practiced martial arts, you would not have had any real feeling for it yet. But Amasawa was different. Even so, in less than 10 seconds of total movement, the match had already been decided by a wide margin.

"You and student should have challenged me at an early stage. You shouldn't have gone around and involved the people around you in the fun."

"So, you understood why I contacted Kushida-senpai..."

"It all connected just now. And now the unexpected is about to happen."

“The unexpected?”

“After 3 p.m., keep an eye on the student council chambers. You are not to be seen in front of anyone. Then you'll have all the answers.”

Seeing Amasawa's strength slowly slipping away, I released the restraints. There was no need for any more forceful techniques.

“We've wasted a lot of time. Let's go back to the maid cafe.”

“Is it okay leaving her?”

Amasawa stood up, but there was no emotion in her face.

“It's okay. You don't have to worry about your past being exposed.”

I started to walk away and Kushida rushed after me.

“How could Ayanokōji-kun know that?”

“Don't worry about it, but you can trust me.”

“Who is Ayanokōji-kun?”

That question would be inevitable if you had witnessed the conversation and fight with Amasawa earlier.

“I don't know anything about fighting, but I can tell you you're not normal.”

“It's not uncommon for classmates to learn martial arts. Horikita and Ibuki, even Ryūen and Akito should be strong in fights, even if they are self-taught. It's not like boys and girls can compete with each other from the start.”

I would explain that it was only overwhelming due to the gender difference. Whether Kushida would be convinced by that is another matter.

“I'll have to get back soon and help them get in line. Please go back yourself.”

“Yeah, sure.” Kushida replied, bowing her head as if she had made up her mind to do something. “Thank you for helping me.”

An unexpected thank you from Kushida. Of course, Kushida was easily more down-to-earth than most people on the external front. She was the type of person for whom expressing gratitude itself was easy enough to do.

“You don't think I'm sincerely grateful, but that's fine. I just felt like saying so, even if it's a lie.”

“It's not a big deal. It's more of a natural behaviour for a classmate.”

“Then you don't have to consider this as a debt, right?”

She emphasised that part, and I thought about it for a moment, but I didn't feel like indebting her.

“Of course.”

If I did consider her to be in my debt because of what happened, she wouldn't really be able to repay me.

Chapter Six: What Airi Left Behind

KUSHIDA, WHO HAD left for a period of time but recovered brilliantly, succeeded in keeping the long line of customers together.

However, the overcrowding caused a shortage of staff. The maids, who had taken a one-hour break, were still tired, and their movements had slowed considerably. The men had extra hands, but it was still a struggle because they could do the backstage work but couldn't stand in the hall.

There were a total of eight maid outfits prepared for the event. Two of them were basically considered as spares, so no more than six maids could work at any one time.

Except for breaks, Sato and Mii-chan were the aces of the team, working hard all the time. Horikita, who was not initially supposed to be in charge of the hall, started serving customers in the middle of the day and was now moving around. The remaining three were Ishikura, who had substituted for Kushida, Matsushita, as well as Inokashira, who specialized in handing out flyers.

Kushida was working in the hallway to keep people from leaving, so in effect there were only four people running the hall. Normally, additional staff should be brought in, but there was no one to fill the position.

It wasn't enough to say that any girl would do.

This wasn't a matter of looks or charm; it was also largely a matter of consent. Sonoda and others approached some of the girls, but the embarrassment of wearing a maid's uniform and the rigors of the work led them not to volunteer for the job.

"Ayanokōji-kun, the waiting customers may have grown bored. I don't think we can keep them tied up like this forever."

In between, Kushida peeked into the room from the hallway and called out to me. Horikita, who was serving customers (though mainly carrying food) in this emergency situation, also saw Kushida and approached her.

"What's going on at the end of the line?"

"We told them that they would have to wait for a long time, and while some of them will wait, most of them will leave."

And if they saw a long line, they weren't going to wait, even if they didn't want to. The guests who were staying now were not just customers, they were just guests who came to the festival. I didn't expect them to stay because they felt that the time they had to wait was a waste.

That was why Kushida was acting as a wall, but it seemed to be on the verge of collapse.

“You had two extra maid outfits, didn't you?”

It may be time to pull out the spare outfits for the day's emergencies.

“Yes, but what's the point if there are no girls willing to do it?”

“Yeah, why not Karuizawa-san?”

Kushida suggested. I guess she thought that Kei, my girlfriend, would listen to my instructions. Certainly, it would not be impossible if I forced her to do so. But....

“As I recall, she has a break at 2 p.m., right?”

“Yes. She's on break right now, and even if we had her change her clothes after returning at 3:00, it's doubtful to what extent she'd be able to be of any use.”

What they didn't know was that you can't have her change in a simple locker room. Worst case scenario, it would be another 20 or 30 minutes to get back to the dorm and then back.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a second?”

Ike, who had brought the food back and forth for I don't know how many times today, called out to me.

“What's wrong? Any trouble?”

“Oh no, I heard you say you're short on staff right now. I was wondering if you could leave it to Satsuki.”

“Shinohara-san? But I wonder if she's up to the task.”

“I think she'll be fine. Besides, she was practising to be a maid, even if only lightly.”

The three of us looked at each other as we heard this for the first time. Shinohara was working on the cooking side of the stall.

“Can you call her right now?”

“Sure! I'm on it!”

Now I'm just grateful to have a student who was willing to wear a maid's outfit. Later, with a recommendation from Shinohara, he strongly persuaded Azuma. It was decided that she would join us.

“Ayanokōji-kun, as you know, I have to take a break at 3:00. I'm going to need some manpower after I leave.”

“I've thought it through, don't worry.”

Fifteen minutes later, Shinohara was asked to go to the hall, and Azuma was asked to join Kushida in the hallway to hold up the customers waiting there. But Kushida's expression in the hallway was grim, and it was not a development she seemed to relish.

“It's hard to say if she's the right person for the job, because Shinohara-san

doesn't make much of an impact visually, and she's not very good as customer service.”

“There's an emergency.”

“Hasebe-san is still unavailable?”

“Before I say 'not available,' she's been gone since this morning. She's formally participating in the festival, but she might be back at her dormitory.”

“You mean payback for Sakura-san's expulsion? You participated in the preliminary discussion, right?”

“I was just observing.”

“Still, that means you know more than Shinohara-san, Azuma-san and the others, right?”

“That's why it was an effective way to get back at Haruka and Akito who seemed to be along for the ride, since we were making our plans based on the calculations of our strength.”

“I see. If you knew that much, I would have thought that you would have considered the possibility that those two would not participate and thought of another way.”

“Even if you knew that, you can't increase the class size. Besides, if we moved with another strategy from the beginning, Haruka and Akito would've got the hint. We decided that it would be more of a disadvantage to have them go on an unexpected sabotage by doing so.”

“It would bother us, but that's it. It's not an action that can be called revenge.”

“If only this were the case.”

“What do you mean?”

“Haruka and Airi were looking forward to the cultural festival. That's why they were going to see it through until the end. Since that's over, there will be no reason to continue staying at this school.”

“You mean they're going to drop out of school?”

“Probably, if two students voluntarily withdraw from the school, in addition to the simple disadvantage in numbers, a significant drop in class points will be inevitable. The class would be severely damaged.”

“How much damage?”

“I estimate 600 class points for the two of them combined.”

“Six hundred?”

“Nothing surprising. Expulsion under the normal rules of this school has traditionally been penalized by that much.”

Excluding limited circumstances where the risk of expulsion was high due to

strict special exams, this was a natural step.

“If two people really drop out, it means that my path to Class A is doomed.”

The fact that she said “mine” was typical of Kushida, but she was right.

“It's going to be almost impossible to get back in.”

“I wonder if they're just going to sit back and watch.”

“I was going to come up with a way out of this.”

I look down at my phone. Unfortunately, I haven't received the notification I was hoping for.

“I guess there was some unforeseen trouble, or maybe the trump card never arrived.”

Haruka's strategy of sabotaging the festival, or rather voluntarily leaving school, was basically like an unstoppable ultimatum. No matter how many countermeasures were devised, there was no way to prevent it completely.

If Haruka herself had intended to stay at the school and repeatedly sabotaged the festival in desperation, as Kushida had done before, she could have used the special exam rules to force the students to leave. It was not difficult to derive a strategy that would go above and beyond the smallest of tricks. But Haruka did not take an unreasonable strategy. She knew that her skills were not as good as mine, so she chose the most efficient strategy.

“Are you sure you want to continue like this?”

“That's not for me to decide; that's for Haruka and Akito to decide. If they want to continue with their non-participation in the festival, then that's also what they're going to have to do.”

“I don't think Ayanokōji-kun really thinks that way, though.”

“Do you understand?”

“Do I understand? You're not going to abandon Hasebe-san and the others, are you?”

Apparently, Kushida could see what I was about to do.

“The reason you didn't try to persuade her until this time was to test the two of them?”

“I didn't know what they were aiming for. Were they going to ruin the festival or not? But from the fact that they've done nothing so far, I had a pretty good guess. I'm going to make contact now.”

“Do you have any idea where they are?”

“That's why I'm having my contact figure things out”

I showed her my cell phone screen and showed her someone's message with Haruka's current location.

“You have a reliable ally. I guess it's thanks to this person that you found out

where I was.”

“Ah. They’re the perfect person to look or keep an eye on someone.”

They always knew where Haruka and the others were.

“But at the end of the day, there's only so much I can do. Whether or not I can make those two people's hearts beat is another matter altogether. I'm leaving.”

I left the situation to Kushida and the others and headed for Haruka.

1

After stopping by the classroom and grabbing the cardboard boxes I had brought with me that morning, I walked through the school building to the road leading to the Keyaki Mall. I eventually came to a place with benches for students to take a rest. There were no stalls on this side, and of course no students or guests were to be seen.

As I approached, I naturally came into their line of sight.

“How did you find this place, Kiyopon?”

Haruka was sitting on a bench, and Akito was standing nearby, staring at me.

“I know you and Airi used to chat around here after school.”

Reports were coming in that Haruka and Akito have been walking all over the school all day today. And after all that, they must have chosen this place as their stopping point

“Quite the former Ayanokōji group. Correct.”

Haruka greeted me without a smile and immediately continued.

“What are you doing here? I thought I wasn't interrupting the festival?”

“Maybe you're right, you’re not interfering. But you haven't been cooperating with us either.”

“That's true.”

“I feel bad for you. No, I feel bad for the class.” Akito, who hadn't shown up since this morning, apologized.

“No matter. I know what you're thinking when you're standing by Haruka's side.”

“Let's not worry about that, let's get you to answer my question.”

“What are you doing here? The maid café is more successful than you can imagine, and we are short of maids.”

“Hmmm... well, maybe things would have been a little different if Airi had

been there. I would have been there too, so you wouldn't have been short two people."

"In that case, Kushida wouldn't be here, and it would've been a much more dire situation."

"You responded to sarcasm with sarcasm."

"I'm just stating the facts."

In Haruka's contentious style, words tended to be exchanged. It was obvious that this was a way to irritate me.

"Can you lend me your hand for the last hour?"

"You know the answer to that. Persuasion is pointless."

"Yes, it is. If there was a condition, it would be that I bring back Airi."

Of course, that was impossible.

"Well, let's just hear what I have to say. I'm sure you're wondering what this is all about."

I put the cardboard box in my hands on the ground.

"I want you to open this box."

Haruka only raised her eyebrows in suspicion.

"What are you trying to do now? I'm sorry, but I don't want to get involved in anything strange."

With that, Haruka pulled out an envelope from her pocket. The white envelope was handwritten with the words, "Withdrawal Letter."

"You're not surprised, are you?"

"I knew there was a good chance you would quit after the festival. And you're planning to go out with her, aren't you, Akito?"

"Ah."

Akito also pulled out an envelope marked with the same withdrawal form.

"That's great, Kiyopon. I guess that's why you were able to expel Airi with apathy."

As she spoke, her gaze did not turn to me. She was simply staring into the void. It was as if she was talking from some other dimension, separating herself from the world.

"This is the festival that Airi was looking forward to. The cultural festival was supposed to be a big stage for her to change herself and take a big step forward."

She closed her eyes in frustration and slammed her fist on the spot she sat.

"I decided to see it through to the end. I decided to watch the whole thing on her behalf."

"I did indeed expel Airi. I also used my heterosexual feelings to handle the situation. I'm not going to say I wasn't at fault for that."

“She needed me. And Kiyopon needed the Ayanokōji group. How do you think she feels like now that the person she loved expelled her from school? Have you ever thought about it?”

“What would that type of person look like? What would she be thinking about? Tell me exactly what she'd be thinking. I don't understand.”

Haruka's emotions were pushed forward, perhaps annoyed at my lack of understanding.

“Of course she'd cry all the time! All the time! She'd be so frustrated, sad, and bitter that she sits in the corner of her room and thinks back to her happy school days. Can't you see that?”

“Is that the Airi you see?”

“Not just what I see. That's the kind of girl she is! Why can't you understand that?!” She spewed out her anger, not loud, but obvious.

“Kiyopon is really the same! You just don't want to face reality. You just don't want to think about Airi, who is miserable because you're the one who drove her out of school!”

Haruka decided that I was just running away.

“I'm sorry, but I don't even think that way. It's none of my business what happens to the students who dropout. It's just a waste of my time to think about it.”

Knowing that she would be upset, I just stated the facts. Naturally, this greatly irritated Haruka.

“You're filthy and disgusting.” Haruka spat out those words and slowly got up from the bench. “I asked myself, how could Airi ever fall in love with such a ruthless man?” Haruka slowly walked up to me. She came close enough to reach out her hand. “I can't stand talking to you any longer, why don't you just die with me?” Saying this, she thrust the expulsion letter at me.

Will you die with me? The devil's invitation.

Her words, which seemed to cause déjà vu, brought back memories of the past.

“Kiyopon is attracting attention in a bad way because he got Airi expelled from school. And it's not like you have a strong desire to graduate in Class A, is it? If that's the case, why not just quit?”

Relationships can easily fall apart over a single thing. Until recently, no one could have imagined that this conversation would take place between me and Haruka.

“It's fine that you want me to withdraw from school, but it doesn't make sense to me. I can't help but be bothered by the fact that Airi is being forced to go along with your self-serving fantasies.”

“What? What are you trying to say?”

“I'm just saying that you don't seem to understand how Airi feels. It's really conceited.”

“I understand her better than anyone else, and you don't want to admit that!”

“Don't get cocky, Haruka.”

“What did you just say?”

Akito, who had mistakenly thought she was going to be attacked, stepped in front of Haruka and extended his left hand as if to defend her.

“I was just a little surprised. I'm fine, so move aside, Akito.”

Haruka could not sense the danger that Akito instinctively sensed. Still wary of me, Akito lowered his left hand and stepped back a little.

“What do you mean, 'conceited'? What are you talking about, Kiyopon?”

“I'm just saying that you shouldn't speculate on Airi's feelings and give convenient answers on her behalf; only Airi knows what she's thinking and what she really feels.”

“It's Kiyopon who doesn't understand. Do you think she didn't mind being expelled?”

“Surely she must have despaired at that moment. But how do you know how she feels now?”

“You can understand if you just imagine it for a moment.”

“No, you can't. In your mind, Airi must be having a hard time right now.”

“What about it?”

“The hard part isn't that Airi was expelled. It's the disappearance of an existence that was convenient for you. You wanted to be there for Airi, who is inferior to you, and play the role of a protector. You loved the sense of superiority and satisfaction you got from that.”

“Of course not! You don't even remember how we used to be!” She strongly denied it, but I could see a slight wavering in his eyes.

“I'm thinking about how she feels right now... I-!”

“Are you really thinking about her?”

“I'm thinking about her a lot!”

In an exchange that could be described as a parallel line, only Haruka's heart wavers violently.

“I don't know what the truth is.”

“There's no way to confirm such a thing directly with the person in question in this situation!”

“There's certainly no way to find out for sure in person. But here's a hint. Here's a cardboard box. This is most likely what you need right now.”

“What? I don't get it. That's not what I need.”

“Even if this is the last message that Airi left you?”

“What?”

Haruka, who had been all bullish up until now, opened her eyes in shock with Akito standing behind her.

“No way. Kiyopon prepared this box, didn't he?”

“On the day that Airi's expulsion was decided, she went through the steps to ship a package to me. I think it was because she realized what she had to do in that limited time.”

Haruka's gaze fell to the cardboard box at her feet.

“If you look at the sender, you can tell that I didn't prepare this for you, can't you?”

Haruka crouched down and looked at the slip attached to the cardboard. There was my name on it as the recipient and the name of the online store as the sender. I myself did not know about this until I received and searched it.

I noticed that Haruka was reaching out and trying hard to roll up the edges of the duct tape with her fingertips. After several attempts, she finally succeeded in peeling it off. Then the cardboard box was opened.

Inside was a maid's uniform.

“This is...”

Haruka must have known what it meant.

“I was supposed to wear it... Airi and I were supposed to wear it together... Why...?”

“She realized that there was a possibility that you would stop and not participate in the festival. That's why this was supposed to be delivered to you, to prevent that from happening, wasn't it?”

“A-ai...” Haruka muttered looking down at the uniform.

“At least I can sense Airi's strong feelings from this message. It doesn't seem like she's just sad. How about you, Haruka?”

“Airi... Airi!”

Haruka took out the maid's uniform from the cardboard box and hugged it to her chest. She sobbed with tears welling up in her eyes.

“I wanted to do the festival with her. I wanted to push her shyness back and see her unveil it to Kiyopon!”



It's not extravagant at all, but I lamented over the scenery I was supposed to be able to see in the near future.

I hope Haruka will now understand and look forward to the future.

But....

“This is... different...”

Wiping her tears with the sleeve of her uniform, Haruka stood up and denied it.

“No?”

“It's not something she prepared for me because she wants me to participate in the festival.”

I'm not sure how much I can change things so easily.

“She was just frustrated. She sent it to Kiyopon with resentment, saying that I really could have worn it to the festival. I'm sure that's how it must have been.”

How one interpreted this maid's outfit was left to one's own interpretation, and since Airi did not leave a specific message, not everything that was convenient for us was true.

“It is, isn't it? If it was really meant for me to wear, it should have been sent to me. But the reason why it was addressed to Kiyopon was because it has another meaning, no?”

It was interesting to see the difference in viewpoints, and I certainly couldn't rule out that possibility. Was it possible that she was harassing the person who expelled her from school? Interesting.

“Wait Haruka, I think that's a little different.”

Akito interjected for the first time here.

“No, it's not. Yes, yes! Even this package may have been a staged act prepared by Kiyopon!”

“The reason she sent the last memento to Kiyotaka and not you is because she wanted you to have a chance to get to know each other again, right?”

If it had been delivered directly to Haruka, and if she had received the gift honestly, then, I would never have had the chance to make contact with her.

“No, absolutely not!”

“I was a member of the Ayanokōji group too, and I know that Airi would have thought so.”

“No, no!” Haruka turned, grabbing Akito by the chest.

“Don't take things as you will! Don't try to make things convenient and forgive Kiyopon!”

“That's not what I meant...”

“Even if that were the case, she was deprived of her precious place in the world! That's not going to change that fact! I won't accept a friendship based on

sacrifice!”

“But whatever anyone's fantasy is, it has no effect on the person in question. What matters is where and what Airi is actually doing right now, isn't that the point?”

“I know. So, I'm leaving school to find out. I'm going to be there for that girl!”

As soon as she completed her revenge against the class, she would go to see Airi himself. Voluntarily withdrawing from school is also convenient for Haruka.

“You're being too loud. Even here, if you're not subtle, you'll receive a lot of attention, won't you?”

Those calm and cold words pierced through her anger

Kushida was a character I never thought I'd see here. Dressed as a maid, which was out of place in this tense atmosphere, she slowly approached.

“Is everything alright at the store?”

“We just had a change of customers, so we have a little time.”

I don't know if that's true or not, but I'm guessing she didn't just slip out unannounced. Kushida's “It's okay” look told me that everything's fine.

“What are you doing here?”

Haruka and I were wondering the same thing.

“What am I doing here? Ayanokōji-kun told me that Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun might be planning to leave the school.”

Haruka's gaze turned toward me for a moment, but then quickly turned back to Kushida.

“Kushida-san was the cause. If you had been against the expulsion from the beginning, you would have-”

“Sorry, but I don't regret my choice at the time now. That incident was a stain on me, but at the same time, it was an opportunity for me to open a new path.”

“I'm going to tell the class that not leaving behind Kushida-san was a mistake.”

“If you want to leave the school, do whatever you want.”

“Kushida-san yourself said that the only way left for you was to graduate in class A. That's the only reason why you keep putting up with an uncomfortable class that you don't get along with. So, I'm going to take that away from you.”

“Maybe your revenge against me will work. But is that what's important? I don't think Sakura-san would want that.”

“Don't say the same thing as Kiyopon. What do any of you know about Airi?”

“I don't know, but I do know that she's a lot less shy than you think.”

“What?”

It seemed to me that this was just a figure of speech - but I wondered if there was any basis for it. The fact that she showed up here also raised a question.

“Sakura-san was weak. That's why she was expelled.”

“How can you say that? It's the same with you, you were greatly embarrassed and lost.”

“It's true that I lost too. I admit that I was weak. But it is also true that Sakura-san was the same. No, she was weaker than me, and that's why she was expelled.”

In fact, Horikita decided that Kushida would be a better and more useful ally than Airi. And at the festival, she lived up to those expectations and played an active role. Of course, there was no question that Airi would have been more popular if she had been able to attend the festival. However, excellent customer service skills and the ability to talk with adults you don't know don't come overnight. This was an area that Airi could not fill. Prior to that, Kushida performed well on the second semester midterm exam, placing in the top half of the class. So far, this is a matter that can be said to have definitely contributed.

“That girl was definitely weak... that's why I wanted to protect her...”

“Wanted to protect her? You're being very high and mighty, aren't you? So, I'm not the only one who thinks she'll always be weak.”

“You've got to be kidding me.”

“I'm not kidding.”

Kushida was not bothered by Haruka's verbal abuse. Perhaps it was because of her experience, but she clearly had a toughness that set her apart from the average student.

“Ayanokōji-kun, can you take a look at this?” Kushida took his eyes off Haruka and turned them to me. “Every day I sought the secrets of others. I was hungry for secrets. I have always believed that it would make me more valuable. And Sakura-san is no exception to that.”

Whoever the subject was, if there was an opportunity available to Kushida, it was covered. People can pay attention to what they were interested in, but it was difficult to pay attention to what they were not interested in. It took an extraordinary amount of mental strength to keep it up for a long period of time. “I thought maybe there was a use for the secret she had after she left school. Then I found it.” Kushida took out her cell phone and showed me a screen.

I took the phone and scrolled through the details.

“This is...”

“I was wondering if Ayanokouji-kun might be aware of this fact.”

“I'm impressed. How did you find it?”

“Ayanokouji-kun used to do a lot of work on this, didn't you? So maybe that's how.”

It had been more than a year, and that was before the Ayanokōji group was formed. Haruka looked at me with concern, partly because of the talk about Airi.

“You're wondering, aren't you? And it's a story about your precious Sakura-san.” Kushida saw through Haruka and flicked her phone off as if to provoke her.

“What?”

Kushida turned off her phone screen and approached Haruka with it in her hand.

“I'm a bad person most of the time, but Hasebe-san is similar. She just finds pleasure in finding someone weaker than herself and helping them. Essentially, you're not worried about Sakura-san, you just miss having someone to take care of, don't you?”

Oddly enough, she said the same things I did. Haruka's eyes squirmed uncomfortably at this unexpected turn of events.

“So you're just like your family?”

Family? I felt caught off guard by this unexpected comment, but Haruka stopped her.

“Stop it. Don't mention it.”

“Why not? If you're leaving school already, who cares who I tell what you told me? It means you won't have to keep secrets anymore.”

Come to think of it, Kushida knew more about Haruka than I do.

“You're not wrong, I wanted to protect Airi, I wanted to be there for her. Even if it was for my own purposes.”

“I understand how you feel, but I can't accept that Hasebe-san is right. That's why you couldn't even make one decent friend before high school. Am I wrong?”

“I...”

“Well, that's okay. If I keep wasting my time talking about it, it's going to interfere with the operation of the maid café. Why don't you just leave school like this without knowing anything? There's no point in knowing the truth now, is there?”

Stopping in her tracks, Kushida turned her back to Haruka.

“Wait a minute, what's this about Airi?”

“You want to know?”

Frustrated that she had been taken advantage of, she forcefully closed the distance and grabbed Kushida's shoulder.

“That girl can't do anything without me. She needed help.”

“You don't understand, she's much more mature than you think, Hasebe-san.”

Haruka, holding the phone half-heartedly in her hand, tapped the screen with her finger and accessed the Internet. There was someone's social networking account.

It was a convenient application that allowed you to send your thoughts to the whole world by tweeting. Since this school does not allow students to reveal their identities, they were basically restricted, and there were probably almost no students who use this app. However, those who do not belong to this school can use it as much as they want.

The name of the account was “Shizuku,” another name Sakura Airi went by when she used to secretly be active as a gravure idol. After an incident, Airi deleted her account, but Kushida found that it had recently been restored. The account had only been created a few days ago but already had over 1,000 followers.

“Lies... this is Airi's?”

Credit to Kushida, who was no stranger to gathering information about her classmates.

“There's no guarantee that... that girl made this kind of thing. It's bound to be an imposter fabricated by Ayanokōji-kun or Kushida-san anyway.”

“Do you still think it's us after you read the actual text?”

[I've decided to resume my idol activities after a long hiatus.]

New account, first tweet.

She had given up on her idol activities. But now, she repeatedly posted what only she herself could write.

[I decided to do what I could do. To become the person I want to be. To show my best friend that I am not ashamed of myself after she graduates.]

“It's true what I said about you being protective; Airi may indeed have been a handful, but she started growing at an incredible rate after she was expelled from school.”

[I finally auditioned yesterday! I was so nervous, but I'm so happy!]

“This is...”

Haruka gasped; the social networking site carried her comments upon passing the third round of auditions.

[The reason I decided to go into show business is because I wanted to make my voice heard.]

[I'm bitter and sad, but I want to look forward... I am looking forward. So don't you lose too.]

Of course, it is possible to create a false account using Shizuku's name.

However, it was difficult to disguise the fact that she was followed by an entertainment production company and her social media content. That was why Haruka should be able to tell that the owner of this account is Airi.

“From reading that, I don't see the abysmal scene you described for Airi.”

“You were overprotective and assumed you were above it all, weren't you? But she opened up a new path by dropping out of school. She didn't stand still.”

Kushida forcefully snatched the phone from Haruka's trembling hands and turned back to me.

“I'm sorry I slipped out again.” She then flashed her usual smile, which didn't seem to fit the occasion.

“I thought I saved you, but you saved me right away.”

“You owe me this one, right?”

“I thought you didn't lend or borrow?”

“I don't like to borrow, but I don't mind lending.”

She says this and starts to walk back to the special wing.

“You're a shrewd guy.”

After exposing her various weaknesses, Haruka stood, shocked and broken. It reminded me strongly of the scene with Kushida in the unanimous special exam.

“Haruka, I don't think this is an imposter.”

Akito must have been looking at Shizuku's social media profile on his own phone, too, because he offered his phone to her instead. Haruka then continued to devour and read through Ari's various messages.

“Ugh, ugh...”

Tears welled up in Haruka's eyes as her vision blurred. She had thought that Airi couldn't do anything without following her, but then she realized that Airi had begun to walk in front of her. Even now, she was trying her best to walk, even though she must have been heartbroken. It was because she was afraid that Haruka might stop.

“What a fool I was,” she thought. I knew Haruka had just assumed that it was unfortunate that Airi was expelled from school and felt sorry for her.

“This is new knowledge for me. I thought that those who were expelled, those who were defeated, had ended everything there.”

She assumed that the package she was sent was the last remnant of her life. But it wasn't. The loser returned. Some people start anew from where they lost.

This was the great divide between the white room and this world. No, perhaps those who dropped out of the white room were also able to reinvent themselves like Airi.

“That girl could be a big shot in the future. And yet you're going to

voluntarily leave school going after Airi? Not only will Airi laugh at you, she might not even take you seriously.”

It wasn’t hard to imagine what would happen if Haruka were to quit school to seek revenge and meet with Airi. Instead of being greeted with a smile, she would be seriously offended.

“I-I-I don't know what to do...!”

“There's only one answer: be yourself enough to meet Airi with dignity. If you graduated from Class A, that's a different story. You need to get through those three years and be someone who isn't ashamed to stand in front of Airi.”

It's no longer time for Airi to go after Haruka; it's time for Haruka to go after Airi.

“Just in case, the cost of this luggage has been included in the budget as something that can be used at the cultural festival.”

There was no guarantee that the item would be usable at the festival, but it was a good thing to have a contingency plan. In other words, there would be no obstacles in wearing this maid uniform and standing in the maid café.

“I'm not asking you to be as agile as the other maids. But you have to see the view that your beloved Airi would have wanted you to see. You were her best friend, and you owe it to her.”

Haruka made a small apology to Akito, handed him the letter of withdrawal, clutched her maid's uniform to her chest, and ran out. She had only a few hours left, but she still had a chance to be on the stage.

“Kiyotaka, will your classmates accept Haruka?”

“Kushida is there, Horikita is there, Yōsuke is there. Whatever the situation, we'll get along fine.”

“I see.”

Akito put his phone away and stacked the two withdrawal papers on top of each other, tearing them down the middle.

“The reason for my withdrawal is gone. I want to stay with Haruka until the end as well.”

“Even having learned the truth, Haruka's heart will remain cold. You should support her.”

Even if she can't laugh with everyone now, she still has more than a year of school left. The day when she can truly smile again will not be far off.

“I'm sure my classmates will blame me for a while, too.” He scratched his head and smiled a little.

“I wonder what would have happened if Kushida hadn't shown up, and what would have happened to Kiyotaka?”

“I don't know, I'm afraid I was out of ideas.”

I took out my cell phone and opened the Internet. I then deleted all the search history that I had prepared in advance that led to Shizuku's social media profiles. Kushida was the one who showed me how to make the most of it. So, the credit goes to Kushida.

“Let's go back, Akito. There's still a few more hours left of the festival.”

“Ah.”

The time was around 2:20 PM. Horikita's class had succeeded in getting back its missing members.

2

When we took Akito to the food stall, the boys accepted him without hesitation, even though they were teasing him. Akito's eyes turned a little red as he thanked them for such a warm welcome.

It was probably due in large to the fact that he was not the central figure in a particularly contentious situation. Unfortunately, Keisei, formerly of the Ayanokōji group, was not in sight as he had just gone on a break. Returning to the maid cafe in the special wing, the line was as long as ever.

Kushida was walking around handing out new cookies while serving customers with a smile. Both the old and young were all gazing at Kushida. They seemed to be enjoying her company. I feel bad for Azuma, who was working hard together with Kushida, and her contribution was more than what any of us expected.

“Welcome back!”

Satō shouted and led us to the entrance. Two female customers left the classroom, waving to the maids. Then the next customer busily entered and was ushered to an empty seat. The seats and chairs originally provided in this classroom were thinned out for the sake of the scenery, but now they have been brought in and reshaped in between to increase the number of customers. The seats were originally intended to be more spacious and relaxing, but now they have no choice because they had to make it to the end of the remaining hours of the day.

“It looks like they're here.” Kushida's words were heard from the corridor, and I waited for her to come to work.

“Ha, ha, ha! It's difficult to run!”

Haruka had arrived, out of breath, shoulders shifting up and down violently. The maids were momentarily distracted by Haruka's presence, but that wasn't the

point now. They immediately shifted their minds to what they had to do. No one asked why she was here.

“Hasebe-san, where did you change your clothes?”

“The women's restroom... It was hard.”

“Of course.”

Kushida, in angel mode because she was in front of so many people, greeted Haruka with a wry smile.

“What's the... situation?”

“Ask Horikita-san about that. I've got my hands full with the lineup.”

Horikita, dressed in a maid's outfit, called out to Haruka and entered the waiting room.

“Welcome.”

First of all, she said a few words of welcome and then gently patted Haruka's stiff-looking back.

“I thought you wouldn't show your face today, but you've made up your mind, haven't you?”

Haruka nodded and replied as she calmed her breathing, though not fully recovered.

“You aren't playing the role of a maid right. You haven't even practiced; I don't expect you to be as agile as Satō-san and the others, but... right now I'm in a tough situation.”

It was inevitable that they would suddenly be thrown into the toughest of battles, a real war.

“You're here to contribute to the festival. Can I trust in that?”

“Don't worry. I won't do anything to ruin everyone's hard work. I know you won't believe-”

“No, I believe you.”

Without hesitation, Horikita expressed her trust in Haruka's words.

“Why?”

“I can tell by the look in your eyes, Ayanokōji-kun must have talked you into it, didn't he?”

“Hey.”

“And Kushida-san. I didn't expect her to come to me dressed as a maid.”

“Kushida-san? I wonder when she left her post.”

Horikita seemed to be unaware of her absence, perhaps because she was busy in the hall.

“Anyway, I'm going to make you forget your grudge against me until after the festival, even if you don't want to.”

“I know.”

“Then fine. You'll be in charge of pouring for the customers who have run out of cold water, and if requested, you'll be in charge of taking pictures. Is that okay?”

“I'll see what I can do.”

Now that she had come this far, Haruka was a carp on the chopping block. She was not allowed to make such naive statements as, “I want to do it,” or, “I don't want to do it.

“I have to take a mandatory break at 3:00, so I'll leave everything after that to Ayanokōji-kun. Take care of her.”

“The best I can do is to take good pictures.”

I've already taken dozens of pictures today. I'm getting the hang of it.

Haruka nodded, looked at me once, and took a deep breath. Then, with a pitcher of water and a slice of lemon, she left the waiting room and began to walk around the store. She politely bowed her head as she introduced herself to each of us.

Of course, it was'nt smooth, and she was clearly out of practice compared to the other maids. But on the contrary, she was warmly looked at by the adults. Furthermore, Haruka had an attractive side as a woman, and even if they couldn't see her inner self, they subconsciously developed a liking for her.

“Before we think about winning or losing, I guess we, as a class, can finally breathe a sigh of relief.”

“Yes.”

“Ayanokōji-kun, Hasebe-san, take three pictures of us! Thank you very much!”

Satō's voice reached the waiting room, and I quickly got my camera ready. Horikita must be ready to make one last spurt with the remaining time before the break.

“See you later.”

After Horikita left the waiting room, I looked at the board in the room.

The board was designed to show at a glance who had been nominated for the most photos, and Kushida was the one who had taken the most photos during our absence, with 56. As for Horikita, she took only 11 pictures, perhaps because she was not very sociable.

If it were only about appearance, I think Kushida would win, but I guess that was not what was important.

It's firstly charm, and secondly looks.

“Even if Haruka tries to catch up from here, I don't think she'll be able to surpass this record.”

While standing in front of Haruka with my camera, I heard from the hallway that another order had come for a photo with Kushida.

“Okay Haruka, let's get a shot.”

“Yeah.”

Haruka's expression was stiff, perhaps because she was still reluctant to face me. I looked through the lens for a chance to take a picture, but she wouldn't give me one.

“Shall I switch with Yōsuke?”

“Wait. It's okay.” Haruka raised her hand.

It wasn't a full smile, but it was a good enough expression for a picture, so I released the shutter. One was taken alone. The other two were two-shot photos with the guests.

3

It was getting close to 3:00 pm. I left the maid cafe to prepare for my final move. No one knew exactly how much we needed to sell in order to win first place.

Of course, it would be possible to win first place for sure if one could sell more than half of the private points in circulation, but that was almost impossible due to the way the system worked. In other words, it was important to earn as much money as possible until the moment the festival was over.

The students' concept cafes were well received by both Horikita's and Ryūen's classes.

The one-on-one competition stunned many of the guests, and they were able to visit one or both classes to take part in the battle.



What seemed to be a deadlocked and competitive situation took a new turn when the guests came to the Japanese concept café to see how the other side was doing. A long line of customers were waiting to enter the cafe.

“This one is just as busy as the other one.”

The place was even busier than I had imagined, and I didn't have time to talk to the students in Ryūen's class.

I couldn't judge everything just from observing the scene, but I suspected there was little difference in the amount of points they were earning. It was formidable enough to aim for the top, but still, there was no absolute guarantee.

“Sorry for calling you all the way here, Chabashira-sensei.”

I called Chabashira-sensei, who would have been using her points for a non-second year class on campus.

“Have you finished using your private points?”

“Hmm? Ah, there are 80 points left. I'd say I've used them up. What about it?”

There wasn't much time left, and she seemed to have firmly finished her contribution to the festival as a teacher.

“In other words, you're free for the rest of the day?”

“Yes, that's right. Now all we have to do is wait for the end of the cultural festival... What the hell is this?”

She showed her confusion, not understanding why she was summoned here.

The kimono café was just a backdrop. I will not say that it was thriving or that Horikita's class could lose.

I left it up to Chabashira-sensei to see the momentum and interpret it as she saw fit.

“Actually, I'd like to ask Chabashira-sensei for her cooperation for the next hour or so.”

“No no no, wait, Ayanokōji, cooperation? I don't understand what you're talking about.”

Teachers were to contribute to the festival by spending points in the school.

That was the only role they had been given today.

“We want Chabashira-sensei to be our maid in order to make sales at the maid cafe.”

I told her the strategy to make it to the victory board, but...

“What...?”

This may have been the dumbest strategy I had ever come up with in my life.

“You want me to turn into a maid? I want you to listen very carefully to what you're saying right now.”

“Did I not just tell you? I'm just going to do what I can to win.”

“Why should I be the maid!? I'm the homeroom teacher. I can't be obligated to one particular class.”

“That's not true. The rule this time is that school teachers are to be treated as if they were guests of honor. Homeroom teachers are not allowed to use points in their grade level. Those are the only two rules that have been imposed. There is also no rule that only students may participate in the presentation. In extreme cases, they should be free to have guests of honor serve them. It would be unusual, but that problem could be resolved if the guest consents.”

This was not a prohibited activity under the rules. It would be a clear violation if the person were to purchase goods from a convenience store, Keyaki Mall, or any other place other than the points of sale available at the festival, using personal expenses.

However, in terms of “human resources,” there was no need to apply for such a permit, and it was free. Chabashira-sensei seemed to be at a loss for words, as if her mind was not fully comprehensive of what she needed to do.

“Shall I explain it more clearly? Assuming there was a student carrying a heavy load, they are dizzy. A guest passing by offered to help and carried the luggage on his shoulders to the desired location. Is this a violation?”

“It's not a violation...”

“Exactly. Other people can be substituted for the students: 2nd year class A asks 2nd year class D for help, and class D readily agrees. Would there be a problem if we loaned the students out?”

The reasons for loaning them out were varied. To provide support out of genuine concern, to plot a plan to cause problems within, or to exchange labour and compensation for something in return.

Whatever the reason, as long as it was within the rules, the school won't blame you for it. In fact, just walking around the school, I saw a few students supporting other classes.

“I don't see the problem.”

“It's the same thing. A teacher's willingness to cooperate isn't, in itself, a violation of the rules.”

“No, it doesn't. It's still considered lending a hand for the class you're in.”

“That's right. Even if it is broadly allowed, you can't be sure that such an opinion won't be expressed.”

That's why clear rules need to be utilized and legitimate.

“We will pay for any private points that would be incurred when renting teachers. I'm sure the school is looking at that possibility in anticipation of this festival.”

“No way, no, but... I don’t know if I’m... enough to be considered...”

I’ve hit the bull’s-eye. She showed such an expression. Chabashira-sensei was also a teacher at this school, and in the past had been in charge of other classes. It was only natural that the school made various assumptions for a cultural festival that had never been held in the past.

In principle, private points at this school were a powerful weapon. No wonder it could be used not only for routine shopping, but also to secure personnel if necessary.

“There is nothing in this school that cannot be bought with private points. Is there a difference?”

To deny this was to deny the school.

And it was like admitting that you were a disqualified teacher.

Chabashira-sensei had no right to refuse, even if it was far from her intention. In a panic, Chabashira-sensei began reading the rules about the festival on her cell phone.

“Pay 100,000 private points for every hour students ask for a teacher’s help.”

“It seems that you are well prepared for the behind-the-scenes rules that only this school has. That’s the option.”

This was the same thing that happened when private points were used to buy test scores.

“That’s 100,000 points per hour. It’s not a cheap deal. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

Asking teachers to cooperate inherently doesn’t help much. Whether you have them cook or serve, if they didn’t practice beforehand, it would be a waste of private points to have them on your side for an hour or so.

It was difficult for them to perform the job on the spot if they had to go out to the restaurant to serve the customers. But if you used them in a different way than usual, you could get the effect you paid for.

“Are you really, really sure?”

“I’m sorry, Chabashira-sensei, but now I’m going to ask you to cooperate even if you don’t want to. I don’t have a lot of time to spare right now.”

After 3:00 p.m., we wouldn’t be able to get a full hour’s help, which would make us less efficient.

“Well, wait. Yes, why don’t you ask Chie? She does this kind of thing better. She’d be ready to do it even for a rival class.”

“I’m sure she would. But what I’m looking for now is not someone who can do this dexterously, but rather someone who is clumsy. Because I believe that the more clumsy you are, or the more effective you are at the margins, the more

effective you will be.”

“I have no idea what your logic is.”

It must have been true that deep down she didn't like it and that she didn't understand. It was because she didn't understand that Chabashira-sensei functioned a certain “way” that could be appealing to a certain audience.

“There's no more time. Please take care of it.”

I forced her to accept my private points as I took my phone and paid Chabashira-sensei.

“We have a deal.”

“That's not fair, Ayanokōji, using the school rules.”

That's not cowardly, it's a really straightforward way to fight.

“I have no idea how to act in a maid cafe. I don't know what's going to happen to me.”

“That's fine. I don't expect anything from the teacher.”

Chabashira-sensei staying inside the classroom in a maid outfit; that fact alone was enough to win.

4

After pushing the reluctant Chabashira-sensei into the locker room, I pasted the text I had prepared on my cell phone and sent it to all my classmates at once as a bulk message.

The purpose was to inform the students that Chabashira-sensei will be working as a maid for the last hour only, and to inform the students who were available that they were to go around the school advertising the event.

As intended, the buzz spreaded swiftly through word of mouth. Using teachers, this was a limited, oversized event that students would never be able to pull off. The air in the hallway was buzzing so much that it instantly turned into an uproar.

Chabashira-sensei, dressed as a maid, rushed into the hallway with a red face. “Okay, here I am Ayanokōji, hurry up and let me inside the classroom!”

“We've been waiting for you.”

I can't keep showing her off for free, so I led her inside the classroom.

“So, what am I supposed to do here?”

“You don't have to do anything. Just stand still.”

“What?”

“I told you, I don't want you to be dexterous. I'm looking forward to working

with you.”

Thus, I threw Chabashira-sensei into the classroom and left her to do nothing but stand.

She didn't talk to anyone, but simply stood shyly in the corner of the classroom. Being clumsy, she wasn't able to do anything in particular and needed to stand without talking to anyone.

This was the ultimate eroticism.

We were going to have to make a major shift in our maid cafe policy from here on out. The biggest concern was the large number of visitors who couldn't fit in the classrooms. In order to forcefully solve this physical problem, we had to make the customers pay a reasonable price. The idea was to have a “standing room only” fee to accommodate over-capacity customers. We added a rule that allowed immediate entry upon payment of 1,000 points to enter the classroom.

The first guests waiting in line would be offered entry, and only those who responded that they would be willing to stand in line would be allowed to enter the room first. Some of the visitors waiting in line at this point may complain, but we were willing to take that risk.

“Standing room only, I've never heard of that idea in a maid cafe.”

A standing room should be set up on the side of the room where desks couldn't be set up and in the space at the rear of the classroom. This would allow people to enter the room without desks and chairs.

And 2,000 points for a photo shoot with Chabashira-sensei.

This will be sold for more than double the price of a photo of one student. We hurriedly filled in the guests with the board at the entrance.

“Amazing. Would a customer pay that price?”

“Look behind you.”

Kushida, who had been staring at the board, looked back and saw the customers who had paid their bill and accepted the standing room disappear one by one into the classroom.

The current faculty and staff were intrigued by the sight, which they would not see again.

Although homeroom teachers of the same grade were restricted from spending their private points, the number of teachers who were still at the school and in charge of classes other than the second year was, of course, overwhelmingly large.

The adults who worked at Keyaki Mall had a strong image of the Chabashira-sensei as a hard-nosed teacher, as they witnessed repeatedly in their daily lives.

Adults came in like a wave.

Some of the adults from the outside may not understand the significance of this phenomenon. But when it comes to the amount that thought, “it's worth a look,” that would be different.

They were tempted by the limited number of people who were willing to take a look, even if they didn't understand what the others were talking about.

The maid café queue was overflowing with more than 10 or 20 people in line. The long line was not decreasing, but rather gaining momentum.

“Wow, that's a lot of people, Ayanokōji-kun.” A stunned Kushida pulled back at the hordes of adults pouring in.

“Yeah, I guess so. To be honest, I didn't think it would be this big either.”

“How long have you been thinking about this crazy thing?”

“About two weeks ago. I had it in mind as a hidden gem for the festival.”

“What would have happened if we had started earlier...?”

“Certainly the lasting effect could have been two or three hours. But another problem arises. Because if you have more time to spare, other classes can do similar imitations.”

“Oh, I see. They have less than an hour left, so even if they wanted to imitate us, they couldn't.”

If you put on a show using faculty members from both this class and another class, the effect would be diminished.

“If we're going to put on a show, we only have this last hour where we can also put on a premiere.”

The fact that Kushida and the others had spread the word about the maid café in a positive light also helped.

“I see. No wonder I couldn't win.”

“Hmm?”

“I realized once again how great Ayanokōji-kun is. He's a nuisance to have as an enemy.”

“Your eyes aren't smiling, Kushida.”

“I guess it's because I was half glad we were classmates and half pissed off.” She said half and half, but I thought the latter was a higher percentage.

“Don't push me! Get in line here! Please don't push!”

Sudō and his team rushed to create a wall of people and tried to get them to form a line, but it was becoming a crowd as some adults sought to somehow look into the classroom.

But this was business too. The inside was thoroughly concealed and the windows were locked, so the only way to forcefully see inside was to break a windowpane.

Of course, no adult would do such a thing, so we forced them to form a line.

While this was going on, there was no end to the number of people who wanted to take pictures of Chabashira-sensei. Both the ‘standing-room-only’ customers, who had entered the store, and those who had already been in the store raised their hands one after the other and asked to be photographed.

“She might be the top individual sales person in the final hour. She hasn't even done anything.”

“I can't let any more people in! The second slot is filled up!”

Mii-chan's voice echoed like a scream, and we were informed that the spaces had been filled.

“That's it, huh? It's a shame that the number of customers hasn't decreased at all yet, and there's no sign of them leaving.”

Kushida said, wondering if she should be satisfied with the ‘standing-room-only’ crowd they were able to bring in.

“Not yet. The customers who are left now are in line because they have money. I'm not going to let them leave.”

“Maybe we need to carry the tables out or something? But I can't bring the tables with all the dishes and stuff. It would take a lot of work to carry them out.”

It was obvious that there was no longer any space in the classroom for guests.

“We can use this location to make the most out of the third slot.”

“A third space?”

I turned to all the customers in line and said.

“I'm sorry, but the restaurant is full and no more rooms are available.”

After announcing this to them, I got a series of looks from disgruntled adults.

“However, those of you who have at least one point on hand at this time may view the room from this location by paying the full amount of your point balance.”

This location was the hallway where the lines were formed for the maid cafe. By opening the door, the obstruction was removed, and by opening the window, the classroom was pseudo-extended.

“Woah, you're using the hallway?!”

“Yes.”

“But the full amount could be small, sure, but it might still be hundreds of points... you mean whoever has money and will pay it?”

It seemed that she couldn't believe that there were many guests who would pay the full amount for her, despite how much Chabashira-sensei was in demand.

“No problem. I don't know if it's worth paying a lot of money, but there isn't

much time left. Even if there were nearly 1,000 points left over, there would be a big question as to where and how they could be used.”

“Oh, I see... I thought you were going to return the remaining points after the festival is over.”

“They’ve been notified to use them up as much as possible. They’d rather spend all their points than to lose them here. It’s not an exaggeration to say that 1 point or 10,000 points are worth the same to the adults who are given them.”

In fact, the more points they had, the more they’d think that they had to spend them here. Furthermore, many of the adults who have had to wait this long still remain.

“Please wait there while we go to the checkout in order.”

I gave the order and sent a few people to collect the sales. Then I lined up the adults in the hallway and directed them to a position where they could all see into the classroom.

“Now all we need to do is open the curtains that we have been using to hide the classroom.”

Doing so completed the third space. The curtains opened all at once and Chabashira-sensei was surprised to see them.

For Chabashira-sensei, it was a kind of public execution, but since we paid the school for it, there was no need to feel bad.

“Oh, oh, I see...”

A teacher who had just previously gossiped about Chabashira-sensei’s transformation sounded impressed.

The sight of a familiar, single, and never-before-seen dress on a colleague must have been a powerful stimulant. Thus, the public presentation of Chabashira-sensei continued until 4:00 p.m., using this corridor.

In the end, Chabashira-sensei took first place, surpassing Kushida, with 63 desired pictures.

Chapter Seven: Unseen Characters

AT 3:00 P.M, my job at the festival had come to an end.

I left the classroom, leaving Ayanokōji-kun in charge, just as our hidden gem made an exciting appearance.

“I never thought that you would really make Chabashira-sensei into a maid.”

Ayanokōji-kun and I had discussed all the preparations in advance for this festival. I had heard that Chabashira-sensei would be used for the last hour of the show, but I was skeptical that it would be possible. However, not only did he make it happen, but she was creating a tremendous effect. Every time I walked down the corridor, I heard the rumors of Chabashira-sensei's maid costume circulating.

Anyway, Chabashira-sensei's participation was an opportune event for me personally. The large amount of attention drawn to the special wing would inevitably draw people away from other places.

After sending them a message on my cell phone and making sure it was read, I decided to head to the student council room. The reason for this was that I wanted to go over the notes again.

Of course, I could have asked Yagami-kun on the day of the student council meeting, but that would have made it impossible for me to calmly observe the notes. He was a person who may end up being a reason for Ayanokōji-kun to leave school. He seemed to have a connection with Amasawa-san and was extremely physically dangerous.

Besides, if it was Yagami-kun, asking him to show me the notes again would let him know I'm suspicious of him.

No. If you assume that he was the culprit, it was better to assume that he had already thought so. Anyway, in order to be sure without being found, it was necessary to aim for a time when no one was around.

The student council was closed for a while due to the circumstances of Student Council President Nagumo. This meant that the opportunity to spy on the proceedings had been restricted, but conversely, the unnecessary dispersing of the members had been done naturally.

I thought the timing of the festival would be the best time to take advantage of this opportunity. I reported to Chabashira-sensei in the morning that I had most likely left my notebook in the Student Council Room, and she gave me permission to go to the staff room during break time to get the key and pick it up.

Even if I stepped into the student council room now and was seen, I would

still have a good reason. I quickly changed out of my maid's uniform into my school uniform and headed for the staff room.

“Fifty minutes to go, huh?”

I exhaled as I walked by the student council office and looked at the clock in the hallway. Today has been a busy day. It wasn't over yet, but my shift of the day was done. Due to the requirement that I must take a break for an hour, the festival will end as soon as my break is over.

I was really busy from the morning, putting on my maid's uniform and working without a break. I changed back into my uniform and walked to the student council office and quietly inserted the key into the door.

The student council room was empty today, as the members of the Student Council were busy with the festival. This meant that it would not be difficult to go over the notes again and take a picture of the writing on my phone.

That's what I thought, but then I turned and...

My phone trembled in my pocket from an incoming call. I was startled to see the name of the caller.

Yagami Takuya. Why could he be calling me at this time? Feeling that this was a scary coincidence, I answered the call.

“Hello?”

“Horikita-senpai.” Yagami-kun's voice, which should be over the phone, directly reached my ears from a small distance away.

The person I least wanted to see right now turned to me and waved with a smile. I felt chills all over my body, as if my heart had been directly doused with cold water.

“Did I startle you?”

With that he stepped closer to my side as he hung up his cell phone.

“Yagami-kun, why are you here?”

“What do you mean, senpai? Didn't you notice that I called from nearby?”

I was so focused on other things that maybe I wasn't able to see him. It was as if Yagami-kun was trying to figure out how upset or flustered I was.

“By the way, why are you in such a deserted place, senpai? Isn't it time to make the final push as the festival enters its climax?”

“I'm on break, so my role in the festival is over. I just wanted to be alone for a little while.”

“A break at 3 p.m.? You chose an unusual time, didn't you?”

Unusual, perhaps. I had never experienced a festival of this type before, so I had no criteria to judge. However, since the rule was that all participants must take a one-hour break, there must be a certain percentage of students like me who chose to take a break at 3:00 PM.

My train of thought failed to come up with an immediate answer, and I fell silent for a few seconds.

Then I realized. Yagami-kun's words, "unusual time," were neither true nor false. It was merely an attempt to find out whether I had chosen 3:00 p.m. as my break time without any intention, or whether I had chosen it purposely.

In fact, I was too upset to respond immediately. No matter how I responded afterwards, I may have already fallen into the trap.

No, not yet. There was an option here to go through with it since I have delayed my response. The uncomfortable phrase "unusual time" could only be heard once.

"Why is Yagami-kun here?"

"I found Horikita-senpai with a grim face, so I was curious and followed you."

"Excuse me? Whatever the reason, I'm not impressed with you following a girl."

"I thought I called out to you properly, but I guess you didn't hear me in the bustle."

On my way here, I was definitely thinking. But that wouldn't stop me from noticing if he called out to me. I couldn't help but feel that I was being swayed in the same way as before, but there may be no real meaning to this whole sequence of events. Besides, he could have called out to me any number of times before coming here. Or maybe he did not follow me, but was in the vicinity around me... from the beginning?

All of this assumed that Yagami-kun was the person I have been following who wrote well. If it's irrelevant, I guess I'll have to apologize later for being so skeptical.

"Are you allowed to leave the festival?"

"I've done what I had to do. It's not a break, but I have free time because there is no rule that says you can't take a break for more than an hour."

Was it still just a coincidence? No, don't get that idea. If it turns out to be a coincidence later, then there is no problem. But if it wasn't a coincidence, then I'm in trouble now.

"What do you want in the student council room? It's locked and I don't think anyone is in there." Yagami-kun asked looking at the door of the student council room as if he anticipated my arrival.

"I'm looking for something. I borrowed the key from the staff room, so it's no problem."

"You're looking for something? If that's the case, I can help you find it."

Calmness and impatience began to compete in my mind. I can't make clearly

determine if his statement was only well-meaning or if he had malicious intent.

“It's not like I need your help.”

“It's so important that you went to the trouble of looking for it in the middle of a cultural festival, isn't it?”

It sounded like a statement that striped me naked and saw through my thoughts.

“It's a notebook. I bought it some time ago and I'm having trouble finding it. It's not good for my mental health to think that someone else might pick it up and read it. I almost gave up on it, but it still bothers me. The only place I haven't looked through is the student council office.”

There was no point in spending any more time here. I told Yagami-kun the lie that I had told the teachers.

“Then I'll help with the search. It will be twice as efficient to search with two people rather than one, won't it?”

“Yes, that's right.”

I slowly unlocked the door and opened it. I stopped moving to step into the student council room one step ahead of Yagami-kun, who was standing right beside me.

“Horikita-senpai? Do we need two people to search the student council room for a forgotten item? Is there something else you're after?”

“Eh?” Under the circumstances, I dared to fight back. “I tried to refuse your help because I honestly felt a little scared.”

“You're scared... why?”

“Don't you understand?”

“I have no idea.”

“We're in an empty student council room. Before, you said you called out to me, but I didn't notice. It was as if I was being followed while we were alone. Do you know what that means for a girl?”

This was where I set him up, not in terms of Horikita Suzune as an individual, but in terms of social gender differences. I could get rid of him in an absolute way, regardless of whether he was persistent or not.

“Oh dear, I see. I'm sorry, I hadn't thought of that at all. I see...”

This made it impossible to bypass the student council room and also made it impossible to wait in the hallway. It would be too creepy to do that.

“I'm sorry. I certainly think my behavior was wrong.” Yagami-kun bowed deeply. “But, at the risk of sounding rude, may I just say one thing?”

“I'm sorry?”

He kept his head bowed and did not raise it, so what was he going to say at this point?

“The true purpose of Horikita-senpai's visit to the student council room...”

Yagami-kun looked up, and right after that...

Yagami-kun's posture suddenly collapsed in front of me, and his upper body was bent.

No, he was attacked.

“I got him!”

With a voice like that, Ibuki-san appeared, dressed in a kimono.

“Wait, Ibuki-san!”

“Don't just stand there, let me in, Horikita!”

It would be a big problem if they found me, as it certainly looked like an obvious act of violence. I opened the door to the student council room and Ibuki-san forcefully pushed Yagami-kun to enter.

“Hey, what are you doing?” The first one to speak out was, of course, Yagami-kun, the victim.



Ibuki-san appeared from behind, confused by the situation, having detained Yagami-kun.

“You've been saved again by my exploits, Horikita.”

“Saved? I didn't ask anything of you...”

“You told me to be very careful with this guy. And you were being pressed by this guy. It's normal to think there's something going on.” She blurted out things she didn't have to say all at once.

Her single-minded behavior had rendered all my previous conversations useless. To say that I had warned her in front of the person in question was nothing short of nonsense.

“Um, who do you want me to pay attention to?”

Yagami-kun, unable to move, asked the question in a natural way. Now that it's come to this, I had no choice but to throw it all at him.

“I apologize for the violent formality. But I have something on my mind about you. Do you remember the other day when you showed me the notes from the meeting?”

“It was in regards to the comments made by Student Council President Nagumo, wasn't it?”

“Yes. I wanted to check again what you wrote in the notebook. Specifically, your handwriting of the letters.”

“Letters? I'm not sure, but what you're really looking for is the notebook full of the meeting records, right?” Yagami-kun continued, looking puzzled. “You said you wanted to check my handwriting, but what is your true intention?”

I continued my explanation, although I was curious about what he was about to say before Ibuki-san appeared. I explained how a piece of paper was inserted into my tent during the special uninhabited island exam. Yagami-kun listened silently while being restrained, wanting to know who the sender of that paper was.

“You mean because the handwriting in my records and the handwriting on that paper were similar?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“If that story is true, I can certainly understand your wariness of me. And in order to confirm it secretly, it would have been best to aim for such a timing.”

Because of the preparation period for the festival, people were coming and going on Saturdays and Sundays, and students were walking all over the school to scout for potential stall locations, so I couldn't take the option of collecting them then.

“But I am not the sender of the letter.”

Yagami-kun denied it once and for all, and although I was inclined to believe him, I wasn't sure if I should...

When I was unable to honestly accept it, he became a little more emphatic.

“Do you have any reason for your doubt?”

“Unfortunately, I don't have any grounds. I just can't expect you to honestly admit it.”

“If you don't mind, could you show me that paper once? Then I think I can ask you to compare the letters with my handwriting, and I should be able to prove my innocence.”

“I'm afraid that's impossible. I had a little trouble and lost that paper.”

Amasawa-san confronted me on the island and tore it up into little pieces.

“That's a problem. Doesn't that mean I can't prove my innocence?”

“That's why I want to recheck the notes first.”

“Even if you reconfirm them, you can't be certain of their consistency with your memory, can you? Rather, Horikita-senpai now strongly suspects me. If that is the case, the possibility of being made the culprit because of a blurry memory is not small at all. The odds are clearly stacked against me.”

“You may be right.”

I didn't want it to be Yagami-kun, but I strongly felt that I found the culprit. I could understand his concern about the developments that would take place.

“It's not right for me to be suspected, but anyway can you let go of my hand? Either way, I think it would be a welcome thing for both of you to back off before it's too late. How are you going to excuse yourself if Student Council President Nagumo sees a scene like this later?”

We were restraining a first-year boy for no reason. Surely this situation was nothing but a mass of inconvenience for us. It would be a different story if we had been assaulted, etc., but he had done nothing.

“Ibuki-san, let him go.” I instructed Ibuki-san to follow his words.

But Ibuki-san's expression was grim and unruffled as she held Yagami-kun down.

“I'm sorry, but that's not how it works.”

“Why not?”

“Because my intuition tells me that harmless-looking people like you are the most dangerous.”

That's what she had learned before with Ayanokōji-kun. But it was clear from her demeanor that it wasn't just a matter of looks.

“Do you have any other grounds?”

“You have a habit of looking weak at a quick glance, but you have a bad sense of humor flying around. You're not just a scrawny kid, are you?”

I thought it was because Ibuki-san was in direct contact with him that I knew what she was thinking. The part about the possibility that the person we were

looking for was quite skilled. If that was indeed the case with Yagami-kun, then it was no wonder that he was a strong suspect.

“The message sent to me is very similar to Yagami-kun's handwriting. Add to that, the hidden physical ability, and the fact that he appeared here.”

“It's true that I don't mind working out, so I have some confidence in my body.” Sighing in irritation, Yagami-kun raised his gaze slightly and looked at me.

“I'm a little angry with you too. This situation is too one-sided.”

It would not be surprising if Yagami-kun had some high physical ability as Ibuki-san had read. Originally, his OAA grade was C, which was average. It was possible that Yagami-kun's running speed and sports ability were low, with him only being proficient in martial arts.

Was he a white or black belt? As the judgment was pressed for time, the silence was broken in an unexpected way.

The door to the student council room, where no one was supposed to come, opened without warning.

“Oh shit, this is quite an unusual situation, isn't it?”

The one who showed up was Student Council President Nagumo, only Yagami-kun didn't change his attitude, but Ibuki-san and I were terribly surprised because of our guilty behavior.

“Student council president, why are you here?”

“What is this about?”

By “this” he meant mainly that Ibuki-san was restraining Yagami-kun.

“If it took two girls to bully a junior student, that's a big problem, man.”

Ibuki-san couldn't continue restraining him, so she released Yagami-kun with both hands.

“Thank you for saving me, Student Council President Nagumo.” Yagami-kun looked calm and fixed his ruffled uniform.

What was with Yagami-kun's calm demeanor, as if he had known that the student council president was coming?

“Then, let's ask you to explain why you're here without permission.”

If I said I lost my notebook, Yagami-kun might've pointed out that I was lying. On the other hand, if I brought up the subject of the notes, the story would spread to Student Council President Nagumo.

“Horikita-senpai seemed to have lost her notebook, and I was going to help her find it... Ibuki-senpai seemed to have mistakenly thought that I was attacking Horikita-senpai and acted like she did for no apparent reason.” He replied, not trying to corner me, but to defend my lie.

“I see, so that's the reason for the restraint.”

“I think the misunderstanding has been cleared up, and I don't particularly

intend to make an issue of it.”

“Then there's no need for further mention. So, did you find the notebook?”

If he was willing to talk back, I was grateful to go along with the process.

“No, I did not find it. This was the last place I placed it. Maybe I mistook it for trash and threw it away. I'll just give up.”

Although he could check himself, he probably didn't care about the whereabouts of the notebook. The student body president looked away from me, as if he wasn't interested, and then sat down in his usual seat.

“Whatever the reason, this isn't something you should be doing in the middle of a cultural festival. Break it up now.”

Even if I persisted here, I could no longer see the meeting notes. I just had to back off quietly for now. With that thought in mind, I was about to leave the room with Ibuki-san, but then...

“By the way, Student Council President Nagumo, how did you know we were here?”

Yagami-kun asked such a question beside me and Ibuki-san.

“Are you curious?”

“The door to the student council room was supposed to be locked. But the student council president didn't hesitate to enter the room, so I was a little concerned.”

It was certainly unnatural. I didn't know if the student body president had a spare key or not, but he should have tried to open the door by inserting the key at least once. It was understandable to be suspicious that he entered the room so naturally without question. It was as if he knew from the beginning that something was going on...

Were Student Council President Nagumo and Yagami-kun planning to meet up here? If so, then Yagami-kun's prediction that the student body president would come would make sense. But, the exchange between the two was far from indicative.

“I'd be happy to answer you, but before I do, I wanted to ask Yagami-kun something too.”

“Me?”

“You remember the matter we talked about in the student council room the other day, don't you? I told you that there's a rumor that I'm trying to expel some students with a lot of money.”

“Of course. I've been doing some digging on my end, but I haven't been able to find out where the rumors are coming from.”

I couldn't keep up with the sudden rehash of the story.

“But you know, don't you? Where the rumors are coming from.”

“Pardon me?”

“I mean, you're the one who started them, aren't you?”

Student Council President Nagumo kicked the underside of the desk lightly in frustration.

“Wait, please. What in the world is going on all of a sudden? Why would I do such a thing?”

Just as he was suspected by us, now he was suspected by Student Council President Nagumo. And it was completely unrelated.

“The reason for you doing it is quite clear. It was a special exam among first-year students where certain students were expelled for a prize money. You were one of the few who participated.”

Yagami-kun's expression clouded slightly here. It contained irritation, just like Student Council President Nagumo's.

“What do you mean, Student Council President Nagumo, what on earth are you talking about?”

“You denied it at the student council meeting, but it was a fact.”

“Well, you were involved too, weren't you?”

“But I didn't break any rules, you know? It's just school policy. I was standing in as student council president with Director Tsukishiro to maintain fairness. Am I right? Yagami.”

There had been relentless special exams at this school, but I didn't think that was even possible.

“Wasn't it a rule not to talk about that special exam and its participants?”

“You broke that rule first, didn't you?”

“It wasn't me. There is no merit in embarrassing Student Council President Nagumo. Besides, there were several other first-year students who received the same explanation.”

“Well, yeah. But you showed up here. It's tempting to speculate.”

“That's just a coincidence.”

Student Council President Nagumo was facing Yagami-kun, but changed his gaze to us.

“You guys go back now. I'll talk to Yagami from here.”

“I did not know about that matter, but please allow me to speak.”

“Horikita-senpai, what are you going to say?”

Yagami-kun attempted to restrain me with his eyes. ‘I covered for you earlier, return the favor’ he seemed to be saying. I had to ignore such a gaze.

“Tell me.”

“I don't know if he was the one who spread the rumor about that special exam. But I don't think it's a coincidence that he showed up here; Yagami-kun was

following me. Or I now strongly feel that he has been watching around this student council room from the beginning.”

“You think so, Suzune? Is this true, Yagami?”

Yagami-kun's expression hardened as he was caught between the two sides, but then he exhaled in irritation.

“I understand. You two were working together from the beginning, weren't you? From the moment you handed me that letter disguised as a love letter, you decided to force me into a corner here, didn't you?”

“The letter disguised as a love letter?”

“You mean this one?”

Student Council President Nagumo took out from his pocket the love letter I had received from Ichihashi-san.

What did he mean by a letter disguised as a love letter?

“I don't understand. It's just a love letter from an unknown sender, with true feelings for me written on it.”

“No, it's not. The letter is indeed a love letter at first glance, but it says, “Cultural Festival, 3:00 p.m., Student Council Room.” Other words like “important,” “expulsion,” and “secret” are everywhere. No?”

Opening the already sealed letter, Student Council President Nagumo looked it over.

“Where is that written? I have no idea.”

With that, Student Council President Nagumo moved to hand me the love letter.

“Excuse me.”

I borrowed the letter and look through the contents. But I couldn't find the letter Yagami-kun mentioned anywhere.

Ibuki-san was also curious and took a peek at the note, but her reaction was the same as ours. Such was the content:

[I want you to forgive me for confessing without telling you my name. I have always loved you.]

“Please stop playing games . If you analyze the anagrams, you will find the truth.”

“What's an anagram?”

Unlike Ibuki-san, who didn't understand the meaning of the word itself, I wondered if he meant to say that this letter was written with an anagram? An anagram is a rearrangement of letters to change their meanings. A play on words.

Even if you try to find the answer repeatedly, you won't find it right away. Maybe you could find it with time, but it's not possible to instantly recognize it.

“You are very clever, Yagami. Apparently neither Suzune nor I can analyze

anagrams right away, right?”

Yagami-kun was just as highly wary of us as we were of his growing skepticism.

“Could it have been written by one of you two? Or was it someone you know in common?”

“Common acquaintance? Who the hell are you talking about?”

“I don't know that. But you can trust that I followed the anagram to this place.”

If that was so... no, he said something completely strange.

“I don't care at this point if it's an anagram or not. How do you know in advance what's in this love letter? You read it before you handed it to me, right?”

Yes. There was no other way to know.

“It's from coincidence. When I dropped the letter, the seal came off and the contents came out. I wasn't supposed to look at it, but I couldn't resist looking through it.”

“That's not very good behavior for a member of the student council.”

I understood the temptation to steal a glance, but I would usually restrain myself. And even more so if it was a letter exchanged by a third party who had nothing to do with me. Would I take the risk of checking the contents of a letter exchanged between third parties with whom I have nothing to do? It was true that not knowing the sender's name tickled my curiosity, but whether I'd even check the contents of the letter was another matter.

“You checked inside because you usually have bad morals, right? I had a hunch that I was being set up in some kind of trap.”

“It doesn't sound like we can quite believe your words at the moment.”

I was feeling strangely uncomfortable about this whole discussion. The world as I saw it, the world as Yagami-kun saw it, and the world as President Nagumo saw it. I couldn't help but feel that they were all slightly different from each other.

They seemed to be meshing, but they were not. I felt uncomfortable as if something was stuck in my back teeth.

It was bad enough that Yagami-kun read the letter without permission. However, the fact that he spread a bad rumor about Student Council President Nagumo, not to mention the ambiguous meeting notes, made it worse. We couldn't determine with certainty whether his appearance in front of this student council room was intentional or coincidental either. There was no way to go on blaming Yagami-kun any further here...

Yagami-kun looked at me and Student Council President Nagumo alternately and gave a small laugh.

“Isn't it about time for you to answer the question? The truth is, you all already know, don't you?” After a moment of silence, perhaps having sorted out the situation in his mind, Yagami-kun spoke up. “Horikita-senpai, you were shown the meeting notes, associated the paper with the one you received during the uninhabited island, and thought I was the culprit. Then you gave a letter to Student Council President Nagumo, disguised as a love letter, and secretly sent him a message.”

For some reason, he started mentioning the notes and paper himself, which he had not mentioned up to this point.

“Why do you have to go through all that trouble? You could have just called or chatted. Isn't it so you don't leave evidence that you suspect me? You can make any number of requests with this letter disguised as a love letter. And Student Council President Nagumo would be willing to go over the meeting records with you to determine if I am the person Horikita-senpai is looking for.”

“The island? The Notes ? the person Suzune is looking for? What are you talking about?”

“Are you still going to continue your act, Student Council President Nagumo? I already know that you and Horikita-senpai are acting under the direction of a certain person. Everything is under the direction of Ayanokōji-senpai, who created the anagram of this letter, isn't it? I feel bad for him. I'm sure he had already arrived at this conclusion far before I even had to show you the notes, Horikita-senpai.”

“Why is Ayanokōji-kun's name mentioned here?”

“He's going around a lot, isn't he? I thought he didn't like to be publicized, but I didn't expect him to contact me in this way.” He laughed amusedly. Yagami-kun's attitude had clearly changed from before.

“So what happens after this? Are we finally going to meet Ayanokōji-senpai?”

Yagami-kun looked at the doorway like a child with a toy gift box in front of him.

“I'm impatient. Can you tell me what you have heard about me before he arrives? I would especially like to hear it from your mouth, Horikita-senpai.”

“Wait. I really don't know what you are talking about. I suspected that you came to my tent and put the letter in there, but I only talked to Ibuki-san about it.”

Even when I told him the truth, Yagami-kun did not seem to believe me.

“Explain it to me so I can understand, Yagami.”

“Fuu~ I'm getting tired of your quicksand, Student Council President Nagumo. You were going to meet up with Ayanokōji-senpai here along with Horikita-senpai through the letter. And he was going to talk to me. He must have

thought it was dangerous to meet with me alone. Yeah, it was a wise decision.”

“Sorry to interrupt your heated mood, Yagami, but I’ll tell you why I came to the student council room.”

Student Council President Nagumo pulled out his cell phone and turned the screen toward us. A phone number was displayed, as if there was an incoming call from someone.

“Looks like you’ve arrived. Come in.”

The other end of the phone hung up.

“Ha-ha-ha! I knew Ayanokōji-senpai was here! I’m so happy!”

Yagami-kun laughed loudly and opened his arms to welcome the slowly opening door.

“It seems I’m a little unexpected.”

With these words, a person who went beyond my expectations entered the room. The first to react was not me, Student Council President Nagumo, or Yagami-kun, but Ibuki-san.

“What? Ryūen? What are you doing here?”

Ryūen-kun was not the only one who showed up. Two of his classmates also showed up.

“Oh, you look pretty good in that outfit, Ibuki. What do you think, Kinoshita?”

“Honestly. I think you look cute with your little bow.”

“What? Wait, Komiya? And even Kinoshita is...?”

And to top it off, Sakagami-sensei and Mashima-sensei also showed up later in the student council room.

“What is... This...?”

The most stunned person was Yagami-kun, who was mouthing something incomprehensible.

“I came to the student council room to talk to Ryūen and the others. Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah, that was the plan, but were you in the middle of taking them in?”

Yagami-kun looking at them also had a grim look on his face, as if he did not understand the current situation.

Student Council President Nagumo stood up and forced the letter onto Yagami-kun’s chest.

“Anagrams masquerading as love letters, secret notes, this doesn’t make any sense to me, Yagami.”

“This can’t be true... what’s going on?”

Ryūen-kun approached Yagami-kun, who could not hide his confusion. Then he pointed his finger and said.

“This is the one you guys were talking about, right?”

Ryūen-kun asked Komiya-kun and the others standing discreetly behind him, confirming something. Both of them nodded strongly with nervous looks on their faces.

“Yes, sir. I'm sure of it.”

“Yes. I'm sure.”

Ryūen-kun heard this and, with a wan smile on his face as usual, moved even closer to Yagami-kun. He was so close that he could reach Yagami-kun if he stretched out his arm.

“I'm going to have to have a long talk with you, aren't I?”

“About what?”

Ryūen-kun laughed, extended his right arm, and suddenly grabbed Yagami-kun by the bangs.

“Ryūen!” Mashima-sensei scolded him for his violent behavior, but he showed no sign of paying attention.

“Yo, what's your name again?”

“Yagami, Yagami Takuya, Ryūen-senpai.”

Ryūen-san pulled up his hair and his face changed to one of anguish.

“So you're Yagami. I heard you're the one who took care of Komiya and Kinoshita.”

“What do you mean? I don't understand.”

“Don't play dumb. Komiya and Kinoshita reminded me just the other day. The reason they got seriously injured during the desert island test was because you violently attacked them.”

Severe injuries on a deserted island. I knew that they were seriously injured with broken bones, but that was an accident caused by carelessness, as I recalled.

“Me? What in the world is going on?!”

“These guys had lost their memories due to the shock of their injuries, but once it was put away as an accident, they remembered. They remember now that you were the culprit.”

As if in response to this statement, Student Council President Nagumo also commented.

“It was just yesterday. We were going to have a discussion today, just me, Ryūen, and Komiya and Kinoshita. Why are the teachers here?”

“I called them here to save you the trouble. I heard that Sakagami rushed over when the two of you were injured.”

“Speaking of Yagami-kun, I'm sure Mashima-sensei recalls as well.” Sakagami-sensei confirmed Mashima-sensei, as if remembering something.

“Yes, I don't want to do anything to suspect the students, but I can't deny the

possibility.”

“Hey, what are you saying? I didn't do anything!”

No wonder he was so flustered. I was not able to clear my head either.

“Yagami. I know that the GPS on your watch was not functioning when the two alerts went off that day. There were several students whose watches were broken during the special exam, but only two, including you, were able to contact Komiya and the others from the point where you last disappeared. Of course, at the time, Komiya, Kinoshita, and Shinohara could only say that someone had injured them, but they could not give their names. Therefore, we had no choice but to treat it as an accident...”

“He couldn't remember, but later he remembered and gave my name? That's impossible! It's obvious that the two of them must have talked past each other to come up with my name!”

“Mutual back-channeling? The fact that your watch was broken is a fact that the average student does not know.”

Over 400 people were taking the test on a deserted island. Two of them were wearing watches with broken GPS at the time they were injured. Surely the odds are too low to call it a coincidence.

“They recall seeing the culprit. What's your basis for your doubts about their claims? Tell me.”

With more strength in his fingertips, Ryūen-kun pulled on Yagami-kun's hair.

“Gghh! That's...”

“‘No one could have seen me, I must have done it perfectly well.’ That's what you think, right?”

“Well, wait a minute. I didn't do anything. Do you think I'm capable of such a terrible thing?”

Yagami-kun was not a big man. To the casual observer, it would seem strange. But Ryūen-kun didn't trust Yagami-kun's words at all.

“I've learned from the past that the ones who look harmless are the most troublesome. Isn't that right, Ibuki?”

“No doubt, this guy is strong. He can at least seriously injure Komiya and the others without them noticing.”

“Normally, I'd have you suffer an equal or greater injury to avenge our enemy, but unfortunately, we're in front of Sensei. I'll give you a break. What awaits you is nothing but expulsion.”

If the facts were confirmed and it was proven that Yagami-kun caused serious injury to Komiya-kun and the others, that it would be more than a suspension. Expulsion was inevitable, even with no extenuating circumstances.

Yagami-kun tilted his face down as Ryūen-kun removed his hand from his hair.

“So? What are you doing here, Suzune?”

“I had some research to do on Yagami-kun too.”

“Oh? What's that?”

I came this far, I had no choice but to tell them all about it. I told them what had happened on the deserted island, that I had been looking for a student with beautiful handwriting, that I had come here to check the notes because they were similar to Yagami-kun's. I pulled out the notebook and opened it to Yagami-kun's page.

“The handwriting and Yagami-kun's handwriting are almost identical. It also matches my memory.”

“Let me ask you to explain what this means, Yagami.”

Student Council President Nagumo asked, even though he didn't have a full grasp of what's going on. The only thing that was certain was that something mysterious was going on in this place. While all of us were related to Yagami-kun, there wasn't a definitive key.

There was no one who could be the most important key. How was such a thing possible? What if it had all started with that one love letter... And I entrusted it to Yagami-kun, and Yagami-kun saw what was inside, too?

They knew for sure that Yagami-kun would analyse the anagram inside of it... But they didn't know that I had seen Yagami-kun's notes.

No, I wonder if that had anything to do with it. I was an outsider, and Ibuki-san was an outsider with me.

Even if Ibuki-san and I were not here, this sequence of events would've continued. Yagami-kun, who was lured by the letter and came to the student council room, would have been questioned by President Nagumo.

But was such a thing possible? Even if it were possible, who would do it? When and where?

No, this kind of question itself may be wrong. It would not be at all surprising... if Ayanokōji-kun was behind this event.



Ryūen-kun, Komiya-kun and others who unexpectedly appeared as well as the teachers. It was a place to surround Yagami-kun, who was evasive, from all sides.

“Kuku, I'm surprised too, but I can't help it. He was playing with fire too much.”

Ryūen-kun started laughing, perhaps feeling the same way I did.

“Why is this happening, this is beyond stupid.”

“I don't know what kind of background you have, but you're trapped.”

“I-I'm still in a state where I can't even fight him!? This is where it ends? It can't be over, that's ridiculous!” Yagami-kun, his whole body trembling, shouted in a voice never heard before. “You mean you don't... even have to deal with me directly? Heh... ha... hahaha! Don't fuck with me... don't fuck with me!”

“Shut up. Don't yell so close to me, you little bitch.” Ryūen-kun stuck his pinky in his right ear and muttered in exasperation.

Yagami-kun's excitement did not subside.

“Okay~” Yagami-kun said, “I'm going to do it now. I'm going to kill him with my own hands! Then I'll go back to where I belong, and get my rightful place! I'll take his dead body back with me!”

There were two teachers here, as if that didn't matter at all. In a clear sign of change, Ibuki-san jumped toward Yagami-kun from behind just as he was about to take a bold step toward Ryūen-kun. Without looking back, Yagami-kun quickly dealt with it and slammed his elbow into her abdomen.

“Guh!”

Just one shot and Ibuki-san crumpled to the ground, unable to stand up.

“Stop it, Yagami!”

When the teachers started to run to stop Yagami-san, Ryūen-kun stopped them.

“Pull back. He's not fucking around. Guess it's time for me to step up, isn't it?” Ryūen-kun, without regard to the fact that this was the student council chambers, clenched his fist.

“Oh my god, you can't stop me. I'm not going to tolerate anyone who stands in front of me from now on. I don't care if it's a woman or a teacher. If you don't want to see yourself get hurt like Komiya and the others, then shut up and back off.”

“Kuku. So that's your true nature. That's funny, isn't it?”

Without hesitation, Ryūen-kun took a step forward and lightly spread his arms out as if to provoke.

“I'll gladly stand in your way, so come at me. You're only a punk.”

Ryūen-kun was determined, but I didn't think Yagami-kun could be stopped.

However, We must do something to hold him here. He was driven by the urge to destroy everything, regardless of the teachers' presence. If we let him go, there is no guarantee that we will be able to stop his rampage.

And where he was headed... was to Ayanokōji-kun. If something like this happened in the middle of a cultural festival, a warning won't do.

“Stop it, Yagami. And Ryūen, too. If you cause a commotion here, it will be a serious penalty.”

“My expulsion is 100% inevitable. If that's the case, there's no reason to stop it, right Mashima?”

Yagami-kun called him out without even addressing him as sensei, and discarded him.

Still, Mashima-sensei, as a teacher, stepped in between Yagami-kun and Ryūen-kun.

“Get lost.” He kicked Mashima-sensei in the face, and when he staggered over, he slammed his fist into his face.

Sakagami-sensei witnessed it up close and took a frightened step away. Ryūen-kun, excited at the start of a perfect fight, was just about to jump on Yagami-sensei.

“Let's stop now, Takuya.”

The door to the student council room opened, revealing Amasawa-san with red, swollen eyes.

“Ah? Why are you here?”

Yagami-kun stopped moving in a situation where no one's words were likely to reach him.

“What's it going to take for you to get any more out of control? Do you think that will make them accept you? They're already done with-”

“No, it's not! The instructors are waiting for me! I'm going to be the best!”

Who are the instructors, I wondered? At least I could guess that they were not the teachers of this school.

“I was just going to close out the cultural festival today in an interesting way by exposing that guy's past, but he's done something absurd.”

“Takuya, I knew you were going to do that.”

“Get out of my way; I'm going to make Ayanokōji regret it. I'll make it so funny you won't stop laughing.”

“If you insist on going to Ayanokōji-senpai, I'll stop you before you do.”

“You? You've never beaten me once. Don't make me laugh.”

“Maybe I can't beat you with force. But I'll give it a try.

“I knew you were devoted to Ayanokōji, but I didn't know you were that stupid.”

“I just learned that a frog in a well doesn’t know the ocean. It’s just like that story we learned about before... Don’t you remember?”

Amasawa had a sad look in her eyes. Yagami-kun seemed to falter for a moment, before returning to his murderous gaze.

“Then it’s time for you to die. There is no reason for you to be alive.”

Just as Amasawa-san was about to make up her mind, we heard multiple footsteps coming from the other side of the hallway.

Five adults stepped into the student council room with blank expressions on their faces. Not all of them were recognizable, but two of the five were guests of honor who had also shown up at the maid cafe.

Yagami-kun, who had been untouchable until a moment ago, suddenly began to tremble.

“W-why are you guys here? Hey, why...?”

“We even got a call to come pick you up at the student council office. It wasn’t exactly what we had in mind.”

Yagami-kun, who had been on a killing spree just a short time ago, found himself squeezed like a child. It was almost as if a child had been caught by his parents and was scared of the punishment.

Surrounded by adults, Yagami-kun was taken away without resistance. Amasawa-san walked with him.

“You people are...”

Mashima-sensei confirmed as he stood up in pain.

“We are related to Yagami and Amasawa. We will settle this situation, so please go ahead and get treated. Please do not tell anyone about what happened here, not even the teachers and students. Rest assured that we will pass everything on to Chairman Sakayanagi.”

“I understand.”

With Sakagami-sensei’s help, Mashima-sensei left the student council room. The room, which had been so noisy, was suddenly enveloped in silence.

“Get up Ibuki, let’s pull out.”

“Come on, at least give me a hand!”

Ryūen-kun gave instructions to Komiya-kun with his chin to Ibuki-san, who still could not stand up, and then lent her a hand and left the room.

Only me and Student Council President Nagumo were left in the Student Council Room.

“So much for this. A lot of things have gone wrong, but I guess we’ve settled the matter once and for all.”

“How much did you know about today’s incident involving Ayanokōji-kun?”

“What are you talking about? As I said before, I just came here with the intention of talking to Ryūen.”

“Then you didn't need to bring that letter.”

The love letter remained crumpled and fallen on the floor in emptiness.

“To borrow Yagami's words, it was a coincidence. It just happened to be still in my pocket.” A simple lie. There was nothing more to say, such was the notice from the student body president.

“The noisy festival is over. You too, go back.”

“I understand.”

I turned to leave the room, and saw Nagumo settling into his chair, eyes closed, with a slight grin on his face.

Epilogue: The People Behind The Scenes

FINALLY, 4:00 P.M arrived, and the hectic cultural festival finally came to an end. As explained in advance, the accounting application was forcibly shut down, and sales cannot be recorded thereafter.

The results could be checked via cell phone starting 6 pm, two hours later. Even though the event was over, we were still expected to not take it for granted until the end of the day.

The guests who had stayed until the end began to leave their seats as the café was closing, and gave their impressions of the maid café to the students.

All of them had positive comments such as, “it was interesting,” and, “it was fun.” The students who had worked so hard at the event were deeply touched by those warm words, and their fatigue seemed to fade away.

Incidentally, Chabashira-sensei ran out of the classroom like a rabbit as soon as 4 o'clock came. Running around in that outfit would've been conspicuous, but let's leave it at that. It was around 5:30 when all the customers left and all the classmates (except Kōenji) gathered at the maid cafe.

“Good work, everyone. A lot happened, but at least we were able to end the festival in an ideal way. I don't think the sales could have been any better.”

Ike and the others gathered in the classroom having just finished taking down the outdoor stalls. In the maid café, some guests stayed eating until late, so there were still some areas to clean up, but Horikita stepped up to sum up the cultural festival.

“The results will be announced later, but there is something I want to talk to you about before that.”

Yes, there were 37 students in the classroom. Akito and Haruka also remained behind.

Although not prompted by Horikita, Haruka, who was the star of the show, stepped forward.

“I would like to be the first to tell you. I have not forgiven everyone here.”

Haruka mumbled in the silence of the classroom as she opened her speech. Some of the students, expecting her to start with an apology, looked at each other, feeling more bewilderment than anger.

They didn't seem to blame her. Everyone understood. They had grown up to be able to feel the pain of losing a friend, a best friend.

“But the person I can't forgive the most is myself. I assumed that everyone

who left the school would be unhappy. Yamauchi-kun, who disappeared last year, and Airi.”

At the mention of Yamauchi's name, Sudō, Ike, and the others seemed to be thinking back.

“I had assumed that it was best for Airi to stay at this school. I assumed that was the happiest thing to do. That's why I hated all of them and wanted to take revenge.”

Haruka clutched the skirt of her school uniform tightly as she expressed her frustration.

“After this festival ended, I was going to leave school.”

It was a fact that she didn't have to tell, but she didn't want to hide it, so she confessed. I think some of the students had foreseen this, but the majority of them were tight-lipped.

“I was going to go along with Haruka too.”

At this point, Akito, too, could not remain silent and told the truth with Haruka.

“If we had dropped out, our class would not have reached Class A. It's the easiest and most powerful way to get revenge.”

No tricks would be needed. Just leaving school was enough to make us lose a large number of class points.

“But if you give me a chance, please let me stay in this class.”

“You've had a change of heart, haven't you?”

“That girl is trying to spread her wings in the outside world. Kushida-san told me about it.”

At this point, Kushida's name was mentioned, and everyone's eyes were drawn to her. The majority of them didn't understand what was going on, so Kushida opened her mouth as if to add something.

“Sakura-san, she seems to be working hard to become an idol; you can find her on SNS, so maybe you can ask Hasebe-san to show you later.”

Some students were surprised, others thought it was a good idea. But the common perception that emerged was the fact that Airi had taken a new step forward.

“Airi will grow a lot. Probably more than I thought she would. So I want to be able to graduate in Class A and go see her. I want to be able to show myself without embarrassment.”

The class learned that this was why she chose to stay at this school.

“You made a good decision, Hasebe-san.”

“I'm going to accept punishment for the trouble I caused.”

“I'm just as guilty. I didn't help with most of the festival and caused trouble

for the class.”

Horikita stepped forward before the other students could say anything else. “Skipping the festival is a problematic behavior, but fortunately it doesn't violate any rules. Kouenji-kun hasn't shown up once since this morning, so it's the same thing.”

Horikita approached Haruka with a look of dismay and relief on her face.

“If you are going to be punished, it will only be by remaining classmates with me. Can you face that reality?”

I wonder what Haruka thought of the reflection in Horikita's eyes.

“I'm going to try my best. Yes. From now on, you can think of me as your regular Hasebe-san, okay?”

“Don't worry. I won't bother you.” That was enough, Horikita nodded and declared. “Miyake-kun is the same as before as well. Is that okay?”

“Of course.”

“That's all for today then. Let's all finish the rest of the cleanup quickly.”

Keisei walked up to Haruka and Akito, somewhat hesitantly. Starting with Akito's apology, Keisei's eyes reddened a bit and he spoke with relief. Haruka's apology brought the three of them together for the first time while, and they smiled slightly at each other. Akito and Keisei turned their attention to Haruka as if they had made up their minds. The two of them signaled to Haruka as well, and the eyes of those three turned to me in confusion.

If I were to approach them here and now, the group might be resumed. That was no longer necessary. I turned my back and went to send words of thanks to Sato and the others.

The group of five was now three, but I hoped that the bond between them would be stronger than before. That place doesn't need me.

The three of them could sense my actions as a sign of farewell. They didn't approach me or call out to me.

It was quick after that. The cleanup that was left to be done would soon be back on track with 37 people.

All the cleanup was done before 6:00 PM. Then the results of the festival were announced.

- *1st place, 2nd year B class (+ 100 class points)*
- *2nd place, 2nd year C class (+ 100 class points)*
- *3rd place, 3rd year B class (+ 100 class points)*
- *4th place, 2nd year A class (+ 100 class points)*
- *5th place, 1st year A class (+ 50 class points)*

- *6th place, 3rd year C class (+ 50 class points)*
- *7th place, 2nd year D class (+ 50 class points)*
- *8th place, 1st year C class (+ 50 class points)*
- *9th place, 3rd year D class (+ 50 class points)*
- *10th place, 1st year B class*
- *11th place, 3rd year A class*
- *12th place, 1st year D class*

“We're in first place! We did it!”

“I guess Chabashira-sensei's cosplay really struck!”

Each was pleased and praised each other for a good fight.

“But Ryūen's place is also in second place, and Sakayanagi's class is in fourth place, which is quintessential.”

“Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Yeah, everything is going according to plan.”

It was a certainty that Horikita's class would take the top place, and it was assumed from the beginning that Ryūen's class would also be in the top position.

“I wondered how the one-liners would fare, but you've managed to outsmart them.”

“But there was also something unexpected: Sakayanagi came in fourth.”

“Yes. Did you see their performance?”

“No, I didn't go to the third floor of the special wing today. Did you see them?”

“Class A was selling brochures and stuff about the school for a low price. They didn't have any other food, drink, or other offerings. I wonder what kind of tricks they used

“The clue is probably at the bottom of the list.”

“First year Class D, Housen-kun's class, right? What about it?”

“If they were the bottom of the class as a result of a struggle, fine. But that's unthinkable. The class's entertainment, which was mainly a reenactment of the festival, was quite successful. I thought it was one of the top classes. Did you think that was lower than the third-year A class?”

“The 11th-ranked class is third-year Class A. They were priced out of the competition from the start. It was only about entertaining to please the guests, right?”

It was confirmed that the haunted house and other activities could be played for 100 points. On the other hand, the shooting and other stalls that Hosen had set

up were priced appropriately.

“The top class got 100 points for this festival. It means that behind the scenes, Hosen might have gotten something else.”

“Conceivably, you mean private points?”

“Doesn't this remind you of last year's desert island test?”

There was an agreement between Ryūen and Katsuragi to receive private points in exchange for letting them earn class points. It would not surprise me if something similar happened between Sakayanagi and Hōsen.

“It's not impossible. Or maybe they signed a similar contract to replace it.”

The accounting was done through a cell phone. It would be a viable enough strategy if Hōsen and his friends had received cell phones from the second-year A class for accounting purposes and donated all sales. If they were also providing funds to Hōsen's class for the festival, it would make sense for the size of the festival to grow.

“But she did,” he said.

“Because if you notice, she's taking the choice to win.”

Either way, it meant that Sakayanagi won'tt be easily satisfied. It was clear that they were steadily producing results, even though they appeared to have abandoned the game.

1

The meeting was then dismissed, but Horikita called some members of the group to the Class B classroom. They were the three maid cafe planners, with the exception of Matsushita, who was absent due to illness.

“Actually, I have something I have to apologize to you guys for.”

“What? Apologize for what? What is it?”

It had been a tough day, but there had been no particular occasion in which Horikita had shown any fault.

Since Satō and the others had absolutely nothing in mind, they tilted their heads curiously.

“You remember how Ryūen-kun leaked the maid cafe and how it spread throughout the school, don't you?”

“Yeah. That was a bit of a panic, wasn't it?”

“Actually, it was already decided from the beginning that he would leak the

maid café.”

The story stemmed from my suggestion to somehow join hands in order to cooperate with each other and win the top positions at the festival.

“What do you mean, the leak was set in stone? What do you mean?”

“It was all planned. Ryūen-kun and I would work together, he would betray us and make the maid cafe's performance known.”

“What? No way!”

Of course they would be surprised. Horikita and I were the only ones in the class who knew about this.

“So you also had a bet where the winner gets private points?”

“That was Ryūen-kun's idea. I was a little nervous when he suddenly said it. Hashimoto and the others, who had been looking forward to the result of the bet, must have been decisive in the betting.”

“Yes, Sakayanagi-san heard a lot of information from third parties. I’m sure that Hashimoto-kun and other spies must’ve told her about this as well. The two classes were supposed to cooperate with each other, but they got into a dispute, and Ryūen-kun unilaterally betrayed them.”

“Then what about the one million points you’d get if you won first place?”

“I’m sorry, but we’ve also confirmed that in fact, no matter who won, no points will be handed over to either of them. He was willing to do it himself, but I think he’s a bit chilled by now. I kept this fact a secret from our classmates, including Kei, with the exception of Horikita. And no one in Ryūen's class, except Ryūen and Katsuragi, had heard about it.”

Even close associates such as Ishizaki and Albert were no exception.

That was why I could only take it as a sign that Ryūen was serious about keeping the agreement.

“One of their strategies was to put up a Japanese-style concept café as a rival. Besides appealing to the public that we were enemies, it was also to keep other rivals out.”

Rivalry. The higher the excitement, the more responsibility and money down the drain for the adults.

If they knew that there was a battle they couldn’t lose, it would be natural to want to let the ones who have the better shoulder win. On the other hand, other classes and grades were not in a fight to the death. Of course, many classes wanted class points, but the heat was a notch or two lower than the Horikita vs. Ryūen battle.

“I’m really sorry. I even kept quiet to you guys, even though I was trying to win.”

Horikita was always feeling guilty because she wanted to reveal the plan as soon as possible.

I'm sure the three of them could tell that she was sincerely sorry.

"It's okay. We were first in the results, hey?"

Not particularly blaming us, Satō happily confirmed to Mii-chan and Maezono.

"Well, you know. If you do well, I guess I don't mind so much."

"Yes. If I had been told beforehand, it might have shown on my face."

Mii-chan replied honestly, "I'm not even sure I'm confident enough to act."

"Good for you, Horikita."

"Yes, it's a weight off my shoulders. You guys can tell Matsushita-san about this. And as soon as the private points are transferred to us, we'll pay you all."

"We did it!"

The three of them high-fived each other.

"Was Chabashira-sensei becoming a maid also discussed from the beginning? That was probably the biggest surprise."

"That was amazing... we were on top of the scores within an hour."

"I know you have a lot to talk about, but we're going to end today off. Thank you so much."

The class found a strategy in the suggestion of a maid cafe and was able to win first place. I was grateful that other uncalculated factors also worked positively.

After seeing the three of them off, only Horikita and I were left in the classroom. A slightly stronger wind came through the open window and shook the curtains.

"Are you sure you're okay with it? Most of the plan was your own idea. You could've claimed more credit, you know? Staging the confrontation and making Chabashira-sensei the maid, it was undeniably your ability that contributed to the first place."

"It was only possible because of Horikita's stand as leader."

"If it had been you in the past, you wouldn't have included me in this scheme, would you?"

In the empty classroom, Horikita muttered without looking at me.

"I guess so."

"You don't deny it, do you?"

"It's a fact, so it can't be helped. You knew it too, that's why you asked me, right?"

"Well, yeah, that's probably true."

It's not that I, Ryūen, and Katsuragi couldn't have forced the issue by

ourselves. But when I made this proposal, I told Horikita at the same time without hesitation.

I wasn't sure if she could play the role or not, but it was not something that could be done without the leader.

If the proposal had been completely rejected, I would've been fine with it.

"I wouldn't hesitate to consider deceiving my colleagues if it's an effective means to win. When it's time to proceed, I will proceed, even if it's at a risk. Do you understand?"

The idea of creating strategies herself became more ingrained in Horikita's body.

"Maybe now I can understand. I think I'm starting to see it, little by little."

It may not be a very strong feeling yet, but she was definitely getting a feel for it.

"That's enough for today. The sun will be setting soon."

"Wait. Ayanokōji-kun, I really need to ask you something right now."

I had a hunch that Horikita would refuse to leave when I tried to encourage her to do so.

I had a feeling that Horikita and Ibuki's presence in the student council room was not a mere coincidence. It must be because they had arrived at that place by following some sort of thread.

"What is it?"

"Today's cultural festival. The serious incident that was happening behind the scenes. Are you..."

Just in time or not, my cell phone rang.

"Sorry, hold on a second."

"Yeah, yeah."

I looked at the screen and saw that it was an incoming call from an unknown number.

"Hello?"

"Are you still in school? I'd like to talk to you for a minute if you'd like."

The voice sounded familiar: It was Tsubaki Sakurako, a student in first year Class C.

I didn't care how she got my number, as there were so many different ways to get it, but she was an unexpected person.

I'm not surprised as to why she made contact today.

"Are you alone now?"

"Unfortunately not."

"Then why don't we meet up?"

"Where are you?"

“I just left the front door. You're still on campus, right?”

“Give me five minutes.”

“Okay.”

After a short call, I told Horikita, “I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to step out for a bit...I'll be back in about 10 or 20 minutes. Then we'll continue our conversation.”

“Okay, I'll wait here.”

I promised to come back here and left the classroom. Once I was alone, I decided to call the person who had helped me the most today.

“The third-year's information network is top-notch; whether it was Kushida Kikyo or Hasebe Haruka, you're able to find them immediately. I've once again realized the power of Student Council President Nagumo.”

“Did you call me to say that?”

“I just wanted to thank you in advance. You were very helpful in today's search.”

The number of eyes and the leadership among the third-year students who quickly located Haruka and Kushida were magnificent.

“I never thought you'd use the strategy I used on you for your own benefit.”

“It was helpful that you were able to tell me what was going on in the student council room. Thanks to you, I was able to respond quickly.”

“At first, I thought it was Yagami's crazy delusion, but was there actually a trick to that letter?”

“It seems to be a love letter to Student Council President Nagumo, but as Yagami complained, it had a somewhat complicated anagram in it. If someone deciphers it, they arrive at the sentence, ‘I have an important meeting in the student council room after 3:00 p.m.’ I also mixed in a few other words that I thought would be interesting. If he had a strong interest, he would naturally take me up on the offer.”

In addition to the anagram, the love letter had a few other little touches.

The envelope used for the letter and the stickers that held it together were made available to anyone at any time at the Keyaki Mall. If they had been custom-made and bought on the Internet, Yagami might've hesitated, fearing that the contents might be seen and evidence would be left behind. However, if you inspect the Keyaki Mall, you'd notice that all but the handwritten letterhead could be substituted.

That's why he could check the contents without hesitation.

Furthermore, by writing directly, I could give Yagami information about the handwriting. White room students were thoroughly trained in calligraphy, so their handwriting were sure to be professional. The love letter prepared in this way was

passed to Horikita through another girl using Kei. Then, she was led to hand it to Yagami, giving him time to examine it. Since there was a possibility that Horikita would hand it directly to Nagumo, I had him act like he was in a bad mood that day so that she couldn't hand it over immediately.

"I didn't think he was the guy who went rogue on the island. How much did you know about him?"

"I don't know anything. Yagami just confessed on his own."

"What kind of a trick was used for Komiya and the others to name Yagami? Was it a coincidence that the teacher showed up?"

"I just told them that the person at the center of the trouble might be lured out. They couldn't identify the culprit, and Ryuen's side wanted a hint. I asked them to take the suggestion knowing the risk that no one would come to the student council. Or even if they did, nothing would happen."

"I see? Well, I wonder how much you're telling the truth."

I left it to his imagination. What I did was really nothing but trivial. Nothing of note.

"Oh well. Now you're ready to make good on your promise, aren't you?"

"Of course. I'm looking forward to it, President Nagumo."

As I approached the front door, I ended my call and reached for my shoe box.

2

"Is Tsubaki alone at the meeting place?"

I thought so for a moment, but it seemed that Utomiya was talking to someone a little farther away. He was only looking at us.

"Is there something you're having trouble communicating over the phone?"

"Well, the first-year students are in a bit of a mess right now. There was an unexpected expulsion at the school festival."

"Expelled? That's a very disturbing story."

Someone else was involved in this school expulsion fiasco. That was Tsubaki Sakurako, who was in front of me then.

"I'm satisfied with the result, which is more than I imagined...Ayanokōji-senpai."



Tsubaki made a circle with her finger as if to say, “you passed.”

“It seems you’ve successfully extracted information from Satō-senpai and drove Yagami-kun out of school. I am very grateful.”

“I didn't extract the information. You contacted Satō repeatedly and gradually drove her into a corner. And then, when she couldn't take it anymore, you coordinated and threatened her, pushing her to spit everything out and confide in someone.”

Tsubaki, right here in front of me, was the person who approached Satō without my knowledge.

“I don't know what that means. What a surprise.”

Satō was apparently approached by Tsubaki near the women's restroom at Keyaki Mall. There, she flashed some bait that would turn things around for her, including a turnaround between my relationship with Kei, which tickled her curiosity.

“It seems you called Satō to your room and made cheap threats, but it wasn't a serious attempt to manipulate her into ruining our relationship. It was because you wanted to push her to act, or deal with the threat of Kei's relationship, by indirectly letting her know that we were getting close.”

Tsubaki listened silently, staring at me without denial.

“When I asked her about the details, the abnormality of the situation was immediately brought to light. As soon as you saw that Satō wouldn't accept your invitation, you contacted her again as if to follow up and made similar comments and provoked her. When you saw that Satō didn't seem to have consulted anyone, you gradually intensified your threats and hounded her. This was due to the fact that she would eventually come to consult someone, and that would be me.”

The goal was not to cage Satō, but to wait for her to ask me for help.

“Then, you most likely told Satō that it was Yagami who was behind the threats, not you.”

The mentally exhausted Satō probably didn't have time to think about whether that was true or not. I came up with the idea of using this one incident for personal use and decided to call up Kei during my discussion with Satō and had her confide in her about the abuse and almost everything that had led up to this point in her past. The fact that Satō didn't choose Tsubaki's side afterwards convinced me that she would be on my side. As a result, the two of them elevated their relationship from friends to best friends in the truest sense of the word. That was on November 1.

“Yagami-kun is a bad guy, isn't he?”

“You don't need cheap theatrics. Yagami had nothing to do with this. He's not involved.”

“You don't think it was actually Yagami-kun's order?”

“If Yagami was using Tsubaki to contact Satō, there's no need to bother naming names.”

The only people who know about Karuizawa's past are those who are connected with the White Room. Others can't easily imitate him in a way that wouldn't have made it difficult for me to see through their disguise.

“Then isn't it the other way around, you found out that I was trying to frame Yagami-kun, didn't you? And yet you did nothing against me and even expelled Yagami-kun, who might be innocent. Isn't that contradictory? There was no indication that Ayanokōji-senpai was looking into it in detail.”

“Ah. I didn't investigate Tsubaki or Yagami. No need for that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I'm sorry, but I don't feel like talking any more.”

I was convinced that I had said enough. It wasn't even Tsubaki who was manipulating everything. Furthermore, the person lurking in the background was the one who painted this picture.

“Utomiya-kun, can you come here for a minute?”

Tsubaki beckoned to Utomiya, who was on the phone, and instructed him to hand his cell phone to me.

“Go ahead...” Wary, Utomiya handed me the phone while it was still connected.

“Yagami had some of Tsubaki's and Utomiya's classmates expelled. That's why those two worked together with me.”

I'm pretty sure that was the voice of the man I spoke to last year on the phone and in front of my room.

“You left him alone because you knew you could take him down at any time if you moved directly on him. But as a result, there were expulsions from the first year. It wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for his nuisance.”

“I don't deny it.”

“The only way to avoid further unnecessary sacrifices was to have him expelled. But even if you knew that, it isn't easy to defeat Yagami. I know he is no ordinary high school student.”

“That's why you wanted to use me.”

He made this decision because he understood the white room student's purpose and obsession.

“I guess you got my message,” he said.

“Eventually, you'll get in touch with someone close to me. And when that happens, there will be expulsions, right?”

“That's right. But to drive Yagami into a corner and expel him all at once?

That was a little out of the calculations. Did you not take into account the possibility that Yagami was unrelated?”

“It was up to Yagami's choice whether or not he wanted to be expelled. It wasn't me who decided whether it was black or white. He was playing with fire here and there, just like he expelled a student from 1st year C. He contacted Kushida Kikyo, pretending to be her former junior, and he used the information he was given to control and manipulate her. He provoked unrelated students on a deserted island by inflicting serious injuries to them. He also checked the contents of a love letter for another person, thinking it was a trap. I don't know why Horikita and Ibuki were there, but I think it was also because he was playing with fire.”

Normally, people don't steal other people's love letters. And even if they did, they wouldn't notice the anagrams that were sprinkled throughout.

“So it was all connected.”

“Even if there was no clear evidence left behind, the more tricks you play, the more traces you will always leave behind. That guy didn't realize he was strangling himself with cotton wool.”

“Surely if Yagami hadn't done anything, he wouldn't have been expelled at this stage.”

“I agree.”

The accumulated fire and games had led to this outcome.

If Yagami hadn't offended the man on the phone, I wouldn't have messed with him, and if he hadn't contacted Kushida or seriously injured those guys on the deserted island, he wouldn't have faced the penalty of expulsion.

If he hadn't seen the contents of the love letter, he would not have been put in a situation where he could be questioned.

“The only reason he was expelled was because Yagami admitted to himself that he was black.”

I merely set up the stage for a test. If he was completely white, there would've been no fuss in the first place. He only went to the student council room because he knew me and because he was smart.

“You seem to be as good as the rumors say you are.”

“By the way, just to confirm, remember what you told me before? You told me that if I didn't get rid of the people who were in my way, I wouldn't expect peace and quiet to return. That was a bluff, wasn't it? You wanted to create a sense of urgency that if I didn't take care of the problem soon, it would become even more difficult.”

In order to make me move, he had made a move to get Yagami expelled from the school from that stage.

“Ayanokōji-sensei was right, you were right to choose this school.”

“What do you mean?”

“It's just as you said. I'm going to enjoy my school life, and as long as we don't bump into each other during the first and second years squabbles, I'll let our relationship end here.”

He said what I wanted to say and the call was unilaterally hung up. A sneak peek at the cell phone screen revealed that the call was deliberately blocked.

This was done because they didn't want Utomiya to realize from their address or phone number that they were registered to an address.

“Have you figured it out?”

“Yeah.”

“When my classmate was expelled from school, at first I thought Hōsen-kun was involved, but recently I was told that it was Yagami-kun.”

Yagami's potential may be impeccably high, but he'd been caught flat-footed by his own conceit. He was only concerned about me and didn't see his rivals standing on the same stage. It seemed that Yagami was not a welcome presence in the first-year students' battle.

“Don't quit just because you've defeated your enemy, Tsubaki.”

“I know. To be honest, I wasn't attached to this school at first, but that's changed a bit. This school is surprisingly fun.

Looking at the exchange just now, it was clear that there were a lot of mixed feelings other than simply taking revenge on an enemy.

“So, we're leaving.”

“Senpai.” Utomiya, who was forcing himself to pull out the honorific, returned to the dormitory with Tsubaki.

“I should get back to class too.”

3

After finishing my conversation with Tsubaki and Utomiya, I ran into an exhausted Chabashira-sensei on her way back to class.

“Thanks for your hard work today. You were very active.”

“What's with the compliment?”

Chabashira-sensei was clearly angry as she turned her childlike glare on me without hiding it.

“Did you really hate it so much that we made you wear a maid's uniform?”

I asked knowingly, and she shook her head and looked down.

“When I went back to the staff room, my pictures were on the desks of

teachers everywhere. That's not all. I wonder how many teachers I've been accosted by in the short time I've been there, how many stories about my maid's uniform, how many embarrassments I've suffered. For the time being, I sincerely wish to be a shellfish."

It must have been a really hard time for her, because she felt the pressure so intensely.

"That's not for me to know. It must be symbolic of the teacher's popularity."

"I am definitely not popular. You've gone the extra mile."

If you really believe there was such a thing as no popularity, you were going to have a hard time in the future. There must've been many adults who appreciated Chabashira-sensei as a member of the opposite sex, even if they hadn't surfaced until now.

"That's it. The class won first place, so that's good."

"Not good at all. If anything, the top sales amount was a sure thing even if I didn't do anything."

"I see. Well, first place looks better than second and third place, doesn't it?"

"That's not like you to say."

She swallowed hard and held back, as if she thought there was no point in blaming me any more.

"Even so, I didn't think you were cooperating with Ryūen's class under the guise of being hostile to them."

"If one class fights alone, the maximum strength is about 40 people. But if two classes join hands, nearly twice that number of people will join hands though, not foolproof."

Propaganda doesn't necessarily have to go hand in hand on the surface. If you get a lot of people together, albeit in different forms, you can make a big show without spending a lot of money.

"Even the staff room was surprised. Everyone thought it was a real showdown."

Chabashira-sensei only mentioned the festival's success, but not Yagami's withdrawal.

Even first-year students who were not directly involved in the event should know about it as well as teachers, but none have spoken about it with me, who they think was uninvolved. As a teacher at this school, she was making the right decision.

"By the way, aren't you going home?"

"I have Horikita waiting in the classroom. Are you still working overtime?"

"I'm making the rounds of the school. There have been several reports of

forgotten items filed by guests.”

So even when the festival was over, the teachers were still busy cleaning up afterwards.

4

When I returned to the classroom with Chabashira-sensei, Horikita was lying on her desk with her upper body on top.

Chabashira-sensei and I looked at each other and decided not to talk to her. I went closer to check and found that she seemed to be asleep. A strong breeze was coming in through the opened window.

For a moment, I wondered if I should cover her with her uniform jacket, but decided against it. I decided not to because I knew Horikita wouldn't be pleased if she knew I had approached her later.

“Nn.....”

Hmm? For a moment I thought she was awake, but apparently not.

“No...”

She was talking in his sleep. I was a little surprised because it was a bit of a startling statement. Horikita must've been tired today. I closed the window quietly so she wouldn't catch a cold before heading back to the corridor.

“I'm going to let her sleep a little longer.

“Are you going to wait for her to wake up here?”

“She won first place at the school festival. I'd say it's well deserved.”

She'll be up soon anyway.

“You go home now. I'll take over here.”



“Are you sure? I'm sure the woman behind the scenes deserves a little more service than that.”

“I'll take it easy.”

“But Ayanokōji, don't ever think of a plan to humiliate me again, okay?”

“You still care?”

“This is a day I will never forget in my life.”

“Well, Chabashira-sensei, thank you for your efforts. Someday that will be a good memory too.”

“Don't get cocky, student.”

Glaring at me, Chabashira-sensei sighed and leaned against the classroom door.

Well then, I'm going home too.

[Class points at the end of the November festival]

- *Class A led by Sakayanagi: 1201*
- *Class B led by Horikita: 966*
- *Class C led by Ryūen: 740*
- *Class D led by Ichinose: 675*

Afterword

The year 2023 is approaching. It's too soon, Kinugasa here.

Eating ginger has recently become my boom, and I regularly buy a few kilos of ginger, grate it, buy a few kilos of ginger, grate it, and repeat the process, eating it with meat and vegetables.

I especially like the combination of eringi mushrooms, ginger, and lemon sauce the best.

Hehehe, I've revealed a bit of my private life that no one is interested in.

Yes, I did. I was disturbed because I had nothing in particular to write about, but let's move on to the main topic.

This story is mainly about the cultural festival in November.

I know some of you may have wanted to see the costumes of the other students, but please understand that this is a story for another time.

The story is progressing smoothly without stopping.

Soon the second semester will end, and we will enter the winter break and the turbulent third semester.

Although the number of volumes is a little larger than originally expected, the second grade version has finally passed the turn of the year. I feel that we are getting closer and closer to the conclusion of the story.

Will Ayanokōji be able to graduate from school safely?

How will each class end up in the end?

I think we will be able to see the whole picture little by little, so please wait with baited breath.

And then! Finally, the second season of the anime will start in July! We have been waiting for it for a long time.

I waited so long that I was wondering how long I had to wait.

I can't wait to see Ayanokōji and his friends in action for the first time in several years.

And since a third season is also planned, well, how can I say that I am filled with emotion. Whether you like YouZitsu or not, whether you are interested or not, I hope everyone will watch it.

I will watch it as one of those who have been waiting for the second season more than anyone else. Yay!

Finally, I would like to make an unusually serious announcement. Please understand this in advance.

The second season of the TV anime “Classroom of The Elite” will start soon. I have written a special volume, a volume “0” so to say, which will come with the DVD bonus. It was really hard work, and since it is volume 0, it goes into Ayanokōji's past. The illustrator, Tomose-sensei, has cooperated fully with me, and the volume and number of illustrations are the same as those in the main volume of the book.

That is all for now, and I will leave you with this afterword.

I hope to see you all again somewhere within this year.

Royal MTL Afterword

Yo, it's Prince. No matter how many times I write these, (questioning whether anyone even scrolls this far down), I never fail to get a sense of accomplishment and pride. It all started with one book, a few readers, and suddenly now providing translations for the entire Classroom of The Elite community. Not only that, I have a wonderful team behind me, and it's not fair to say I, or any one individual is responsible for RoyalMTL's. All the editors, translators, illustrators, and you, the readers, go into creating such a wonderful space regarding something we all hold a deep passion for.

From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you for supporting us, reading from us, helping us, with these translations. It simply would not be possible without everyone coming together to enjoy Classroom of The Elite.

Once again, thank you, and see you in four months.

As always, a shout out to Kinusaga (the author) for writing this novel in the first place, please do support him by buying one of the official copies of *Classroom of The Elite* somewhere down the line.

Bookmark/Favourite our website to keep updated on *Classroom of The Elite* translations!

<https://royalmtls.wordpress.com>

Credits

aejk#1968 – Editor
“it’s morbin time.”

Akuma#5279 – Editor
“Kanzaki hot.”

Alya#7028 – Illustrator
“I love rhy.”

Amadeus#5012 – Senior Editor
“Ichinose class will beat Horikita's class in the year end special exam. Ayanokouji will be 'stolen' from Horikita class, and join Ichinose. Best girl Honami will become relevant again. You heard it here first.”

BGS003#2745 – Illustrator
“Nagumo > Yagamid.”

Cast#5942 – Senior Editor
“Hey there, I really enjoyed editing and reading this novel. Definitely one of the best in the second year so far. Really looking forward to the next ones as well and the soon to be released Season 2 anime.”

DoSomething#5700 – Editor
“I love Haruka.”

Ebb and Flow#6122 – Editor
“It's so hard being a single mother when you have no kids and are a male bachelor.”

gaynesis#6795 – Editor
“Nagumo is the strongest ANHS student.”

Genesis#0172 – Editor
“I hope these 5 years of waiting fucking delivers”

Grimmfx24#0843 – Editor

“What If One Day You Woke Up And You Were A Chicken Nugget?”

goose#0823 – Editor

“Watch redo of healer.”

inoriy#2022 – Editor

“I believe people who make wrong decisions based on his or her emotions are the ones with the bolts screwed on the wrong way.”

JogoscomGugu#1893 – Editor

“I'm glad to have been part of this project (in fact, the experience of editing the untranslated book has already helped me write better in school), and I hope to participate in future volumes. Hope you all enjoy reading!”

noah.#4097 – Editor

“Thanks for reading!”

roninga#0892 – Editor

“I like men.”

Rhyamar#7433 – Translator

“Kushida is the best girl in ANHS.”

Schnitzel#2121 – Editor

“It all lies within the current of causality.”

[unknown]#9495 – Editor

“Imagine wasting time editing a LN.”