

衣笠彰梧
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トモセシュンサク
TOMOSESHUNSAKU

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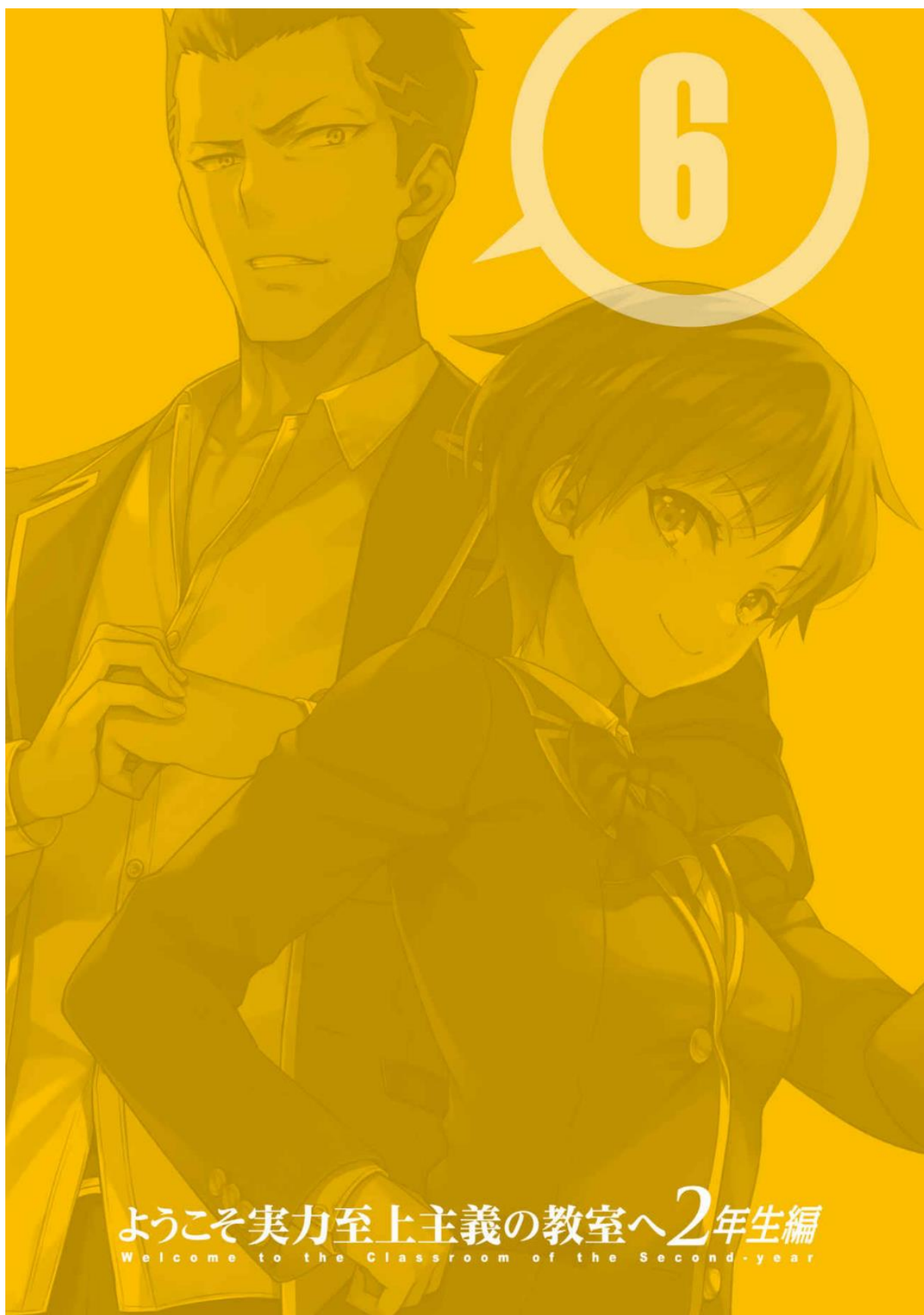
ようこそ**実力**
Welcome to the Classroom of the Second-year
至上主義の教室へ **2**年生編











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実力至上主義の教室へ
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口絵・本文イラスト：トモセシュンサク

Prologue: Akito Miyake's Monologue

I HAVE NEVER thought of myself as a special person. I guess I'm just an average person that has no special strengths or flaws. I've just lived my life as I liked, somewhat by inertia. I've done some bad things, and I've done some kind things.

I'm not a good person, and I'm not a bad person. If I were to evaluate myself, I'm just another guy. Ever since I was born, I've been walking around as someone who is neither of those things, just someone in the middle.

It was only when I got to high school that I grew fond of Archery. I was just watching it on TV and thought I'd give it a try in my spare time. Besides that, I just went about my life in a normal way, as if I were surrendering to the flow of the river. I don't pay attention to the big things, and I just go about my personal routine.

It may be a boring routine, but I've done it because I thought it would be easier. However... I didn't make any friends in high school because of the negative effects of this way of life. I wasn't lonely, but even still, I ended up making some friends through unexpected chances. There were only five of us, including me, but I felt strangely comfortable in that small group. I had a feeling that the rest of my school life would be spent in a relaxed atmosphere with these five people. The environment around me may have changed, but I was still me. That was the only thing I knew would never change. And then... one big change occurred in spite of my expectations.

I fell in love with someone.

I've always thought the opposite sex was cute and pretty, but I've never fallen in love with them.

I wonder when it started.

What was it that had made me look different towards Haruka?

What made me sure was when Haruka announced that she would drop out of the school in a unanimous special exam. There was a part of me that could not accept that we would be separated. Emotions, not logic, were my top priority.

I wanted to protect Haruka, even if it meant abandoning Airi, a member of the group I cared about as much as her.

I don't know if this feeling was justified. I gave priority to what I wanted to protect, not to what was right or wrong.

But I have no regrets.

“Will you go along with my ambition for revenge?”

The murmur brought me back to reality. Her eyes looking at me were the same as always. They were strong, straightforward, and dangerously colored. But they were unclouded, with a determination that showed no sign of hesitation.

I did not answer aloud. No, I couldn't.

The revenge would surely embarrass many of my friends and classmates. She must have seen through my emotions, because she laughed and turned her back to me and walked away. In the past, I would have just sent her off without a second thought.

Seeing her off was the right thing to do.

Yes, how much easier it would be if I could see her off.

I didn't know that falling in love with someone could be so troublesome, difficult, and stressful...

I...

No matter how many people are going to hate me in the future...

I'm not going to let my feelings allow me to let her go alone.

On this day after the sports festival, I had to make an impossible decision.

Chapter One: The Price of Victory

AFTER THE UNANIMOUS special exam, the week ended on September 20th. I woke up around 6:30 a.m., turned on the TV, and started preparing breakfast.

It's a new day, and it's going to be very different from the previous week. I don't have to get too presumptuous to guess why that is the case.

There are two main factors that cast a dark shadow.

Kushida's revelations have caused a rift in the relationship between classmates. The fact that Horikita overturned the premise of limiting the expulsions to only those who betray the class, namely Kushida, has shaken peoples trust in Horikita. The choice was to expel or not to expel, and I got everyone to vote in favor of expulsion with the promise that only traitors would be expelled. Then, using all the resources I had built up so far, I put my plan into action to push Kushida into a corner, make her confess to being a traitor, and then expel her.

Even though she was protected by classmates who wanted to believe in her and those who liked her; when she finally revealed her true nature and started revealing secrets, she lost their trust. She was one step closer to being expelled from school, but then an unexpected event occurred.

Even after knowing everything, Suzune Horikita pushed the idea that Kushida is an essential member of the class. To top it all off, she even stated that she would never agree to expel Kushida. Originally, it was me who promised to expel only traitors, and Horikita only agreed to it, but I was shocked that she insisted on keeping Kushida. With so little time left, the only choices left were to keep Kushida and accept the penalty of the exam, or let someone else leave the school and pass the exam.

As I said, Horikita's change in policy and my classmates trust in me for accepting it and expelling another student was greatly shaken. Some of them were genuinely hurt by the revelation of my true ideals. Others have become suspicious of me due to rumours spread around.

Then there are those who lost their friend and resent me.

The list goes on and on of the severity of the situation in the class and the reasons for it. However, the effects related to the exposure are not a problem to be panic over, but something that was planned from the beginning. It was an unavoidable and necessary expense to bring down the trustworthy Kushida.

Some may see this as a mere disadvantage, but I don't see it that way. If you look at it that way, you won't be able to gain any experience. It's a missed opportunity to grow. We were the only one out of the four second-year classes to have a student drop out of school. Even though the students were deeply hurt, in return, we gained class points.

That's still not the full picture. In order to grasp the entire picture, it is important to change the perspective of the situation. Don't just end with the pain, but look beyond it. We must assume that because we were hurt, we have the opportunity to strengthen our bond. In this way, Horikita's class can become even stronger. It is unclear how many students are aware of this, but we must face the problem and not run away from it.

The special exams for Horikita's class are still going on. The weight and preciousness of 100 class points. It's a good idea to look back and reflect on what we've accomplished to gain a sense of achievement.

Of course, we need to be careful because if we let it go on like this, we could get swamped. If left unattended, the wound could spread further.

I finished my breakfast and checked my phone with my toothbrush in hand. There seemed to be no new contact since I had seen her in the middle of the night.

“And yet...”

It was an ending that was not in the original plan, and I am still surprised that the special exam took an unexpected turn. From the standpoint of rationality, consistency, and objectivity, there was no other choice but to expel Kushida, who had persisted in taking down everyone and had thrown the class into chaos. I had decided that expelling her would do the least amount of damage to the class and allow us to shift our focus immediately to the sports festival.

In other words, from my point of view, Horikita's decision not to expel the traitor Kushida was irrational, unfounded, and a mistake. Even though I felt that it was a clear mistake, I supported Horikita's decision and steered her in the direction of expelling Airi. In other words, I chose to resign myself to an irrational failure.

At least, it's a choice I would never have made before coming to this school. So why did I accept it now?

It has become clear that Suzune Horikita had stronger feelings about Kushida. Something along the lines of a close friend, which might be an overstatement, but she was definitely a special person to Horikita. It was natural for her to want to protect someone who was special to her, but it would be unfair if she made judgments based on that criteria, especially when she had already established her position as a leader. It would be easier to understand if we take the point of view of Haruka, who was Airi's best friend.

From Haruka's point of view, Kushida's insistence on the option of expelling students was evil and should be eliminated. Horikita and I were also proceeding on the premise of eliminating that evil.

That's why I voted to expel Airi. Nevertheless, Horikita's favoritism cost me one of my closest friends. It's hard to convince me that I should start working hard again next week. But let's not forget that Horikita's choice was not an easy one either. In that special exam where she had to make a difficult choice, Horikita came up with a clear answer for herself. She took the risk of being put in the line of fire herself, and declared that she would not leave Kushida behind.

This alone is an impossible decision for an ordinary student. Even though she was prepared to be pointed at as unfair, Horikita believed that keeping Kushida was in the best interest of the class.

"Of course, even so, it is difficult to say that the current valuation is the correct answer," was along the lines of something she had said. Before the unanimous special exam, Kushida was clearly more valuable to the class than Airi. Even after the revelation, Kushida still had the upper hand, but the gap that had been so large had definitely narrowed.

In addition to that, Kushida herself has not changed her mind and is expected to continue to be uncooperative with the class. In other words, there was no guarantee that keeping her would benefit the class. Horikita's idea might not ever evolve into what she had envisioned.

That conclusion alone remains unchanged. Still, I supported Horikita's idea for one reason only. In a blunt way, it's because I want to see Horikita's growth, direction, and results. What will happen at the end of her actions that Ayanokōji Kiyotaka could not have chosen?

I wanted to see the chemical reaction that would occur in the class as a result of not leaving Kushida behind.

Will we be able to grab Class A by the narrowest of margins and prove that her choice was right? Will the class disintegrate and learn of the oversight of their choices? Or will it bring about some other unexpected change?

I think it's more likely to create a negative chain of events... When I activated OAA from my phone, I found that Airi's name had already been deleted from the class list. It was as if such a student had never existed in the first place. I put my cell phone in the right pocket of my uniform, then grabbed my bag and headed for the door.

Apart from what was going on in the class, there were also some interesting developments in the other classes.

Ryūen and Sakayanagi wanted to fight each other in the final special exam. Ryūen wanted to strip points from Class A to minimize the gap, so his decision makes sense. But what about Sakayanagi? There is no advantage to nominating the lowest ranked class at that time. I'm not sure if it's because she's in a cooperative relationship with Ichinose or because she thinks it's better to crush Ryūen now.

I wonder if the "promise" made between Sakayanagi and Ryūen all the way back during the island exam is also involved.

I guess I had better pay attention to these events closely. Either way, we have the best situation for our class.

I left my room at the same time as usual and headed out of the dorm. When I got off the elevator, I saw a familiar Horikita sitting on the sofa in the lobby, waiting for someone. She took one look at me, but didn't show any signs of getting up. But perhaps because there was no one else around, she stood up a little later and approached me.

“Are you waiting for Kushida?”

I cut her off before she could speak, and she replies while stumbling over her words for a moment.

“You seem to know already... Yes, I am. I went to her room a few times over the weekend.”

It seems like she tried to provide some mental support, but couldn’t even make contact with her. For Kushida, it must have been the most humiliating thing ever experienced in her life. She wouldn’t be able to bring herself to face Horikita right away. Either way, it was evident that Horikita had been waiting for Kushida to come down from a very early hour. What bothered me more was that I could easily see the lack of sleep under Horikita’s eyes.

“You seem to be pretty troubled about Kushida.”

“Huh? Oh, no. Lack of sleep is lack of sleep, but this is for a different reason. She didn’t leave her room once. No matter how many times I visited her, she never answered. I practically had launched a siege. I’m still staking out every now and then to meet her.”

“You mean you waited by her front door...?”

Even if it was only on Saturday and Sunday, it would be a big deal if she was staking it out from morning till night.

“Repeatedly pressing the chime and kept waiting. Still, she didn’t make a single noise.”

No wonder, there was probably enough food in her room for a two-or-three-day hideout.

“Anyways, we need to be aware of our surroundings, don’t we? There’s nothing to be gained if the rest of the class knows that Kushida is holed up.”

Nervous, she waited in the hallway for her to come out. It was truly an exceptional dedication. An ordinary student would have been touched by Horikita’s passion, but as expected, Kushida was one to show no sympathy.

“After what happened the other day, she can’t be the same as before.”

“Since you made the choice to save Kushida, it’s only natural that you would certainly follow through.”

Horikita nodded with a peek of determination, but she wouldn’t be entirely without doubts.

“Ayanokōji, how was your... weekend?”

She was, of course, referring to the Ayanokōji group. Since we had expelled Airi, Horikita would have seen more problems erupting than just the issue of Kushida.

“I’ve had some casual contact with Keisei and Akito, but that’s it.”

That, too, did not include anything specifically about Airi in the conversation. Rather than saying that we didn’t talk about her, it would be more accurate to say that we didn’t know how to talk about her. I’m not an expert on how to use apps. I wouldn’t be surprised if she had blocked us, even if Airi hadn’t left the group.

“Have you spoken to Haruka at all?”

“I couldn’t muster up the courage to get in touch with Hasebe-san.” After showing an apologetic look, Horikita bowed her head.

For Horikita and Haruka, it would be incredibly difficult to open up to each other and meet face to face. Rather than trying to repair the relationship, it would be more practical to maintain the group relationship instead of letting it break down further.

In other words, the best choice would be to watch.

Even if Haruka still holds a grudge against me in the process, that will come in handy eventually. It would be easy for the class if that happened, but we have to be prepared for it if it doesn’t. If she continued to hold a grudge against me, Horikita, and the class, there was a possibility that Haruka could potentially have a desire to harm the class for personal reasons. Her specs are not essential to the class, but it is of course a disadvantage to reduce the maximum value of the class by missing one piece that can be used in a reasonable way.

A concomitant chain of events, such as the loss of strength of Akito and Keisei, is also possible.

“No matter what I tell you right now, you won’t be able to convey anything to her anyways. We’ll just have to wait and see.” I told her.

First of all, I’m sure that this is not the place to discuss this. Confirming the situation with me, Horikita gulped quietly.

“I’ve changed your relationship by forcing you to make the choice to keep Kushida-san.”

I was the one who threw down the gauntlet on Airi, but that was a role I took upon myself. At least that part of it was my responsibility.

“There’s no need to apologize twice for the same thing. If you thought it was the right thing to do, that’s fine.”

“But you covered for me. No, that’s not all...” She spun the words carefully, as if trying to clear her head. “Even if I had induced Sakura-san to leave the school in that situation, I’m sure that Haruka-san would not have folded until the very end. In other words, the penalty for running out of time was unavoidable.”

Thanks to this weekend giving us a time to relax, she’s seen the situation clearly. How burdensome the role of pronouncing an expulsion is, and how difficult it is to carry out. The battle against a ticking clock is tougher than you can imagine. She was relieved to have avoided the worst-case scenario, but her eyes still looked somewhat anxious. More than a few were seeking salvation in the path where time ran out and no one left the school.

A world where 39 people were not missing. Horikita knows that this is the common coping method to avoid accepting reality. That’s why she holds back the thought that threatens to eat her out from the inside.

“That test, it was as if you could see everything from the beginning.”

“I didn’t foresee the future. I just went into it with all kinds of assumptions.”

“That’s what’s so amazing. You can make some images, but you can’t read through them perfectly. What the question is, what kind of statement will make the other person do what you want. It was all based on calculations.”

I’ve begun to notice more and more, albeit slowly, that there is a difference in the world I observe and the world I think about.

“It’s fine to reflect and analyze, but right now, we need to solve the class problem first, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. Right...”

“You can’t expect the same environment to be waiting for you as it was the other day.”

“Of course, I’m prepared for that. Hasebe-san definitely holds a grudge against me, and I’m sure Yukimura-kun and Miyake-kun feel the same way. Besides, there are students who aren’t convinced that I made the right move to keep Kushida-san.”

She said she was prepared for this, but it was still hard to say that she truly understood the severity of the situation. How long can you remain calm about the changes that the decisions you make lead to?

It would be fine if the changes were merely positive, but this time they are the complete opposite. This is a negative change.

She won't be seen as a contributor to the increase in class points.

"You should go to school now."

Horikita is too busy dealing with Kushida right now, so there's no point in having a long conversation here. This isn't only a dormitory where Horikita's classmate's live. There are also students from other classes that are considered enemies, such as Sakayanagi and Ryūen. I don't believe that we can cover up what is really going on with Kushida, but that doesn't mean that we need to willingly expose ourselves.

The class certainly gained a lot of points. Whether or not they can face up to the cost will be decided by how our classmates handle things going forward.

But before that... I'm not sure what to do about the problems that the class is quickly discovering we need to solve.

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When I arrived at the classroom, I immediately noticed that the atmosphere was different from the one before the special exam.

First of all, there were a few students looking at me. These are a high percentage of students that I don't get to know very well on a daily basis, but I guess it's not surprising. Considering the fact that I've been on the sidelines, or on the side of the silent spectators, I'm not surprised that they've taken this new approach to me. There are a lot of things they don't understand about my relationship with Kushida, given how I used to act in public. There aren't many students who can come and talk to me directly, even though they care about what happened.

"Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun!" In the midst of all this, Matsushita happily approached me.

"Good morning."

The stares from the students turned to surprise at my unexpected behavior. I've only had Matsushita wave at me from a distance before, but this may be the first time she's approached me during school.

Is she concerned about what happened the other day, or does she have another goal in mind? Matsushita has a high opinion of my abilities. The fact that I tried to get Kushida expelled and the way I handled it may have raised her expectation rather than lowered it. Even in the process of expelling Airi, Matsushita was one of the students who vocally agreed that it was inevitable.

"So, it's like we're finally moving towards the ascension into Class A?"

"I can't say for sure."

I dodged her light jab and backed off, she looked away as if she didn't need to take it any further.

"There may be a lot going on for now, but I don't think you need to worry about it." After saying that, she added, "It's Ayanokōji, so I'm sure you don't even care about it." She lets her true thoughts of me come out. "The way the class feels is outside of Ayanokōji-kun and Horikita-san's hands right?"

I'm not sure how I feel about that result, but it seems that Matsushita understands my feelings better than Horikita, or at least interprets them more accurately.

The problem is that Shinohara, Haruka, Mii-chan and Kushida can't relate to my line of thinking. The students I just named are the ones who were particularly damaged by the unanimous special exam.

Shinohara occasionally stared daggers at us, but it wasn't directed at me, more so at Matsushita. She seems to be unconcerned, though.

"Over the weekend, I tried to make something work out, but she canceled on me." She mumbles in a whisper, perhaps noticing Shinohara's gaze on her. "Girls tend to take a long time in these situations."

"That's tough."

"Well, it's us who are at fault."

It originally started when Kei, Matsushita and the others made fun of Shinohara and Ike as a couple. They had been badmouthing them behind their backs about their looks, so it was only natural for Shinohara to be angry.

“This is just an everyday thing. There have been times when it’s been more difficult.”

The relationship between the girls is something that the boys, who only have a superficial relationship with them, cannot know. I wanted to know, but it’s probably better if I don’t.

After that, no other student made an effort to come talk to me, and time passed by. Horikita also came to school late, but there was no sign of Kushida. Sudō and some of the other students tried to talk to Horikita, but since they arrived at school at the last minute, the chime rang and they had to take their seats.

Kushida, who hadn’t appeared in front of Horikita over the weekend, continued to stay hidden. The morning homeroom starts with many other empty seats. Chabashira-sensei came to the classroom and immediately noticed the empty seats.

“Kushida, Hasebe, and Wang are absent. That’s unusual.” We didn’t know the details of their absences, but Chabashira-sensei did. “Hasebe and Wang have notified me that they’re sick, so that’s acceptable. As for Kushida, I haven’t heard from her, so I’ll call her later to confirm. We’ll soon be able to determine if she simply overslept or if she’s too sick to get up.”

Although she used a somewhat exaggerated expression, it was probably based on the assumption that they were faking illness. It’s not unusual for someone to be absent for long periods of time, but this was the first time in the past year and a half that three students were absent at the same time. Up until now, Chabashira-sensei hadn’t made any comments when someone was absent.

This was different from the past, where teachers just went about their business. If this were a normal school, consequences for missing classes would come back to you. If you were to skip a week, it would affect your internal evaluation score, and might even result in you being left behind in class. However, in this school, one person’s responsibility is also everyone’s responsibility. They may not all say it, but I’m sure Chabashira-sensei understands what they’re worried about.

“Don’t look so anxious, a day or two of absence won’t affect your class points. It’s even possible for all three of them to be sick at the same time by pure coincidence.”

At this moment, she assures us that there will be no impact on the class. Her students must have felt a sense of relief at her clear words.

“That said, if this break lasts longer, it won’t be limited to that. And if it turns out to be a temporary illness, problems will gradually come to the surface.” She replied, staring at Kushida’s seat since she hadn’t heard from her. “Well, perhaps ‘temporary illness’ was a bit of an exaggeration, but there’s a limit to how much you can do when you’re sick without knowing the specific name of the illness. I’m hoping for a quick recovery if possible.”

The students eyes were drawn to Horikita. In the unanimous special exam, she declared that she would put her own ideas first and leave Kushida behind. Naturally, most of the blame was directed at Horikita. Even though she was receiving the brunt of the gaze, Horikita did not move an inch.

We can’t tell what she’s thinking, but there’s no point for her to expose herself without purpose and risk showing weakness. After looking at the situation, Chabashira-sensei coughed once, forcibly pulling the students’ attention away from Horikita.

“I’m concerned about the absentees, but we can’t afford to dwell on that. The unanimous special exam is over, and you must now turn your attention to the next battle.” She lightly placed her palm on the monitor behind him and brought up the screen. “I would like to explain the details of the gymnastics competition and the special rules that will apply this year. Please listen carefully.”

All the students assumed that the sports festival would be the same as last year

“Special rules... does that mean we’re going to have a different sports festival than last year, sensei?”

Chabashira-sensei nodded once in response to the question from Sudō, who was more enthusiastic about the sports festival than anyone else.

“It means that the new way this school should be, as proposed by the student council president, is being accepted, such as the island exam. It will be an attempt that strongly incorporates the idea of emphasizing individual ability, and the sports festival will be the embodiment of that.”

In the deserted island exam, Kōenji, with his high academic ability and above all his outstanding physical ability, performed very well, and in addition to receiving class points, he also received a huge amount of private points. It was a true representation of a meritocratic school. On the other hand, students who were not good enough were in danger of being expelled. This was a sports festival where the same emphasis was placed on individual abilities as at that time. If we were to accept only those words, it could be a tough test for students like Keisei, whose academic strength is their strong point, but who are worried about their physical abilities.

“I’m sure many students will be worried, but this sports festival has been adjusted so that no individual will be expelled for lack of individual ability, nor will any individual be the only one to suffer damage. Because not everyone is able to perfectly embody both academic ability and athleticism.”

Chabashira-sensei explained gently, perhaps to avoid a mild panic. Some of the students looked at each other in surprise at her softer tone that was different from how she was last week. Cutting the chatter, the outline and rules of the sports festival were displayed on the monitor.

[Outline and Rules of the Sports Festival:]

OUTLINE:

- *A sports festival for all grades, consisting of a variety of events.*
- *Time: 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. (with a break between noon and 1:00 p.m.)*
- *Students are free to participate in any event of their choice to earn points, compete against other students, and work for the class to get the highest score.*

RULES:

- *Each student will be given 5 points at the start.*
- *Each student must participate in 5 different events.*
- *Additional points will be given to the winners according to their events.*
- *Each time a student pays 1 point, he or she can participate in the 6th and subsequent events.*
- *The maximum number of events that can be entered is 10 per person.*

- *If a student does not participate or abstains from an entered event except for unavoidable reasons, he/she will lose 2 points.*
- *Students who have finished the events they are participating in should cheer at designated areas.*

Just by reading this outline and rules, one can see that it is completely different from last year.

“This will be this year’s Sports Festival, and these are the outlines and general rules. Unlike the usual one where the whole school watches one competition, we will have parallel competitions at various locations at the same time.”

“Nah, it sounds like we’re going to be pretty busy.” Sudō was baffled by the rough image of the day in his mind.

“Participating in the competitions and aiming for high rankings is your top priority, for which you’ll need to make a meticulous schedule. It will be a busy gym day if you plan to participate in numerous competitions to win.

There are two main types of competitions; The first one is called the basic competition, which is a competition that can be participated in by one person, and all the basic competitions have a fixed reward of five points for first place, three points for second place, one point for third place, and one point for participation. The other type of competition is called the special competition, where two or more people can participate. The rewards are higher in the team competition, and all participating teams receive equal points. While the rewards are attractive, they also have drawbacks such as the need for cooperation and longer time constraints.”

There is a clear distinction between individual and team competitions, in relativity of points. It’s a nice consideration for students who aren’t good at sports to not be at risk when they drop to the bottom of the standings.

“The rewards for team competitions vary depending on the competition, so be sure to check them out separately.”

The rules are simple enough once you understand them, but there’s a surprisingly large number of things you have to do. The initial five points and the five points for participation, a total of ten points, can be obtained by participating in the sports festival and completing the competition regardless of the grade. If any student fails to meet the minimum requirement due to some accident, the number of points will be reduced by 10 for each student.

If we assume that all the students will participate, Ichinose, a class of 40 students, currently has 400 points, and our class, with two students missing, has 38 students and 380 points. This means that we will be fighting with a handicap of 20 points. The reward for the individual competition is 5 points for taking first place, which means you need to take 4 more first places. It may not seem like much, but each person can participate in up to ten events.

In other words, it's impossible to get Sudō to work at full capacity and participate in 15 or 20 events to make a lot of points due to the risk of burnout. This may be a heavier burden than we think.

"It's up to the individual and the class to decide whether to pay the points and participate in the sixth and subsequent events. And the overall score at the end of the competition will determine the ranking by grade."

The monitor switches to show the rewards by grade level.

[Point Distribution:]

- *1st: +150 class points*
- *2nd: +50 class points*
- *3rd: 0 class points*
- *4th: -150 class points*

From the perspective of a normal exam, I feel that the fluctuations in class points are somewhat large. I wonder if it has something to do with the fact that it is a big overall event, and the fact that the currently announced Cultural Festival has relatively slow fluctuations in class points.

"These are the rewards for each class. From here, we will announce the rewards for individuals."

The rewards by class alone are motivating enough, but it doesn't stop there. As this was an athletic festival that was meant to test individual abilities, it was inevitable that individual rewards would also be prepared. This is the event of the year where you can shine, and you know your abilities better than anyone.

[Individual competition rewards - by grade and gender]

- *1st: 2 million private points or class transfer ticket (limited)*
- *2nd: 1,000,000 Private Points*
- *3rd: 500,000 private points*

Sudō shows his surprise at the reward of high private points. In addition to that, there was a new reward which I had never seen before.

“Class transfer ticket, no way...”

The class buzzed with surprise at something that was completely new to us.

“The school was quite cautious about introducing this new system. The introduction of protection points was also unprecedented, and this system is being introduced not too long after that. However, it is the natural right of the students who have shown their individual abilities to move up.”

The only winners in this school are those students who were able to graduate from Class A.

It's no wonder that if you're the number one student in your grade in a physical education exam that requires a great deal of physical ability, you're considered worthy of having the right to change classes. It seems that the sports festival does not fall under the category of a special exam. Originally, the number of private points needed to move classes was 20 million. In other words, there is one digit missing. Nevertheless, the right to move classes is given. The answer to this disproportionality may lie in the limited text of the class transfer ticket.

“Does limited mean I have to move and come back sometime later?”

Sudō seems to be confused by the word “limited”

“No, it doesn't, does it? That doesn't make any sense.” Ike yelled out from his seat.

“We'll give you the right to change classes. But that said, it's also true that you can't finalize that ability forever. Therefore, the term “limited” refers to the period of use. The right can only be exercised during the second semester. So if you don't exercise it before the start of the third semester, it will be invalid.”

Limited means a class transfer ticket with a period of use, so to speak. This makes a certain amount of sense when it is said to be equal to 2 million points.

If you can hold on to it until after graduation, it's practically a Class A ticket, but since it has an expiration date, you need to have an eye to determine which class you will eventually win or stay in. If you move from your current class to another class but your previous class ends up graduating from Class A, you would realize the ticket has gone to waste. Even if you didn't suffer such a worst-case scenario, it takes a certain amount of courage to use it. It's not easy to abandon your own class that you've been used to for over a year and a half. Even if Sudō won the right to do so, when he objectively thought about whether he would leave Horikita and his friends and transfer to Class A, he couldn't imagine moving classes.

Even though it's a high-profile sports festival, it doesn't mean that you're guaranteed to go to Class A with just one success.

We need to keep that in mind.

However, this is only for second-year students. If you're a freshman, you're still not that close with your classmates.

Some freshmen may abandon their current class, which they are not so close to yet, and move to a class where they feel they have a better chance of winning, or simply to Class A.

On the other hand, for the third-year students, it's the strongest idea to move to Nagumo's class. This is because it's the same as graduating with Class A. It's a big deal to be given the right to move classes in any grade, and to have that very limited choice.

It will be interesting to see how this will affect the students in the future. I'm sure the school will see the reaction and decide whether or not to offer similar tickets again. Overall, I think it's an interesting reward with an interesting balance.

"The students who come in first place for each gender will be asked to choose one of the two. Sudō, if you plan on making it to the top of the individual competition, you'd better think twice."

I could see Sudō's back stiffen. Rather than being paranoid about putting his friends first and jumping to two million private points, he should look beyond that.

Does he want to stay in Horikita's class, or does he want to move to Sakayanagi's class, which has never given up the lead since we started school? He'll need to face the future and consider it carefully.

"Now, let's move on to a more detailed explanation. There are two types of competitions: those that are open to the public in advance and those that are not open to the public until the day of the competition. In other words, there will be a certain number of events that you will have to take on the spot."

In addition to the basic events such as the 100-meter run and steeplechase, several interesting and unusual events are displayed: penalty kicks, basketball shootout, tennis singles, and mixed doubles or mixed gender doubles. It's a lot of stuff you don't normally see in a sports festival

"You may not always be able to participate in all the events you want due to the limited number of participants or the time of the event. If you force yourself to make a schedule that doesn't fit the time schedule, you may not be able to participate in time and may be treated as an abstention. Don't forget that you also run the risk of losing your points."

For those students whose physical abilities are superior to the rest of the school, it is necessary to have them participate in many events where they can gain points efficiently. In this sense, there is an aspect of using one's head, and luck or the ability to read who can participate in which events are required. However, if the sports festival were to be held in its current state, the students would probably panic. If all the students were to rush to a particular event on the day of the event, they would not be able to compete. Of course, there is no way the school wouldn't prepare for that dilemma.

"Reservations for participation in the open events will be released today at 10 p.m. on a special app. The earlier the better for all grades. Cancellations will be accepted up to one week before the actual event, but cancellations can only be used three times. The last reservation deadline is two days before the actual event, and if you haven't registered for the maximum of five events by then, you will automatically be assigned to an open spot." With that, a timetable that appeared to be an app screen was displayed. "Let's say you want to participate in the 100 meter run for a test."

The screen changes. This is an event for up to seven participants of the same grade and gender. Four races in total. You can register for any race, or join on the day if there are seats available. Participants must arrive 5 minutes before the start of their race to complete their entry. No need to wait until after the race. Scheduled start time of the first race: 10:15 a.m.

This means that the maximum number of men and women who can participate in the 100-meter run is 56. No matter how many races you participate in, you need to arrive at least five minutes before the competition starts at 10:15.

From the explanation that there is no need to wait after the competition, if you participate in the first race, you can start moving on to the next one in a short time. On the other hand, if you participate in the fourth race, you will be detained for a long time. Same competition, same reward, but you lose some time.

“Also, it is important to note that any student who is currently enrolled or has been enrolled as a club member at least once in the past while in school will not be allowed to participate in the relevant event.

Take Hirata for example, he isn’t allowed to participate in soccer, and Sudō, he isn’t allowed to participate in basketball-related events.”

To make sure students who are involved in club activities don’t have an advantage, they’ve added constraints. Surely, they don’t want to have a showdown between students who have experience in club activities, since it’s unlikely that any student can beat an experienced athlete like Yōsuke or Sudō.

If Sudō plays soccer and Yōsuke plays basketball, the other students will have a good chance to win. There may be a few students who devoted themselves to club activities in junior high school but did not choose to participate in them in high school.

“Anyway, it’s like reserving seats in a movie.” The words leaked out from Sudō, who was taking the explanation seriously, were right on target.

“I guess you could say the system is similar. It’s also made to reflect in real time who held which event and time slot.”

“So that means there will be people who don’t want to fight me and cancel, right?” Sudō muttered, sniffing and crossing his arms proudly.

“Yes, but those students will hit the cancellation wall sooner or later.”

Because of the number of people who can participate in each event and

the time limit, we want to hold our strongest events and specific races as soon as possible in order to plan our schedule. However, if you do so quickly, the risk of being targeted by strong opponents also increases. But if the number of times you can escape is fixed, you will hesitate to even make a reservation.

There is also a battle of checks and balances and probing.

It's as if the competition is held online before the festival even starts.

"In addition, if there are students who are ranked the same in the results of the individual competition, their private points will be divided equally and they will not get class transfer tickets."

In the event that students collude to create a large number of ties for first place and win a large number of class transfer tickets, the system will fail. I think it's a measure to avoid that. In any case, if you play well and get all the rewards by yourself, you will get a lot of private points or a class transfer ticket.

It's a reward worthy of the name of your individual ability.

Even if you don't plan on moving classes, you can use the 2 million points for a variety of purposes, such as accumulating a dream of 20 million points to set the stage for Class A.

On the other hand, students who are not confident in their athletic ability should try to stay in the compulsory five events. If they use their precious points to participate in the sixth and later events and do not win, they will lose a point. This is a big disadvantage in the class competition. However, it also depends on how you fight.

When Chabashira-sensei finished her explanations and left the room, the classroom started buzzing all over again with chatter about the upcoming festival.

"Okay, Suzune, let's get started with the meeting!"

The first person to shout out loud was Sudō. After hearing the rules, he suddenly became more motivated.

Yōsuke, and I naturally sat up and started walking towards Horikita. Up to this point, it was the same as usual. However, some of the students were beginning to look at her coldly. Doubts swirled around them, wondering if they could really trust Horikita to take charge, or if they would be okay with Horikita taking the lead.

"First of all, before we discuss this sports festival, there's one thing I

should tell you.”

She moved before the students could make the first move. She stood up from her seat and turned around so that everyone could see her face.

“During the special exam held last weekend, I forced Kushida-san to choose not to withdraw from the school, in a way that violated my promise to everyone. First of all, I want you to let me apologize for that.” With that, Horikita bowed her head. But there was also a strong will in her eyes as she looked up. “But as it turns out, I think I made the right choice. She’s someone who can help the class.”

“I don’t think so.” Shinohara was the first to deny Horikita’s words. She was one of those affected by Kushida’s revelation. “Now that I know that Kushida-san is a questionable person, no one will trust her. Right now, I don’t get the feeling that anyone is talking to the rest of the classes about Kushida-san but I’m sure that’s just a matter of time.”

Shinohara cut to an important factor that should be put on the shelf, whether you like her or not. The fact that Kushida will continue to exist as a classmate cannot be changed, and if things are to proceed on that basis, it is better to keep the inconvenient “truth” to oneself as much as possible.

In other words, going around telling the enemy class that Kushida is guilty in nature and has a dangerous ideology can lead to strangling yourself. It’s a simple story of the benefits of keeping quiet, but it’s surprisingly difficult to carry out.

In particular, Shinohara, who is protesting now, has been directly hurt by Kushida. It would not be surprising if her anger had already exploded, but for the moment she seems to be suppressing her feelings. It doesn’t look like Shinohara understands the benefits of keeping Kushida. So it would not be surprising if someone smart enough to understand this, someone like Yōsuke, would have urged her not to talk about it beforehand.

However, it is doubtful that this will last forever.

When the doubts and insecurities about Kushida reached their limit, they would break down at once.

“Hey, Horikita-san. Can you really say that you were right to stop us from leaving Kushida-san behind? Answer me.”

Shinohara’s words made Horikita, who had only been looking at her, snap out of her thoughts and give an answer.

“It’s not something that can be answered at this moment. It’s the same for me, Shinohara-san, and the rest of my classmates. We need to make our presence felt for the rest of our school life.”

“What the hell? I want an answer now. No matter how you look at it, Kushida-san is a distraction to the class.”

“Indeed, the unanimous special exam may have hurt you. It may have hurt Wang-san, who is currently absent, and Hasebe-san. But that doesn’t erase the fact that Kushida-san has been contributing to this class for a year and a half. Or do you think you’ve contributed more than she has?”

Causing major problems doesn’t make past achievements go away. She had brought the class together, taken care of their concerns, and helped raise their academic and physical averages. At least Shinohara personally hasn’t done as much as Kushida.

“I can’t blame you if you don’t take kindly to my deception and Kushida-san’s continued insistence on expelling certain students. But if I had expelled Kushida-san just like that, can you say that it would have been the right decision immediately? Can you be okay with the class average dropping and losing the special exam?”

“That’s... you don’t know until you try something like that.”

“Right. Then when I’m about to do something, no matter what it is, we won’t know until we try it.”

Either way, it’s still an uncertain future. It wouldn’t be easy to argue against Horikita with Shinohara’s ability.

“Can I have a word?” As Horikita and Shinohara stared at each other, Yōsuke stood up, raising his hand. “I’m a little stuck on something. If we’re going to get the most out of Kushida-san’s skills, we need to keep her secret within the class. That’s why I’ve been asking everyone in class to keep quiet about it.”

“I’m sure you have. If someone hadn’t given the instructions behind the scenes, the truth would have been leaked by now.”

Horikita was wondering the same thing, given that there were no rumors circulating about Kushida on Monday.

“But you never asked me to keep quiet, Horikita-san. Why is that?”

“Because it doesn’t matter how many gag orders you put in place against people who want to bring her down. It won’t make a difference if the

school finds out about it sooner or later.”

Regardless of the process, the students would now have a decision to make. Do they let their emotions get the better of them, make her true nature known, and get back at Kushida, or do they keep it a secret for the good of the class?

“I wouldn’t leak anything even if Hirata-kun didn’t ask me to. There was a chance for us to get together on our day off. We kind of had a discussion about how it wouldn’t do any good to leak this out. Of course, it would be a lie to say that I don’t have any feelings for the current Kushida-san.”

As expected, Matsushita was a smart girl. She was one of those who were affected by Kushida’s revelation, but she understands the disadvantages of spreading the word. They were exposed, so they expose her back. There is only a temporary sense of accomplishment to be gained by doing so.

“We will bring her back. And if I can’t, I’m going to take whatever responsibility I can.”

Take responsibility.

Even the students who had bared their fangs at his strong determination cleared their throats and gasped. It was no exception for Shinohara.

“Are you really going to take responsibility?”

“I chose to leave Kushida-san with that resolve. If something happens, you people will judge me.”

Akito and Keisei look on in silence at this. It’s not hard to imagine how they must be feeling as they listen to this story. Anyway, with a few strong words from Horikita, the conversation came to an end, and free time arrived. Horikita’s eyes were not on me, but on someone else.

That person also looked back at Horikita, and eventually Horikita left the classroom. At the same time, Kōenji, who was sitting across from Horikita, stood up and walked out of the classroom as well.

I was curious to see what was going on, so I decided to open the door a little bit and check.

“You acted like you wanted to talk to me about something, please dispense with the pleasantries.”

“There’s something I’d like to confirm regarding the upcoming sports festival.”

“I don’t suppose you’re going to ask me to participate with whatever plan you have in mind?”

“Of course not. I just want to confirm your intentions. You can at least let me hear those, right?”

To include or not to include Kōenji’s activities in the calculations. Depending on that, the strategy could change. When asked, Kōenji grinned and put his hand on Horikita’s shoulder. She tried to brush off his hand, but Kōenji’s arm didn’t budge.

“You seem like a very lucky girl, don’t you?”

I questioned back the truth of his words, somewhat grimly, as he kept his hand on her shoulder.

“Does that mean you’re motivated to finally help?”

“I’ve made some money from the deserted island test and the treasure hunt, but why would I ever omit a chance to make some more? As far as I’m concerned, there’s no reason not to participate.”

Kōenji, who had shown overwhelming power in the desert island test, was not expected to help in the future, but if it was a special test that would bring in a huge amount of money for an individual, he would be enthusiastic. For Horikita, it was icing on the cake. As long as she can get as many points as possible, she has nothing to complain about. And with Kōenji, there is a good chance that she could easily earn 10 or 20 points.

However, there would be some things to worry about in this reward. Horikita seemed to hesitate for a moment at that, but then stepped forward.

“If you get the right to change classes, what will you do?”

Kōenji is without a doubt the most troubled student in the school year, or rather a free spirit. He would never hesitate to abandon his current class if he decided he wanted to do so. Whether Kōenji would be good for the class in the future was another matter, but at least Horikita wouldn’t consider the loss of students from the class as a positive thing. Besides, he may take future special exams seriously, such as the deserted island exam and the sports festival, where a lot of money is at stake.

If that happens, he stands as a strong opponent.

“There is no problem on that matter. I don’t think the other classes are attractive enough at the moment for me to abandon my personal contract with Horikita Girl, so have no fear.”

“For now...”

In other words, depending on the conditions, a class transfer is always a possibility.

“As of today, you’re safe, so don’t fret.”

I’m not sure I would consider Kōenji’s words a conformation of safety, but I’m skeptical as to how many classes would want to bring in Kōenji. I’m sure it has its advantages, but it also has its disadvantages.

“Okay, I’ll agree with you on that. I just don’t trust you either if you’re swayed by whims. You’ll get enough points to take the top spot, is that correct in your calculations?”

“You can take it that way. I don’t have to team up with anyone, though.”

He was only going to earn points in the competitions that he could participate in individually. I wouldn’t be surprised if Kōenji got first place in all the competitions. It means he’s likely to get a maximum of 55 points.

“Are you sure you’re not interested in moving up to Class A?”

Kōenji answered the question with a laugh and walked back to the classroom.

“I guess eavesdropping is your hobby?” Kōenji, who had stopped behind me, asked.

Perhaps he had guessed from the slightly open door, or perhaps he had known all along.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried about what’s going on for the sports festival.”

“Let’s leave it at that, shall we?”

“Can I ask you a question, Kōenji?”

“I’m in a good mood right now, I’m simply exhilarated thinking about the points from the sports festival. You may have an answer.”

“You and Horikita have made a promise. But it’s not an absolute guarantee. There was a possibility that you might be cut off, just as you let Kushida stay to face the opposition of the class. Do you have any thoughts on that?”

I enquired into whether he was anxious about his promise, about if it would’ve been kept or not. Kōenji was in a position to be bullheaded and agree to expel fellow students, even though he had the purpose of extracting private points behind his back.

“It’s all a matter of calculation, you know. If there was a situation

waiting for me to be narrowed down to a final candidate for expulsion, I would vote against it before it happened. The talk about trusting Horikita Girl is also based on that basic premise.”

“I see. So, you didn’t fully trust Horikita.”

“I would never entrust myself to another person. You wouldn’t either, would you?”

“Maybe.”

Kōenji seems to be free and careless, but behind that there is also calculated thinking. And even though it’s calculated, he still maintains his freedom. No matter how many times I deconstruct each student and understand what I need to know about them, this man is the only one I can’t read.

2

“Ayanokōji-kun. Do you have any time to spare at the moment?” Just after the lunch break, Horikita approached me while saying that.

“Well, Kei and I...”

“We’re going to eat, sorry. I can’t lend you Kiyotaka.” Kei came running and forced her way in between us to stop Horikita’s advances. She spread her hands and put her palms up at her. “Also, I don’t think it’s a good idea to ask out a boy who has a girlfriend...”

“Yes, whatever, but it’s not me who wants to borrow him, it’s someone else. And it’s not a girl either. So would you still allow me to do so?”

She pointed her phone at me, and Kei peeked at the screen before I could.

“Yagami... Takuya? Who?”

“It doesn’t matter who’s sending the message. What’s important is the text.”

The text sent from Yagami to Horikita seemed to have been sent about an hour ago;

[Can you call Ayanokōji-senpai to the student council room during lunch break? The student council president has requested it. If it’s too difficult for you, please let me know and I’ll come to you.]

“As a member of the student council, I have a role to perform. If a member says they have something for me to do, I can’t refuse the request.”

Horikita basically had no choice and had to tell me that my presence was required.

“Miyabi Nagumo-senpai, it seems that the student council president wants to see you. Did you do something to him again?”

“I haven’t done anything.”

These days. I add in my mind.

“If you refuse, Yagami-kun will come here. If you still refuse, maybe the student council president Nagumo-senpai will come here. So, how should I respond?”

Horikita is just a liaison. Regardless of how I responded, she would just proceed with the process without hesitation.

“Sorry, Kei. If I ignore the student council president’s orders, the rest will be troublesome.”

“Crap. Well, if it’s the student council president, I guess it can’t be helped. Satō, let’s have lunch together?”

Understanding that she had no choice but to agree to this situation, Kei quickly ran over to Satō and the others.

“You switch up so quickly, *girlfriend*.” Horikita mumbled something that might have been admiration or disgust.

“I’m on my way.”

“Then I’ll report that to Yagami-kun.”

“If you’re exchanging contact information at the student council, wouldn’t it be faster if the student council president Nagumo contacted you directly without going through Yagami?”

“The only people who exchange contact information on the chat app in the student council is Yagami-kun because Yagami-kun requested it directly.”

I was convinced and left the classroom, and Horikita came out to the hallway along with me.

“I don’t know what kind of reason you have, but I recommend that you try not to make him angry as much as possible.”

I parted ways with Horikita, who had given me some advice, and I had no choice but to head for the student council room.

I arrived in front room and knocked softly on the door. Soon after, I

heard the voice of Nagumo in the room, and the door swung open. As expected, there was no other figure inside the student council room except for Nagumo.

“Yo, Ayanokōji. Have you noticed any changes in your life lately?” Nagumo asks me before anything with a slight smirk.

The only thing that is disrupting my life is this man standing in front of me right now. The pressure of the stares I receive from the third-year students every day has not weakened at all. In fact, even the third-year students who didn’t recognize me in detail remembered me as a matter of course. Without a doubt, I am the most famous junior in the upperclassmen. Even if they didn’t know the details, I was engraved as the junior who challenged and poked Nagumo.

“Nothing in particular has changed... or I’d like to say so, but well, I do have some issues here and there.”

It’s easy to pretend that I don’t notice anything, but if I don’t show that I’m overwhelmed, I risk escalating the situation even more.

“As the student council president, I can help you with those problems, you know?”

“It may just be a passing issue. I’ll ask for your help when I’m really in trouble.”

If I make him feel good to some extent, there’s a possibility that Nagumo will back off. No, that’s a bit too optimistic. The only thing Nagumo wants is for me to be directly defeated. There was no way he could be satisfied with this level of achievement. Even though Nagumo had a certain goal, he was not going to let this be the end of the conversation, so he changed the subject.

“I bet you’ve already heard about the rules of the sports festival, right? It’s time for our direct confrontation, Ayanokōji. Some of the events in the sports festival are open to all grades. You should fight me in those.”

“Is that strict discipline for juniors? I’ve seen Student Council President Nagumo’s OAA. Unless it’s a competition with a big luck factor involved, there’s no way I can win even if I stand on my head. The result is clear as day.”

Even though there was no other choice but to play the hand he had been

dealt, Nagumo would not be satisfied with that.

“You’re a funny guy Ayanokōji... You think that if you play yourself down, I’ll give up on you or something. Well, I can’t blame you for that. You have no choice but to take the low road given the circumstances.” It seems Nagumo is a man who is able to see through shallow thinking. “I know you’re not keen on this. I don’t want to waste my time on you either. So, if you win one match against me in this sports festival, I’ll let bygones be bygones.”

“One win, huh?” That was much looser than I had imagined. “You seem to think that one win is simple enough. Is it that easy for you?”

“You could say something like that but I wouldn’t state it that way.”

“What about winning all the games, isn’t that a better conditional...? No, it’d be a disgrace to the student body president if I confronted you with the condition of winning all the games.”

It wouldn’t be that mere pride was getting in the way. In fact, he’s using his pride as a shield to somehow drag me out into the fray.

“Who said I’m not adding a restraint? Regardless of whether you win or lose, you’ll have to participate in all five of my events, and if you miss even one of them, you’ll lose.”

“What will happen if I lose? Would the winning student council president be satisfied with that?”

“You better hope so. Otherwise you won’t see your troubles going away anytime soon, and you’ll probably get more calls from me like this. Or maybe you’ll have to worry about... other things.”

“We have a class policy regarding the festival. Can you give me some time?”

“Well, I guess that’s the only thing you could say for now I’ll give you a week to get back to me by next Monday.”

“Okay. If we’re done talking, may I be excused here?”

“Don’t be so hasty. Or do you have plans after this? Since I called you, you didn’t make any promises to be anywhere, did you?”

“Yes, well, I don’t have any plans.”

“Aha, that’s a relief to hear.”

Nagumo was talking while occasionally checking something on his phone. He had no intention of releasing me yet.

“Excuse me.” From the other side of the door, I heard a voice I hadn’t heard in a long time. Ichinose with a plastic bag in her hand. “Sorry for the wait, Nagumo-senpai.”

“Ah, don’t even worry about it. Yo, I’m sorry I couldn’t come with you to buy lunch today.”

“Don’t worry...” Ichinose trailed off as she suddenly saw me standing next to Nagumo.

“Oh, this? I’ve been having lunch with Honami every day in the student council room. I’ve been keeping my right-hand man busy.” Nagumo said while looking towards Ichinose and adding a wink.

I had thought that the chances of us passing each other or running into each other during lunch break had been decreasing, but I guess that’s it. If she was in the student council room, which was off-limits to normal students, I wouldn’t have seen her.

“When we eat and talk together, we hear about a lot of gossip and stuff. Isn’t that right, Honami?”

“Fufu, yes.”

“I told her that I have a visitor today. So what. Ayanokōji, how about joining us for lunch today?”

There were three lunch boxes peeking out from the bag. It seems that he was planning to have us eat here from the beginning while he finished his conversation with me. I’m sure it’s emotionally painful for Ichinose to sit with me right now. However, there was no way to escape, as the environment wasn’t one I could just walk out from.

“You said you don’t have any plans after this, right? That’s why you can chill with us.”

I was surrounded, and if it was an order from the student council president, it was as if I had no right to refuse.

I sat down in a seat far away from Nagumo. Ichinose, who always eats next to Nagumo, handed him a plastic bag and sat down next to Nagumo. She didn’t look at me, but started preparing his lunch with a slightly downcast look. It was impossible for Nagumo not to notice this unnatural appearance, and he must have thought back to the exchange on the boat.

“The rules of the gym festival are very different from last year, aren’t they, senpai?” I decided to break the tension.

“I’m rather grateful for that, man. If we had held the gymnastics festival with the exact same rules as last year, my win would have been too easy.”

The rules of the previous year’s sports festival were that the students were divided into two groups, the red group and the white group. Nagumo was in control of the entire third grade. This meant that he was able to intentionally make the students in the groups he didn’t belong to lose. No matter how much the remaining freshmen and sophomores struggled, their chances of winning would be zero. In the end, the conversation that used to take place between the three of us became a rally between Nagumo and Ichinose, and I silently carried my food to my mouth.



I finished eating with the two of them not even halfway through their meal, and I closed the lid cover and held it in my hand.

“What, you’re done eating already? You can leave the empty stuff there.”

“Thank you.” I replied, but Nagumo’s eyes were already on Ichinose, not me. Ichinose, too, had turned to face Nagumo, perhaps to avoid focusing on me.

“Excuse me.”

There was no point in staying here, so I left the student council room.

“A strategy to show superiority, huh?”

It may look like humiliation to the casual observer, but it’s meaningless if he can’t inflict psychological damage on me. If he wanted to achieve that effect, he should have prepared a few more members of the student council to be on the sidelines.

Then he could have at least labeled me as a poor, pitiful man.

Nevertheless, from the looks of it, Nagumo will probably continue to contact Ichinose in the future. It would not be surprising if something happened that would change the relationship between them. As I start to walk away, I thought about the effects of that.

Will becoming a part of Nagumo lead to the growth of Ichinose Honami? If all goes well, she may be able to gain enough favor and love to take over the position of student council president. This is the reason why he’s so confident... No, that idea is a little too naive. If Nagumo’s obsession with Ichinose stems from me, he may well cut Ichinose off at the last minute. If she couldn’t become the student council president after devoting her body and soul to the school, and the title was recommended to Horikita who made lesser contributions, her spirit would be crushed within a year.

In that sense, I wouldn’t underestimate Nagumo’s stand. I need to keep Nagumo in mind, but there are other things I need to do now.

I need to prepare for the upcoming sports festival, but I also need to prepare for the cultural festival that’s just around the corner. I’ve asked the people who came up with the idea, Satō and Matsushita, to take a break from the class, but I need to make preparations to secure staff for the maid café.

I was hoping to include Airi in my calculations, but she’s clearly not going to participate, and I don’t foresee Haruka participating at this point either. The powerful card of Kushida has also disappeared.

And even if I wanted to learn the ins and outs of this field, I couldn't simply rely on my classmates.

In the midst of the cracks in the class relationship, bringing up the subject of maid cafes risks getting people wondering what you're talking about, as well as causing information to leak out.

"Maid café...?"

It's a show that you don't know what to do with, but the budget you have to work with demands big sales. You need a strategy to win, and you also need to research what your competitors are doing.

3

The next day after the explanation of the specific rules of the sports festival, we had our morning homeroom. Just like yesterday, the atmosphere in the class was not very cheerful. The reason for this was the absence of three of my classmates. Just like the other day, they were absent again today. It's not uncommon for anyone to miss school due to illness or health problems. However, in the case of these three students, I think everyone is thinking that they are all absent for other reasons.

In the case of consecutive absences, it is usually necessary to go to the hospital in the Keyaki Mall to have a medical certificate written. On the other hand, as long as you have a medical certificate, it's not a big problem. In other words, even if you don't have a fever, the hospital will take care of you for a couple of days if you complain of any kind of ailment.

However, according to what Chabashira-sensei said in homeroom, none of the three students had been examined at the hospital.

Two of them, except for Kushida, have been in touch with the hospital, but it is unclear how long they will be allowed to stay there. The problem is if the three of them continue to be absent after tomorrow. Haruka's absence was related to Airi's withdrawal from school. Mii-chan's love for Yōsuke was exposed. Kushida was absent due to the fact that her true nature had been revealed. None of them are related to illness.

I wondered what would happen if this continued for three days, five days, or a week. It's no wonder that the school would start investigating and not think that these absences were just a coincidence. As Chabashira-sensei said, it will eventually start to have a big impact on the class points.

Furthermore, some cracks are beginning to appear in places that are not visible to the eye. Mii-chan is not the only casualty of Kushida's exposure. Ike and Shinohara, the two new couples in a relationship, have also been caught in the crossfire, which is a source of concern. In fact, they don't seem to be talking to Kei, Matsuhita, or Mori, who are said to have been bad-mouthing Shinohara.

It's hard to exclude the possibility that this is the same reason why Shinohara hasn't spoken to students such as Satō, although they weren't called by name.

Even though the groups they usually interact with are different, the class has always had strong horizontal connections among the girls. It would be obvious that this is now creating a complete gap. It's time to start deciding the members of the class to play team games to score points, but we haven't reached that stage yet in this class. If we try to divide the class into teams at this point, the internal division will be even worse. Knowing this, Horikita was unable to step forward. On the other hand, it is also impossible to bring about a rapprochement on this occasion. Not only Horikita, but also Yōsuke is well aware of this.

Time flies, and morning homeroom comes to an end. Shortly after, a message arrived on my tablet.

[I need to talk to you. Please follow me.]

It was a short message from Chabashira-sensei.

Not long after the teacher left the classroom, I left my seat as if I were going to the bathroom. The advantage of sitting at the end of the hallway was fully demonstrated, and no one saw me. As I rounded the corner of the corridor to the staff room, I spotted Chabashira-sensei standing with her back to the wall.

"It's unusual for you to call on me in this way. Is it an urgent requirement?"

For a moment, I thought it was about the three being absent, but it didn't seem that way.

"Yes, it is. There's something I need to tell you. It's about Sakura."

"About Airi?"

Already a week had gone by since Airi had left this school. Is there something that I need to know now?

“When she left the school, the school naturally followed the procedures. Packing up her belongings, collecting her private points. Well, that’s what they call the necessary post-processing.”

She was straightforward in her expression, but slurred her words a bit. It was probably due to her emotions about the fact that one of the students in his class was missing.

“Items pre-purchased in the school are basically the property of the students, and it is up to them to decide what to do with them. There will be no problem in leaving them behind or taking them with you. The official acceptance of the expulsion will take place in the staff room. In any case, an unexpected thing happened during that process.”

“Unexpected thing, sensei?”

“Yes. After the unanimous special exam, we found evidence that Sakura used about five thousand of her private points, and we’re still trying to decide what to do with them.”

“The private points of the expelled students will be stripped away, right?”

“Yes. But, as I said before, this can only be done after an official acceptance. However, the school believes that this is also an extremely gray area. For example, the school doesn’t allow the transfer of private points to a specific student.”

“Yes, I suppose so. If I were to transfer all my private points after my expulsion was decided, it could be a problem. But you’re saying Airi transferred five thousand points to someone else?”

“No, that’s not it. Sakura had...”

I was told about the unexpected use of her private points. In the midst of the explanation, I realize that I’m more involved than I thought.

“That’s why I thought I’d talk to you, the person involved. Of course, you are under no obligation to take on this case. If you refuse, I’ll handle it myself.”

Airi’s action in the very short time after her expulsion was confirmed. With a certain premonition in my answer, I decided what I should do.

“It’s not that big of a sum, please leave to me.”

“You mean you’ll pay it?”

“That won’t be a problem, will it?”

“It will be private points that you used for convenience, so the school won’t see it as a violation.”

“I understand.”

I got a statement from the teacher confirming that it won’t be a problem.

“I’d like to ask you one thing, is this also something you’re involved in?”

Chabashira-sensei asks, giving me a slightly probing look.

“No, sensei, it’s not. I’m sure it’s a conclusion you came to after thinking about it yourself in that limited time.”

Of course, even I don’t know the details of that right now, but I’m sure that as time goes by, the answer will naturally come to light.

“Anyway, even though it’s a small problem, it’s good news for me that one of them has been cleared up. I’m not all that happy about the situation in the class.” As a homeroom teacher, she couldn’t help but look worried about the class. “What’s with those eyes?”

“Nothing, sensei. It’s true that the class is unstable right now, as you said. I was going to forcefully correct some of it, but I guess that may not be necessary.”

“What do you mean?”

“For now, please watch over them. Watch each student grow and develop.”

Chabashira-sensei looked a little unhappy, but nodded quietly.

Chapter Two: The Inevitable Path

AGAIN, THIS CLASS stands in front of several difficulties at the same time.

It is not acceptable for a leader to simply stand by and watch as the situation deteriorates everywhere.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to do everything yourself, but if you're not good enough, then you're just idealistic. No, even if you have the skills to solve problems, you may not be able to do it alone. What we need now is to rely on our colleagues, to work together and to choose the right path. From the weekend until today, I haven't made any concrete moves to help. After watching the day's news on my phone, I decided to leave the school a little later than the other students who were out playing after school.

A man who had been waiting for the opportune moment came hurrying after me. I knew that if we were too impatient to find a solution, he would eventually come to me.

"Kiyotaka-kun. I was wondering if we could meet somewhere this evening...? I need to talk to you about something." He was a little concerned about his surroundings, so he whispered to me that he wanted to talk.

"I'm going to meet Kei in the evening. Can't we do it now?"

I didn't really have any such plans, but I lied to see what his reaction would be.

"That's..."

Of course, he won't say yes. As a club member, Yōsuke does not have free time immediately after school. Students will want to participate as much as possible now, as club activities will be temporarily suspended once the sports festival approaches.

"It's alright, I can talk to Kei about it, we can meet up later."

"Ah, thank you, Kiyotaka-kun."

"Just to be clear, you need to talk to me, right?"

I knew it, but I dared to ask back. Yōsuke nodded his head without hesitation.

"Yes. I think we should act quickly."

"Right. Anyway, if you'd like to come to my room, I'll make arrangements for the evening."

Yōsuke's cheeks relaxed and he smiled like a child at the pleasant reply.

"If it's possible, it would be nice if Karuizawa-san could be there too, but I'm not sure if she would be okay with that..."

"Kei too? I'm sure she'll be happy to be there, but won't she get in the way?"

"I have a few things I need to work out and I need her help as well."

There is a big difference between the presence of Kei, who has a network of information about girls, and the absence of Kei. What Yōsuke is trying to do, without me needing to ask, is all about Kushida, Shinohara, and Haruka.

"Can we then go to... about half past 7?"

"No problem. I'll be there without delay."

With a happy look in his eyes, Yōsuke walked off briskly to his club activities.

If someone has a major problem, the chain of asking for help eventually moves up to me.

"That's problem number two in my class."

Of course, this is an unavoidable aspect. It is inevitable that Yōsuke will have to face this kind of situation, as I have been the one to give him a hand when he has been in trouble.

It's not easy to destroy what you've built, but it's the inevitable path.

Either way, I'll call Kei and tell her to come to my room around 7.30pm.

1

It was 5:30 pm when I got home and I was patiently waiting for Yōsuke to come. I got a notification on my mobile phone.

[Can I come and hang out with you now?]

A message from Kei, my girlfriend, with a cute little cat stamp.

My meeting with Yōsuke is at 7.30pm, which is very soon.

[Why don't we have some food while we're at it?]

Before I can reply, a postscript comes. It seems that she wants to have dinner with me. In response to Kei's text, I sent a short message saying that I was ready.

“If that’s the case, I’ll have to make something.”

I could serve yesterday’s leftovers, but if I want to make something quick that Kei likes, I’ll go with...

I open the fridge, stare at the contents and think about it, when the doorbell rings.

When I opened the front door, I saw Kei smiling at me.

I was a little surprised, but I didn’t panic and invited her in. Now that our relationship is public knowledge, it’s great that I don’t have to worry about when to let her in.

“You’re early.”

As she takes off her shoes, Kei goes into the room with a familiar movement.

“I texted you before I got in the elevator.”

She said that she was going to come and visit me anyway, but that her plans were secondary to my own.

Once the cooking is finished, Kei sits down on the floor by the table.

“Because I’ve been in Kiyotaka’s room so much lately, I’ve become so used to it, it’s like my own room.”

“I’m glad to hear it. On the other hand, I haven’t been invited to your room.”

“Oh, yeah? That’s a bit embarrassing and... well, maybe one day when I feel like it!”

She didn’t give me a straightforward yes, but when you’re in a girl’s room, there’s bound to be circumstances. Let’s not pursue the matter too deeply.

“So, what do people say about our relationship, Kei?”

“The girls? I think they’ve been surprisingly easy to accept. I mean... nevermind.”

She tried to say something, but it was unclear. I was a bit curious, so I pressed the matter.

“What is it?”

“Well, you know. There is a so-called status attached to Hirata Yōsuke. A lot of girls question why I would let go of such a thing.”

I see. It means they don’t understand why she went to the trouble of switching to a guy with no status.

It's certainly not surprising that they would be so open about the comparison between Yōsuke and I.

In a way, Kei's been affected by it. She was supposed to be the one who broke up with Yōsuke, but it may be thought that she was the one who was dumped.

If the man you switch to is more or less irrelevant, you can't blame them for their suspicions.

"But that's only part of the story. Kiyotaka's reputation has been an *anagonobori* recently."

"The expression you're looking for is '*unaginobori*'. 'Anago' is wrong."

(TL Note: '*Unaginobori*' is a Japanese idiom referring to something rising rapidly, like eels do. '*Anagonobori*' is wrong because '*Anago*' refers to conger eels.)

I wondered if she did it on purpose, but then Kei smiled at me.

"I know that much, as expected."

"You must have an excellent tutor."

"Thank you for everything, sensei. And thanks to my secret private lessons, my grades are going up."

Gradually, Kei's academic performance improved and at the beginning of September, her OAA showed that her academic performance had risen to a 48; a C.

It means that she has finally reached the average level of knowledge as a student.

After a few minutes of idle chatter, I sat up and headed back to the fridge.

"I'm going to make an omelette, would you like one?"

When I asked her without looking back, Kei immediately made a happy noise.

"Eat, eat! Please make the ketchup a bit thicker, chef."

It's not the first time I've served Kei a home-cooked meal like this.

After we started going out, we had regular opportunities to have meals in my room. So far, Kei has shown little inclination to cook on her own, but

that's alright. If she wants to cook, she can do so, and it doesn't matter if she's a man or a woman. I don't mind cooking, and Kei is happy to eat.

Kei likes to talk and talk and talk, but I'm not the best at making conversation, so she tries to liven things up a bit. I think we have a good balance.

I get the eggs, ketchup, chicken, and butter out of the fridge, get some salad oil from the shelf, and I'm ready to go. I took out the frozen rice and started to defrost it in the microwave. In the meantime, I prepared the onions. I wanted to add some carrots, but unfortunately, I didn't have any in stock. As I put the onions on the cutting board and picked up the knife, I felt a presence behind me. Kei came up to me, snuggling against my back.

"What are you doing?"

As it is somewhat dangerous, I stopped moving and asked only with words.

"I'm just watching~"

Kei answered, but since her profile is stuck on my back, it shouldn't be possible to see what's going on.

"You can ignore me. I'll stay put."

"Right, got it."

I did as I was told and continued with my work. On the cutting board, I cut the onions into 5 mm cubes. While I was cutting the onions, Kei stayed close to my back, never leaving me. This time, I put down the knife and reached for the bowl to crack the eggs, but at that moment, Kei wrapped her arms around my waist and hugged me.

"What are you doing this time?"

"Hmm? I'm just watching."

"It doesn't look to me like you're just watching very closely, does it? It's more like sabotage."

She didn't seem to mind, although I did prod her that I was losing some efficiency.

"Oh, I'm so happy. Is there anything else that makes you happy?"

She murmured briefly, and her arms tightened even more in a hug. She looked rather satisfied.

"That's cheap happiness. Isn't there any other kind of happiness that's more amazing? Buying what you want, watching the TV you've always wanted."

“It’s not enough to make me happy.”

“That was a random remark, but you actually have that.”

“No, I don’t. Even if I did, I wouldn’t want it. The happiness I have now is enough for me.”

If you’re happy with this, I can’t say anything more.

“May I resume cooking?”

It is very inconvenient to continue in this position.

“Huh? What should I do?”

She looked at me and smiled, glancing at me and looking into my eyes.

“I’d like some kind of reward for being so quiet?”

“There’s chocolate in the fridge.”

“Buh. That’s not what I meant. There’s something off about that. It’s not that I don’t like it. I’ll be waiting quietly.”

Satisfied, Kei pulled away and sat down on the bed.

“Well, now I can concentrate on making omelettes for a while.”

Kei waits for the food to be ready, alternating between her mobile phone and the TV, and then the two of us sit around the table for a slightly earlier dinner than usual.

“By the way, about Shinohara-san...”

I didn’t ask her to talk about it, but she did and started talking about the matter with no prompt.

“I’m sorry about that, but that revelation really got to her and she wouldn’t talk to me.”

“That’s fine, I didn’t think she would...”

People have different tastes and preferences when it comes to good and bad looks, but generally speaking, those who are considered to be better than others make condescending remarks about those who are considered to be inferior. It’s not an uncommon occurrence, it happens all over the world.

More often than not, there’s no malice in it, they’re just saying what they think.

“Do you and the others hate Shinohara?”

“I don’t dislike her at all. Shinohara-san is a funny girl, she’s popular for making people happy.”

“I see. So that’s why she was unconsciously attracted to Ike.”

“I think so... we were laughing and talking about things that would hurt if anyone heard.” She murmurs regretfully, as if she is sorry. “Are you going to hate me for being so mean to her?”

“I won’t deny that others say bad things about others. It’s harder to find someone who doesn’t speak ill of others at all, to varying degrees.”

I don’t like the senior members of the club because they are too heavy-handed. I hate bossy teachers. It is good to have a place to complain about one or two such things. If you want to talk about appearance or your academic performance, you can do that too.

“That being said, we have to avoid bad gossip getting into the ears of the person concerned.”

“I know...”

“It must have been a shock to find out that the exception, Kushida, was the one who leaked it. Telling someone is always a risk.”

The leaked story from Kushida that they had been joking about her looks naturally hurt Shinohara deeply.

And that’s not all. Shinohara’s friends who didn’t have a good impression of her, her boyfriend Ike, and Ike’s friends, naturally don’t think well of Kei and her friends.

This time, Shinohara may go around prominently speaking ill of Kei, Matsushita and Mori.

Once the negative cycle has started, it takes a lot of effort to stop it.

“So, you didn’t just feel bad, did you? What’s going on?”

I’ve had some light explanations from Matsushita, but I have to hear it from Kei too.

“I misunderstood several times... but I tried to solve it through discussions about what I hurt. I’ve tried to talk it out, but there’s nothing I can do about it at the moment.”

“Unapproachable.”

“That’s it... but I guess it’s my fault in the end?”

It seems that Kei and her friends have tried to repair their broken relationship with Shinohara in their own way.

“So, how do you think we can make up for this?”

“You’re asking me?”

“It’s not a surprise. You’re sure to come up with a good plan.”

Kei also has the same problem as Yōsuke, although so far no breakthrough has been found.

“I’m thinking about it. Give me some more time.”

I’ll tell her that for now and postpone my answer.

“Listen, I know this is going to sound a little crazy, but can I ask you something?”

As I listened, she looked up at me with a curious look on her face and asked.

“Didn’t Kiyotaka expel Sakura-san based on OAA in the special exam? If...” When our eyes met, Kei choked on her words. “It’s alright. It’s nothing.”

“If you’d finished last in the OAA. You’re wondering what I’d have done?”

Kei’s eyes widened in an obvious way.

“As with Ike, there are similar grades but the difference in friends is overwhelming. I wouldn’t have expelled you.”

“What if I didn’t have any friends? What if I was in the lowest caste of girls?”

I started to feel uneasy and the words came out in rapid succession.

“That argument is pointless. If we use that assumption, then the person called Karuizawa Kei is a completely different person. If that were the case, then you and I would not have developed into the relationship we have now.”

“That’s... I see. Maybe... If I wasn’t dating you, would I have been expelled?”

Although she understood that it was a meaningless discussion, she couldn’t help but ask.

“I suppose you would if you’d had the ability you placed yourself in.”

“Oh...”

“I can understand how it might hurt your feelings, but it’s not you. That’s not who you are. You were bullied and hurt, and in order to turn things around in high school, you established yourself as an independent girl. You used Yōsuke to meet and date me. That’s what you are, Karuizawa Kei.”

When I answered that much, Kei’s lips pursed in obvious frustration.

“I’ll protect you, no matter what happens. That’s the right thing to do.”

“I see.”

I want it to be me who declares that I will protect Karuizawa Kei no matter what the situation is.

I learnt that there is no need for logic.

I laid her head down on my lap and shifted to patting her head to put her in a good mood. After a few minutes of watching her curl up on my lap like a cat, Kei opened her mouth, still in the same position.

“Hey, Kiyotaka. I don’t think it’s wrong that you cut Sakura-san. There is nothing wrong with that. But was it really right for Horikita-san to leave Kushida-san in the class? She’s definitely an obstacle, isn’t she?”

She is the one who has caused the rift in the class. Kei feels that the disadvantages of her not dropping out of school are significant. It’s nothing unusual, it’s a natural reaction.

We all have questions. But it’s not easy to speak up when time is running out. And in the end, you think it’s better to save yourself. It was around the two days off after the exams that the enthusiasm began to wane. Some of us wonder if we’ve done the right thing, some of us are glad we weren’t expelled. Others are terrified that they might be next.

“What does Kushida have that Airi lacks? Do you know what it is?”

“What? Study and sport? Kushida-san’s pretty good at everything.”

“For superficial reasons, yes. But that’s not the point.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a possibility that she will become an important piece in Horikita’s awakening as a leader. She could be a partner to Horikita, not Yōsuke or Kei.”

“Kushida-san will...?”

“I don’t think Horikita herself fully understands. She just trusted her instincts in a tight situation with no time to spare.”

“That’s what she has and Sakura-san doesn’t.”

“The perspective that only Kushida has, the thought that only Kushida has, the remarks that only Kushida has. These are elements that can be used with or without popularity. And that’s what drives Horikita.”

Although she is convinced of a certain point, Kei herself is not convinced.

Is that a natural reaction? This is an indeterminate future.

It’s just a theory that assumes Horikita was right in making that choice.

“She knows that she will be resented by Haruka and those close to her. But the results won’t come in a day or two. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

“But aren’t you more hated by Hasebe-san than she is?”

“Yeah.”

It was difficult to get unanimity in that situation when time was running out. No matter how many times Horikita mentioned others, it was almost impossible to make them unanimous. And the negative class points were an unacceptable reality. If that happened, there would be no way for me to help.

“It would be easy if we could say what the result is, what the conclusion is, what the answer is. But the reality is that you can’t.”

“You mean Horikita-san?”

“Suppose there is a hurdle in front of you that is so high that you may or may not be able to jump over it. If you try and fail, you might not jump over it, you might fall over it, you might scrape your leg, or if you’re unlucky, you might break a bone.”

You can imagine the hurdles that stand in the way of your ability.

“What do you think you need to do to make sure you get over that hurdle?”

“Ummm... lots of practice before you jump?”

“What if I don’t practice?”

“The only way to do that is to do it on the spot, right? That seems to be the only way anyways...”

“It’s the same thing. Horikita couldn’t stop running and tried to jump over the hurdle in front of her.”

“So Horikita-san failed the challenge and fell down?”

“No, you’ve just leapt and hit a hurdle. How bad is my injury, will I fall? Will I be okay or will I be seriously injured? That is yet to be determined.”

It was easy to avoid the hurdle. All you had to do was not fly and take short diversions. This is where I’m tempted to watch Horikita, though.

Once again I found myself wondering how I could have imagined this when I first started at the school.

“That’s how it is. But I’m still not convinced by Horikita-san’s decision. She broke her promise. And she even said she would protect Kushida-san.”

It is true that there is an aspect of intimidation, but it is also true that until now, discipline in Horikita's class has been too lax.

By throwing a stone here, we know that our personal safety is not guaranteed. Of course, their trust in Horikita will have been strongly shaken, but this can be made up for in the special exams ahead, provided they continue to pursue their goal of getting closer to Class A.

By the time we were finished talking, it was around 7pm.

I cleaned up the plates and went to the kitchen to wash them while I was at it.

"Hey, hey. Come and have a chat with me over here."

"I'm going to do the washing up now, then I'll see."

"What? Then it'll be half past seven."

She complained because that would be the time when Yōsuke arrived.

I listened to her and started to wash the dishes. She was quiet for a while, but gradually lost patience and started demanding again.

"Hey hey, come here. Come on.. come here? Can you come here?"

As she said this, she patted the bed with the palm of her hand three or four times.

"It's no use..."

I would have liked to have washed the dishes before Yōsuke came to my room, but I gave up on that.

As I sat down on the designated spot, Kei happily poked me on my right cheek with her index finger.

"You're so soft and smooth for a boy. What do you do?"

"It's just lotion."

Considering the strain on teenage skin, I believe that further care is necessary than the bare minimum.

"Hmmm..."

Although she was convinced, she didn't really care, she just wanted to touch me and wouldn't stop poking me on the cheek.

I grabbed Kei's hand and pulled her to me and took her lips.

I thought she would be surprised, but she seemed to have been waiting for it and laughed nervously.

"I've been waiting for you to make a move since I came to your room today."

"So that's it."

I have to say I'm still a bit naive in that area. Our lips met again and again in near silence. The repeated kisses tasted like an omelette, a rather unusual experience.

"Love..."

I gently held Kei in my arms and was met with a quiet silence. It was a pleasant moment, not an awkward one.

For how many minutes did we just hug each other?

As if to break the silence, the chime of the door rang. Suddenly jolted back to reality, Kei hurriedly distanced herself in a moment of sudden embarrassment. There is no hurry, the door is locked, but well... I know the feeling. After allowing Kei some time to settle down, we both greeted Yōsuke. Yōsuke, who was still in uniform, came to visit me in my room.

"I went to Keyaki Mall with my senpais after school."

That's what Yōsuke reports when he realizes I've been focusing on the uniform.

"Come in, come in, come in." Yōsuke smiled happily at Kei, who acted as if it were her own room.

I knew that he was happy to see Kei's cheerfulness and purity now because he had watched over her more than anyone else since she started school.

"Pardon the intrusion."

After carefully arranging his shoes, he came into the room and sat down as I served him tea.

"Thank you."

"So what do you want to talk about?"

I encouraged him to talk to me, as it is no use holding them back for too long. Of course, the content is all very predictable.

"Yes. It's about our class. I'm sure you're well aware of this, but I thought it might be dangerous to go into the sports festival like this. The girls, in particular, may find it difficult to work together."

"I'm sure Kei-san knows more about this than I do," Yōsuke said, looking at her.

"I was talking to Kiyotaka-kun earlier about what happened with Shinohara-san. To be honest, no one's really focused on the sports festival at the moment."

Because they're just starting to reform their relationship as friends.

“So I was wondering if you had any good ideas. I need your help, Kiyotaka.”

The same Kei who came to me for help earlier also gives me that look. If so, don't hesitate to talk to me.

“Yōsuke, did you ask anyone else for this advice before me?”

“What? No, this is the first time I've asked anyone. I didn't want to talk about it inadvertently, because I didn't want people to know that I was trying to fix it.”

It would be nice if they were willing to help him, but if they knew that he was trying to befriend them, they might be wary of him. There is a danger that people will think that there is an ulterior motive behind the kind words.

“And why did you ask me?”

“I thought I'd like some direction.”

“So, from now on, the first person to talk to is me, but not the leader of the class, Horikita?”

“But I think Horikita-san has her hands full with Kushida-san's case right now. To bring up the issue of other classmates here and now is...”

“If I had been dealing with Kushida, would you have approached Horikita?”

“I don't know about that... I might have ended up speaking to Kiyotaka-kun about it anyways.”

He imagined what it would be like, and then he admitted it honestly.

“Horikita-san is doing a great job. But I knew that Kiyotaka-kun would be able to see the big picture and make the right decisions. I just think you can give me the right answer, that's all.”

“I told you that at the last special exam. You can't always rely on me. Even if you're unsure, you have to go through this process of talking to Horikita first.”

“But...”

“It's a burden. You don't always get a solution. That's why we don't rely on any one person. Do you really think that makes Horikita a leader in the true sense of the word? How about a leader like Ryūen, Sakayanagi or Ichinose? Don't you think they would be the first to raise concerns, even in the midst of dealing with other issues?”

The important thing is to rely on each other and to be relied on. Horikita and the class are about to grow through success and failure.

“Failure is an experience. Everyone has started out with a problem. Of course Horikita isn’t at a high stage yet, but it’s only due to a huge lack of experience.”

“I get that, but...”

The process of discussing and searching for different solutions should not be omitted before deciding on a solution.

“I’d like you to bring it up with me only after she answers first, even though she has her hands full with Kushida.”

“I see what you mean, Kiyotaka-kun.”

Taking it seriously and nodding a few times, Yōsuke processed the meaning of the words in his mind.

“It’s important to gain experience in failure, but this isn’t the same as a test score. I don’t think it’s just because you got a bad score that you should try harder next time. It’s an important thing that deals with the student’s mind. If a cracked relationship is broken by an immature decision, that’s a problem that can’t be undone.”

This area is quintessential to Yōsuke. He didn’t bring up the subject just for the sake of getting an easy answer.

“It’s the right decision. But I think you’re reading into it a little too much. It’s probably true that there are cracks in the friendship between classmates. And it’s certainly true that frictions and quarrels between friends, or bad language, can lead to irreversible problems.”

If it escalates from bad language to harassment, ignoring, and bullying, it can create the worst case scenario.

But that’s really the worst case.

“Kei-san, is your feud with Shinohara in a truly dangerous state?”

“Hmmm... when you put it that way, well, it’s an extension of the fight, isn’t it? It’s hard for me to say anything bad about it because I’m in the position of the assailant. I’m not harassing her or anything, and I don’t think too many girls even hold negative feelings about Shinohara-san.”

By taking it too seriously, she was stirring up unnecessary anxiety. That was my view.

“Besides, you’re not going to let Horikita solve this alone, are you?”

“Of course not. If there’s anything I can do, I’ll do it.”

“Good then. I’ve calculated that if the two of us work together with Horikita at the center, we can get through most things.”

However, these words alone wouldn't be enough to completely remove his anxiety, so I'll add something important. "Of course, there will be things that can't be solved even if you cooperate with Horikita. In that case, I'll lend a hand."

If the backup was perfect, both Yōsuke and Kei would be able to act without hesitation, and they looked convinced, but Yōsuke still had something on his mind, and his expression wasn't completely clear. We exchanged information for a while, and when 8:00 p.m. approached, I urged them to leave.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to talk to you alone for a bit." On his way out, Yōsuke, who felt he couldn't leave it like that, cut me off.

"Okay. I'll go home first then." Said Kei as she put her shoes on and waved goodbye.

After the door closes, Yōsuke looks back again.

"Kiyotaka-kun. Tomorrow, I'll bring your story to Horikita-san. However, do you have a clear path in mind for us at this point?"

"Honestly, Yōsuke, I don't have any ideas for an immediate solution to the Haruka and Kushida matters. I'm hoping that you guys can discuss it and lead us to the upper hand."

"So you're saying that's not the case regarding... Mii-chan?"

"In a manner of speaking. It will take time, but we have a chance. If you're in a hurry, there's always the possibility of forcing rough treatment."

"Rough treatment? If there's anything we can do, I think we should do it."

Yōsuke reacts to the mention of the girl who likes him with the same attitude as the others.

"I told you it's a rough treatment. I don't recommend it."

"What kind of method is that?"

"That would be for Yōsuke to go see Mii-chan and respond to her feelings."

Yōsuke reacts in a way that I never thought he would.

"Actually, I like you too, Mii-chan. I want you to go out with me. If we can get that kind of conversation going, she'll come to school tomorrow, right?"

I was a little reluctant to suggest it, but it was the only solution I could come up with right now.

“If this wasn’t Yōsuke, I wouldn’t be talking about this kind of plan either. But I thought it might be possible for you, since you’ve been asked by Kei to lie about your relationship with her.”

“Indeed.” Yōsuke muttered, but his expression did not brighten. “The reason why Kei-san and I ostensibly agreed to go out is because neither of us had any romantic feelings in between. It’s not the same as pretending to respond to Mii-chan’s feelings and going out with her. I’ll only hurt her deeply later.”

“I don’t mean to endorse this idea, but, you’re right, it’s not the same. We don’t know at what stage Mii-chan fell in love with you, but we can’t deny the existence of other students, including anyone else, who had romantic feelings for you right from the start of school. In other words, at the cost of protecting you from bullying by going out with Kei, there might have been girls who were hurt because they were indirectly rejected because of that lie.”

“That’s...”

If Kei and Yōsuke were seriously dating, it would be a legitimate reason. But since they weren’t, there wasn’t much difference in what they were doing, even though the circumstances were different.

“What if Mii-chan came crying and clinging to you right now and told you that she can’t go to school anymore unless you go out with her? Would you be able to say no to her?”

Yōsuke choked at my words. He probably wouldn’t be able to make such a choice.

“If you can’t say no, there are two choices you can make. You can either tell her that you don’t like her and go out with her, or you can lie and say that you liked her too and go out with her.”

If true love can grow in the midst of all this, it can be brought to the best possible end.

“I still don’t think that’s what I should do.”

I can understand what he’s saying here, but it’s the emotional side still getting in the way.

“It’s just a rough, forced solution. It’ll take time, but we’re at the stage where we’re planting the seeds.”

“I understand. I’ll see what I can do. Then again, Kiyotaka-kun is really strong. You don’t seem to be dragging up the fact that Sakura-san dropped out of school in the slightest.”

There was no sign of sadness or anger from the quietly speaking Yōsuke.

“I still have the feeling of that time in my... hands.” He looks down at his outstretched hands and stares at the palms of them. “It’s the sensation of my fingertips touching the tablet and pressing my approval. I can’t forget it.”

Yōsuke, who works day and night for his classmates, doesn’t show much weakness. But he’s struggling to put the blame for Airi’s expulsion on the same level as me.

“I know what you were thinking at that time. There was no way you would have agreed to expel Airi, who had done no harm in the exam. But still, you persevered. You could have said at the last minute that you didn’t agree with it, but you restrained yourself from saying it.”

If he complained about the situation and made them face it, our classmates would regain their composure. A broader perspective, narrowed by the pressure of time running out, would have made unanimity impossible.

“Our class must move up to Class A. That’s the most important thing, I told myself.”

You know it in your head, but you can’t convince yourself of it. I guess that’s about it.

“We have three students that are absent. I wonder how long this will continue. Seeing the reality that students with lower grades are being cut, it really did induce some fear within the students. The cheerful class we had last week is still like a lie, isn’t it?”

Even though they’re working towards a solution, they’re probably still suffering and answering to themselves about the same thing over and over again.

“I’m well aware that you’re not happy with the choices Horikita and I have made. But we have to accept that. We just have to understand how good our class is right now and bite the bullet. That’s why Horikita needs a lot of support. Sometimes you choose the right path, and sometimes you choose the wrong path. And there will be times when you choose an uncertain path.”

Even if he told them, not everything could be digested in Yōsuke’s mind.

“I-I-I should have chosen to r-run out of time... and...” Yōsuke’s shoulders shake slightly as he can no longer hold it in.

It’s not like Yōsuke wants to think about sacrificing someone else. But the fact that he was able to make a decision in that situation is a definite sign of growth.

“Am I getting stronger, or have I broken down? If it happens again, I’m afraid I won’t know what decisions I’ll make.”

I couldn’t see his face because he was looking down, but he rubbed his eyes once with his sleeve before raising his head.

“I’m sorry for being so weak, even though I’m sure you’re in more pain, Kiyotaka-kun.”

“It’s okay. Both Horikita and I were saved by Yōsuke many times in the special exam. It’s going to be a much tougher battle from now on. I hope you will continue to lend your strength to the class.” Yōsuke nodded. He would still be heartbroken, but he still smiled slightly.

Yōsuke reached for the front door, but stopped himself.

“Thank you for everything today.”

“Do you hold a grudge against me for expelling Airi?”

Unlike the other students, Yōsuke didn’t show it outwardly, but it wouldn’t be surprising if he did.

“If you only look at that point, yes, I do. But I believe in you.” He thought to himself as he put it into words, but then added more as if he wasn’t convinced. “No. I want to believe in you.”

If it was a kind of delusional belief, Yōsuke’s thoughts would be dangerous. However, there is definitely a will behind his eyes. A firm demand that I’m worthy to be believed in, and I wouldn’t ever betray him .

“Well then, good night.”

I suppose I could have removed some of Yōsuke’s burden, but on the contrary, I might have given him a new one. It would be convenient if I could take this opportunity to thoroughly drain the negative emotions out of him.

I’m not sure how much of an effect this will have, but I’m sure we’ll have to follow through step by step.

2

The next day, the three empty seats were still there.

Of course, the chaos in the classroom still hadn't calmed down. The first prerequisite for a fundamental solution was for the three of them to come to school.

"Hey. Wanna go to the bathroom with me?"

Sudō called out to me while I was sitting at my desk touching my phone, waiting for my next class. An unusual invitation. He said he was going to the restroom, but his face was serious. The fact that he wanted to use the restroom was just an excuse, and he had a purpose beyond that.

It's the same as Yōsuke and Kei, he wants my opinion on something.

"Ah. I guess so."

There was no reason to refuse, so I left my seat and discreetly left the classroom in the flow of the two of us going to the bathroom. Thanks to my convenient seating place, it wasn't much of an issue. However, one student soon followed us.

"Sudō-kun. I'd like to talk to you for a minute, if that's okay."

She seemed to have some business with Sudō and was trying to time his appearance in the hallway.

"What is it, Onodera?"

Onodera stopped talking when she saw me standing next to Sudō.

"Ah, you're with Ayanokōji-kun. Well I needed to tell you about something so..."

It seems like my presence was an unwelcome one. However, since it was Sudō who asked me out during the break, I had no choice but to stay.

"We're both going to the bathroom. Can't this wait?"

"Well, I don't know." She looks a little lost, as if she doesn't want me to hear what he has to say.

"Can I wait here? I want to talk to you as soon as possible, if that's okay with you..."

Onodera decided that if we were going to the bathroom, she would just wait for us, but this time Sudō looks embarrassed. If he had something to discuss with me, it wouldn't take more than a minute or two.

"Well, I'll ask you now. Ayanokōji can keep waiting."

Just when I was ready to talk later, I was confused by Sudō's unexpected response.

Onodera looked somewhat resistant, but she scratched the back of her head lightly and cut to the chase.

"The individual rewards for this sports festival are evaluated by gender, right? I'm thinking that Sudō-kun will naturally go for the first place among men, is that correct?"

"Of course. This sports festival is the biggest chance for me to shine." He answers confidently, which makes sense.

Onodera nodded in satisfaction at his powerful reply.

"Actually, I have a lot riding on this sports festival. Being first among the girls is a step towards Class A. It's not often that I get a chance to compete in something I'm good at."

She is an accomplished swimmer, but she also showed her sprinter side at last year's sports festival. Her OAA physical ability is also near perfect, and she is a student with an extraordinary talent for sports in general.

Onodera is expected to be good enough to adapt and win in a variety of competitions.

"I think you might be able to get first place. I'm seriously rooting for you."

"Thanks. But even if you can win some individual competitions, there's no guarantee that you'll get first place in everything, right?"

"Why not, if I keep winning first place..."

Sudō's idea of thinking that only taking first place would be enough wasn't wrong, but in reality, they might end up losing in unexpected ways.

"It's because of the high score of the team competition, right?"

I supplemented, and Onodera gave me another hard look, but nodded in agreement. Onodera seemed to be harboring a kind of distrust towards me.

The other day at the unanimous special exam, I cut off my own group of friends. No wonder some of the students reacted this way.

"Well, that's for sure. If there's a guy who takes first place in every team competition, he might be bad. But even so, it's not so easy to form a team, is it? If the teams are unbalanced, we could end up slipping and losing. I don't like the idea of having five or six people in a team fight."

If everyone was on the same level as him, Sudō would be satisfied. However, in reality, there are students who are dragging their feet. As a result, it is quite possible that they will lose the competition because of it.

That's what the struggle in a group competition is all about.

"Yeah. I'm not thinking about a large number of people either. But... What if we can participate in a competition with two people who are sure to win? Moreover, there are some competitions that can be participated in only by pairs of men and women, right?"

At this point, Sudō also starts to guess the purpose of why Onodera was talking to him about.

"Sudō-kun and I will have no trouble cooperating with each other. If we're going to team up, I'd like to choose the best partner possible, don't you think?"

It's a class take-away, and it won't be a detriment to trying to get first place in the gender division.

"So you're saying I'm the best partner for you... I guess I am."

"That's what I mean. Unless, of course, you have an objection to it, Sudō-kun. The class is in a bit of a bad mood right now, isn't it? Sakura-san has been expelled, Hasebe-san and Wang-san are also absent." She turned her gaze to me for a moment, but then quickly turned it back to Sudō. "That's why we have to lead the class."

Sudō didn't feel bad about the invitation based on the recognition of his abilities, but he wasn't very crisp.

"Am I not strong enough?"

"No, that's not it. I'm not gonna deny that you have game."

Even though he had absolute faith in her physical abilities, there seemed to be something else that bothered him.

"You don't want to be paired with anyone other than Horikita-san?"

"W-what? No no, that's not true..." He looked uncomfortable at Onodera's point.

Pairing up with a partner you like. It's true that this may be very important to Sudō in addition to his ability. As long as he can't participate in swimming competitions, there won't be much difference between Horikita and Onodera.

"You know, there's Kōenji. I hate to admit it, but he's better than me."

“That may be true about your ability. But I don’t trust Kōenji-kun. I hate him more than anything.”

Onodera clearly rejects Kōenji. Her appeal to Sudō is genuine, but how will Sudō respond?

“What are you going to do... if I say no?”

“If there’s anyone else in the class who has the ability and seems trustworthy, it’s... well, only Hirata-kun, but I’m not going to ask him to be a pair, you know? I don’t want to be misunderstood in any way.

Being paired with Yōsuke, who was immensely popular with the girls, would be more than just one or two teases.

“So, if Sudō-kun says no, then it’s like you’re going to go as far as you can on your own?” She doesn’t threaten him in the slightest, but simply states the facts.

The first place of the school year is in jeopardy, but I can imagine her earning a solid amount of points.

The decision between Onodera and Horikita upset Sudō, but when he saw Onodera’s determination, he immediately regained his composure. It was because he realized that he had been trying to refuse Onodera’s invitation for some silly reason.

“I’m down for it. Let’s pair up, and win this thing, yeah?”

“Really?”

“For sure. Let’s use our power to carry this class.”

With that, Sudō immediately extended his arm and asked Onodera to shake his hand. After staring at it, Onodera also responded to the handshake strongly.

“I like your style, Sudō-kun. Let’s definitely take first place in the male and female categories together.”

Satisfied with the conclusion of the contract, Onodera heads back to the classroom.

“It turned out kind of unexpectedly, but it’s okay, right?”

“I think so. I’m sure you wanted to team up with Horikita, but it’s better to work with Onodera and show 100% of your strength than to have a bad distraction.”

“That’s...”

There were only about five minutes left, but I headed to the bathroom as originally planned

“Hey, by the way. I wanted to talk about Kanji, Shinohara, and the related stuff...”

“Is it related to the revelations of Kushida?”

“Honestly, I don’t think it’s a good idea, their relationship is so awkward now.”

“Wouldn’t it be more interesting if the two of them broke up?”

“I hope that’s a joke. I’m really hoping that the two of them can work it out.”

I asked him as a test, but he seemed to be genuinely worried.

“But unfortunately, I don’t have much of a relationship with them. There’s nothing I can do for you.”

“Can you at least give me some advice?”

“We can’t solve the problem without talking about it. Whether what Kushida said is true or false is a separate issue at this point, and you may need to expose each other’s feelings.”

“Isn’t that a bad idea? It could make things even worse than they already are.”

“That’s right. That’s why we need someone who can control the situation. You have to be able to listen to both sides of the conversation and calm the flow of the conversation that’s about to get disrupted.”

“Oh, I can’t do that, can I?”

“Then you’ll have to ask someone who can do that.”

I won’t give an answer here, but let Sudō think about it.

“If that’s true, this kind of role would be done by Kushida, right..?”

“Correct, but that’s not available now. If we can’t rely on Kushida, then we’ll have to use another student.”

The answer is so simple that it doesn’t even take him a second to guess it”

“So, Hirata?” Sudō has an immediate idea.

Although Sudō doesn’t get along with Yōsuke, this isn’t the situation to be talking about that.

“Alright then, I’ll go ask for his help.”

Sudō and Yōsuke have a distant relationship, but that may change after this incident.

“Thanks, Ayanokōji.”

“I didn’t do anything. You just thought about it and came up with the answer on your own.”

That’s how it seems to be these days.

3

Same day

Each class, or rather all the grades, are in full swing for the sports festival. As was the case last year, some of the events were already known, so the students made time to start practicing as if they were the real thing, using the ground and the gym during lunch break. They would want to spend as much time as possible practicing, especially for team competitions where more than two people compete.

The gymnasium I came to scout was filled with the sound of many energetic voices. It seemed that the gym was carefully equipped so that all the students, from the first year to the third year, had a certain amount of free space and could practice fairly. Today’s second-year students seemed to be playing volleyball and table tennis.

The first thing that jumped out at me was the large number of participants in one of the classes, as well as the unusually high level of enthusiasm. They were raising their voices and actively discussing the tips and tricks of the game.

“You can see how serious Class A is.”

“Yeah.”

I was here with Yōsuke, and we calmly analyzed the students and said so.

“Purely class-based sports competitions aren’t Class A’s strong suit, you know.”

“Yeah. For better or worse, there are a lot of students with average physical abilities, and only a few of them can get top prizes.”

Because they know that they are at a disadvantage in terms of overall strength, they are working together to raise their abilities as quickly as possible. He’s planning to practice and aim for competitions where he can earn points for his experience.

I can't confirm her appearance, but I'm pretty sure it's first and foremost Sakayanagi's instructions.

There are also students from Ichinose's class and Ryūen's class, but they still seem to be in limbo. I was hoping that one or two of them would show up, but even if they did, they would just be standing in a corner, unable to do anything under the circumstances.

"We're not out of the unanimous special exam yet. It's not going to be easy to try to practice under those circumstances, is it?"

"You're right, there's still a lot of uncertainty. But it's not necessarily all doom and gloom."

I tell Yōsuke that Sudō and Onodera have teamed up to become the number one male and female sophomores. The few pieces of good news made his cheeks relax, if only a little.

"If we keep getting first place in both the single and pair competitions, we should be able to get enough top places."

"Those two have a good chance of winning, don't they?"

There was a great deal of hope, but it still took more than just the two of them to win the class. A system that can temporarily cooperate with them is urgently needed, even if it's full of joints.

"Speaking of which, Sudō-kun asked me to meet him after school today, before club activities. Could it be that Kiyotaka-kun is involved behind the scenes?"

"I didn't do anything. I'm sure Sudō thought about it himself and decided to ask for help."

"It's probably something related to Shinohara-san, right?"

"Sudō probably thought that she couldn't leave it like that."

"But what about Mii-chan?"

"I think I'll take care of that one."

"Kiyotaka-kun?"

If I tell him that I'm going to leave it alone or leave it to the right people, Yōsuke will have a hard time accepting the situation. The reason why he's still sticking to Mii-chan in this mess is probably because the element that he feels is 'his fault' is stronger than the other students. Of course, it's not Yōsuke's fault at all.

While I remained quiet, I decided that Mii-chan was the one who could use a little push. The inability to use Yōsuke as a key is one of the reasons for this.

Chapter Three: We Have To Try...

LAST WEEKEND, AT the time of the special exam, was the last time, I Suzune Horikita, saw Kushida-san. A week after that, I didn't see her even once until after school on Friday.

That wasn't all. Wang-san and Hasebe-san didn't come to school either. Five days, from Monday to Friday. In the meantime, school went on without them. Careful meetings and preparatory research for the sports festival. Student council work. Studying regularly.

My knees shake and I feel like I'm about to fall over as I keep facing the waves as they come head on. But I can't let myself fall here and now. I have declared that I will definitely bring her back, and I have no right to lament when I have not achieved anything.

I wanted to contact Ayanokōji-kun several times, but I stopped myself each one of those times. There is a possibility that he will give me the answer that I am looking for. But at least in this case, it's something I would have to solve on my own.

"This concludes homeroom."

As soon as Chabashira-sensei finished homeroom for the day and left the room, I quickly followed her.

"Sensei, may I have a word with you?"

"I don't mind, let's walk and talk."

The hallway is conspicuous at this time of day as many students leave their seats to use the restroom. Perhaps sensing my intentions, Chabashira-sensei decided to take a walk and hear what I had to say.

"It's been five days since Kushida-san, Wang-san, and Hasebe-san have been absent from school."

"Ah, yes. Hasebe and Wang called in sick, but they haven't been seen at the hospital as a sick individual should be. As for Kushida, she's just saying she'll be absent and hasn't given us any details."

They weren't gone for lighthearted reasons by any means. Even so, that doesn't negate penalties our class might start accumulating due to them not being present.

“Are we in a state where we’ll start receiving severe penalties?”

I’m not sure I’ll get a specific answer, but I’ll ask once.

“Don’t worry about that. The rules are made so that honor students, especially Wang and Kushida, are given a longer grace period. As for Hasebe, as long as she isn’t a problem child, it’s not a big deal right now. These benefits only apply to students with no malicious track record or bad behavior in general.”

“In accordance with daily conduct, is that what you mean?”

“That’s what I mean. There are energetic students who like to exploit the rules, and there are students who clumsily hurt their hearts and clock out a week. It’s hard to tell the difference. If that’s the case, the only way to judge is to look at their attitude and performance in school so far.”

I feel my heart lighten from her consolidation.

“Besides, the school isn’t evil either. They don’t want to force you students into class while something is already eating away at your consciousness. Anyway, the three students who are currently absent have never been late and have been diligent in their classes. They are fully qualified to be given a reprieve.” Chabashira-sensei tells me this in a soft tone.

She looked so different from her usual self that I wonder if there’s something behind it. It could be that she had changed after the special exam, which is something the class often speculates about.

“Most importantly, we understand that the school is also conducting a rigorous upcoming special exam.”

So, the fact that rest is needed and they are already mentally strained means they’ve been given more leeway to skip school.

Checking that there is no one around, Chabashira-sensei pauses before continuing.

“But the grace word is almost up. If they continue to be absent next week, the 100 class points you’ve earned in desperation will be mercilessly diminished.”

Do something during this weekend, was the hidden message from sensei. But would I really be able to respond to that message? I wanted to ask sensei how I would go about doing such a thing, but my weakness was already starting to show little by little. That was something I wanted to avoid.

“Thank you very much. You’ve been very helpful.”

“Hold on, Horikita. Do you still have something to say to me?”

“No, I don’t wish to trouble you anymore, sensei.”

“You won’t know if it’s troublesome until you ask me. We still have a little time left, wouldn’t it be a little easier if you tried talking to someone?”

I guess Chabashira-sensei can see through my shallow mental state. It would be a lie to say that I wasn’t hesitant, but I decided to be brave and confess my thoughts.

“We got class points by expelling Sakura-san. Was that the right thing to do?”

“Do you regret your decision?”

“I thought it was the right decision at the time. Even so... I can honestly say that I’m shaken now.”

“I wish I could show you the answer, but I can’t help you with this one.”

“I understand. As a teacher, you can’t give me an answer, can you?”

“You’re mistaken. It’s just that at this point, I can’t tell myself whether you were right or not. It’s true that your decision was a bit dictatorial and self-serving, and some students may have seen it that way. You’re suffering from their judgment and you’re beginning to feel that you gave the wrong answer.”

That was painful to hear and I can’t say anything back.

“But does it really matter that much? No human being is perfect from the start. We make simple additions and multiplications wrong, we learn, and then we move on. I’m walking through life full of mistakes too.”

“Mistakes, sensei...?”

“That’s correct, back when I took the same special exam. I couldn’t answer the question before time ran out. In that respect, you gave an answer. I think you’re doing well. There is no one who can get 100 points without experience. At the time of the special exam, you were recognized as a leader and given authority. And you were ready to cut someone down to protect Kushida. Now it’s time to make them admit that it was the right decision.”

Sensei had just said something typical of a sensei. I was a little confused, as such things have rarely happened before.

“You don’t have to try to get a hundred points at this stage; you can either cut the OAA bottom line reasonably, or you can prioritize your

commitments. There are two choices, and you need to accept the inconvenience.”

“You’re right...” I know she’s right. I know, and yet I’m still confused. “But... I also think that I may have been blind to my surroundings. I think that if I had listened more, I might have grasped a better, more correct answer.”

“It’s possible to lose sight of your surroundings. And later, when the fever subsides, you may wonder if you made the right decision.”

I’ve never had that experience. I was so frustrated that I unconsciously clenched my fists.

“You’ve always made decisions that were prestigious at best, or simple at worst, haven’t you? Of course, that’s normal. It’s just that we each have idiosyncrasies and this is the first time you’ve asked for a new option.”

“I suppose so...”

I was given strong advice, yet I still couldn’t find the right response. I must have looked pathetic, but Chabashira-sensei treated me softly without being dismayed.

“You fought within the rules presented to you by the school, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but I broke my promise not to expel anyone except traitors.”

“You decided to protect Kushida from the start, and you lied and made that promise in order to consolidate the vote in favor?”

“No! I was really ready to do that at that time. That much is true.”

“In that case, there’s nothing wrong with it. It’s important to keep your promises. However, even adults sometimes make mistakes in their promises. I know you changed your mind because you realized that leaving Kushida wasn’t the right thing to do. You are free to despise or ignore those who think poorly of you now. Some will follow you, some won’t, and uniting a class of nearly forty students is no easy task, even for Ryūen, Ichinose, or Sakayanagi. The other students may be loyal and devoted on the surface, but you never know what they’re thinking on the inside.” Chabashira-sensei said, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Don’t be afraid to fail. I’m not an adult who can’t admit or forgive a child’s mistakes.”

“I haven’t failed yet.”

“That’s right. I’m willing to see the choices you make through to the end.”



After giving me a slightly troubled look, sensei looked me in the eye again. Her polite, stern but warm words almost make me choke up a little.

“You’ve changed, Chabashira-sensei.”

I didn’t mean to say that, but it just came out. I suppose it’s what I honestly felt.

“Is it that strange for me to act like a teacher now? Have I been treating you that coldly?”

“I’m a little surprised, but it’s not strange.”

“Well, that’s good.”

Chabashira-sensei probably thought she had talked too much, and she coughed and cleared her throat while changing the subject.

“What did Ayanokōji say in regards to Kushida?”

“Ayanokōji-kun...? Nothing specific about her. If I had to say, I think he’s observing what I do.”

“I see. So he thinks it’s something you should solve on your own, huh?”

“It may be that he just can’t deal with my mere selfishness.”

“I don’t know. Ayanokōji was the one who took a drastic step with Kushida’s case. Even if you don’t trust him, I don’t think he’s one to leave you alone.”

“You’re selling Ayanokōji-kun quite a bit, aren’t you? I remember you saying that Ayanokōji-kun was the most defective product in our class.”

“Why do you remember such an old statement?”

“I know for sure that he’s better than his OAA.”

“I see that your evaluation of him has increased considerably.”

“There are some difficulties with his personality, but those aren’t limited to just Ayanokōji-kun. I still don’t understand what you meant by him being defective.”

He is undoubtedly a brilliant man, more calm and collected than I am. I don’t see any reason for him to be ridiculed as a defective student.

“You don’t have to take every single thing I say seriously. You’ve spent more time with him than I have, right?”

“Still, I’d like to hear your reason.”

“In that case, my assessment hasn’t changed since before. No, I believe that the credibility of that assessment has increased.”

Chabashira-sensei still believes that Ayanokōji-kun is defective, even after everything he's done and shown us.

"But you're not ready to dwell on that now. You have other problems that you need to solve as soon as possible."

"You aren't wrong..."

It was true that I was curious about him, but it could certainly be done later. I have to make sure that Kushida-san, Wang-san, and Hasebe-san come back to school.

"Do you think Kushida will be able to take your hand if you offer it to her?"

"It's hard to envision such a thing. No matter how much I visit or wait, she won't open the door."

"That's harsh."

She has countless opportunities to leave her dorm to get supplies when I'm in school, and hide out during the weekend.

It's pointless to try to attack her in such a way where I attempt to ambush her. I tried to contact her on her cell phone, but it never picked up.

"She most likely understands that I'm on the other side of the door, pacing left and right, and it surely resonates with her somehow."

"I suppose you have a point. That said, if you don't make a move, things won't progress and they'll slowly get worse."

"That's right..."

"When you can't do anything on your own, it's a good idea to ask for help from another person."

"The only classmate who would be willing to lend his strength to Kushida-san's persuasion is Hirata-kun. He probably doesn't have time for that right now either."

Hirata-kun is currently occupied with Wang-san and Shinohara-san.

"Sure, Hirata would be able to make large impact. Although I'm not sure if he'll have much effect on Kushida. I don't think it would be easy to open the doors if you took someone like that with you. A righteous, sensible, good person."

Somehow, I think I understand what sensei is trying to say. Hirata-kun would lie to make Kushida-san feel better, and she knows that.

"I'm afraid I can't think of anyone suitable at the moment, but it might not be a bad idea to look at someone other than your classmates."

“When I try to confront Kushida-san, I’m confronting her true feelings which relate to what happened in class. It’s quite a disadvantage to tell that to an outsider.”

“I suppose you’ll have to work on balancing the advantages and disadvantages. Even so, that doesn’t necessarily mean you’re not allowed to tell them. Some of us teachers, for example, know about Kushida’s past, and some of us would probably let others know if we chose to. I believe that there are no such things as secrets.”

There is no such thing as a secret...? Maybe... there is someone who can move Kushida-san’s heart. No, even if they can’t move her heart, if there’s someone who can make a breakthrough, I think I need to visit...

“It’s time to go. Let me say one last thing, and it may be meddlesome, but let me say it. The most important thing is what you want to change Kushida into. You need to think about that carefully.”

What do I want to change within Kushida-san?

“Thank you very much, Sensei. Thanks to you, I feel more prepared.”

I still didn’t have an answer, but I had the energy to make an effort.

“Don’t worry about it. As a teacher... this is my job.” With that, Chabashira-sensei returned to the staff room.

I continued to watch her from the stairs until I could no longer see her back.

1

When I returned to my dorm after shopping at Keyaki Mall, I found Ibuki glaring at the entrance next to the elevator. I ignored her and pressed the elevator button, and she became angry as if she had been weaned.

“Don’t ignore me!” She yelled at me with such force that spit flew out onto my face.

I was ready to enter a long battle with Ibuki-san, but what the hell was going on? It seems like she’s going to follow me into the elevator. I had no choice but to stop and watch as the elevator doors opened to welcome her.

“Ignore you? What do you want from me?”

“This! What did you mean by this sentence? Tell me the answer.” She thrusts the screen of her cell phone in front of me, glaring at me. A blinding light illuminates my eyeballs, but all I can see is white light.

“Are you stupid? It’s too close to me, can you move back a little?”

“Damn it! Come on!”

She moved back a little bit, but I could read what it said right away, just by skimming through some of it.

“That’s a well-written and impressive piece of writing. I’m sure it must have been written by an intelligent person.”

“Don’t pat yourself on the back! I mean, what’s so intelligent about this?”

“Maybe if you read it out loud, you’d understand.”

“Huh? If you drop out of school when I have nothing to do with it, then of course you’ve lost to me.”

“Don’t be such a dumbass. Where’s the intelligence in that? No, that’s enough, just tell me what it means!”

“You read it and didn’t get it?”

“Not at all. I’ve been thinking about it all week and I didn’t get it. So what?” She huffs, sniffs and crosses her arms.

I wasn’t expecting her not to understand my simple advice. No, I’d rather think it could be potentially effective.

“It’s not something that makes sense to ask about now. You didn’t seem to have a problem with what I said, seeing as I got no response.”

“What? Explain it to me in a clearer way.”

She really doesn’t understand things. I wonder if all she has are her athleticism and fighting sense.

“I wanted to give you some motivation to not be expelled. You aren’t well liked by your classmates and could have been in jeopardy if the question during the exam had anything to do with your expulsion. To get back at me, you’d try to stay in school even if you didn’t want to, wouldn’t you?”

“Don’t tell me you’re worried about... me?” She pulled away, looking not surprised, but truly sickened.

“Don’t take this the wrong way. It’s just that there’s a lot left for you to help with. Even if you were dismissed from the last special exam, Ryūen-kun would gain 100 points, alongside abandoning you. If you’re going to leave anyway, it’s more profitable to have you disappear in the exam with a penalty attached to Ryūen-kun.”

She didn’t look a millimeter convinced when I tried to explain.

“I think it’s time for me to leave, if you don’t mind.”

With her silently and angrily making way toward me, I pressed the elevator button again. Then as I get inside, I notice that Ibuki is not following me.

“You’re not joining?”

“I don’t want to get in the elevator with you.”

“Don’t be silly, we’ve been inside together a few times by accident.”

“I don’t feel like riding it right now.”

“Right. Then do what you want.”

Pressing the close button, I head for the floor where Kushida-san lives. From here, I must continue to persist until she opens the door for me. As the elevator ascends, I wonder if I will really be able to make a breakthrough. If I don’t try something else, it won’t change. If that’s the case, then what I’m about to do is nothing but a waste of time. I arrived at my destination floor and the door opened.

Suddenly... I can’t move and I’m frozen in place. What’s changed up until now that had let me talk with Kushida-san?

Time passed and the elevator closed. Before I could press the open button, the elevator started moving and began to move downstairs.

“Ugh...”

I don’t think you can persuade Kushida-san to come face to face with you in her current state. I think back to the warm words from Chabashira-sensei.

The elevator came straight back to the first floor. When the doors opened, Ibuki-san, who was looking down at her cell phone, took a step forward without noticing me. She looked up when she felt the presence of someone in the elevator, saw me, and let out a slight groan.

“Why are you here?”

I can’t say I expected any other reaction.

“You’re not getting in?”

“I told you I’m not getting in! Are you harassing me?”

Shaking my head, I reached out to press the close button again. Then I saw Ibuki-san averting her gaze and felt something tugging in my mind. Just before I touched the close button, I pressed the open button and stared at her. She looks at me, suspicious that the elevator isn’t closing.

A breakthrough may be lying in an unexpected place.

Maybe it’s time to put Chabashira-sensei’s advice to use...

“What the hell?”

“I thought I’d ask you to help me with something.”

“Huh?”

It’s a pretty big gamble, but it could be the ingredient to break the stalemate. An unseen breakthrough, and it might be a surprise ambush that takes us out of the stalemate we’re in right now. I know this is reckless, but for now, I’ll just have to try whatever it takes.

“Get in.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m not getting in?”

“Just get in.”

“What the hell?”

I pushed the close button, checking on Ibuki, who got in, despite her irritation.

“There’s something I need your advice on.”

“Excuse me? No no no, I am definitely not helping you with anything.”

“At least hear me out... Maybe it’ll benefit you.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. Just because you’re asking me about it, I know it’s bad news.”

While we were talking, the elevator reached the floor where Kushida-san’s room was located. I stepped out first and looked back at Ibuki-san, who was still in the elevator.

“Get off. We don’t know who’s listening, so stay close.”

“I’m going home. I don’t know what that means.”

She presses the close button and tries to leave, but the elevator doors don’t close.

“It looks like the elevator wants you to get off too.”

“That’s because you’re blocking it from the outside by pushing the button!”

“Do you have any special desires? Like, things that are important to you?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just answer the question.”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“No, uh, I don’t know... I can’t think of anything at all, but maybe strawberries?”

“That’s surprisingly cute and cuddly for you, Ibuki-san. Enough, forget about what I just said.”

“Then why the hell did you ask?”

As Ibuki-san grew unsurprisingly unhappy, I decided to cut to the chase. I realized that it would be better for her if I quickly shared my story and moved on to the next part of the plan.

“I’m going to go see Kushida-san now.”

“So? Why don’t you go see her on your own?”

She hit the close button repeatedly, but of course it didn’t work.

“It doesn’t work that way. She hasn’t shown up once in this entire week. I’ve been to her dormitory and she hasn’t shown any sign of coming out. I need you to get her out of her room. Do you understand?”

“What? Wait, why do I have to do that?”

“It’s another way of helping people.”

“If I don’t even help my class, why would I help your class?”

I’ve already calculated that there’s no way Ibuki-san will accept my offer. But if there’s a benefit, it’s a different story. As the elevator is left open the whole time, the warning beeping starts.

“Fine. Then I’ll give you compensation.”

“I don’t want it. If you think I’m money driven, you’re wrong.”

“I’m sure you aren’t. But I’m sure my success fee will be something you strongly desire.”

“I don’t think there’s anything like that.”

Ibuki’s mind is not easy to move. But if you confront her with certain things, her thoughts will change one hundred and eighty degrees.

“You can pre-register for up to five events of your choice for the sports festival. You are free to choose which events and which groups you want to participate in. The main purpose of this system is to be used to clear the required events, or to avoid strong opponents. On the other hand, it is also a system that allows you to fight against targeted opponents.

When I had explained that much, Ibuki-san’s eyes, which had been unmotivated, lit up with color.

“Since it’s you, you’re waiting without reservation to fight me, aren’t you? But unfortunately, I’m not going to decide until the last minute. Depending on the situation, there’s a good chance that you’ll make a move

for the last slot. In other words, even if you aim and wait, your chance to fight won't come for a long time."

"So you're saying that if I cooperate, you'll fight me?"

"Yes. I'll fight you in one of the competitions of your choice. Of course, I won't go easy on you because of your class, so you won't be able to pick up any points. That is, if you're okay with it."

"Ha. That's interesting. But I'm not satisfied with just one. I'll help you if you give me at least three competitions, so we will have a best-of-three."

"Three? That's greedy..."

I make a pretense of thinking as the warning beep goes off again.

"It's non-negotiable."

She has a point, I agree that it's not clear who would be better out of one competition. On the other hand, if we play two or four rounds, there is always the possibility of a draw. It was expected from the beginning that the game would be decided by three rounds, but if you present the match at the beginning, you may be asking for five rounds.

If she's willing to accept three rounds, then we're right on schedule.

"Fine, I'll face you for three rounds and join the competition. Is that okay with you?"

"Deal. No changing your mind later." With that, she stepped off the elevator. I took my hand off the button and the elevator began to slowly close its doors.

"Of course. However... you're going to have to help me out this time until we get this matter resolved."

"Just tell me clearly what the goal is."

"Kushida-san comes to school on Monday. That's it."

"How hard can that be? I mean, what's the point if Kushida is absent? Everyone gets sick at least once in a while." Chabashira-sensei said that secrets shouldn't matter when it comes to resolving Kushida-san's issue. The important thing is who I'm telling the secrets to.

I decided to follow that advice and tell the whole story. If Ibuki is the kind of student who would blow up and tell everyone around her, it would be my fault for not yet realizing that. I need to find a way to break the ice now, even if it means pushing myself further.

I told Ibuki-san everything about Kushida-san, I left no secrets. Ibuki-san only knows what kind of life she's been leading through shallow encounters. But I explained to her Kushida-san's true nature, her way of thinking, and every detail of her current situation. While I was talking to her, Ibuki-san was listening to me with a disinterested look on her face, looking in some random direction.

Normally, I would have been dissatisfied with such an attitude, but strangely enough, I felt saved by her method of listening. When I finished telling her the truth about why she was currently absent from school, Ibuki-san let out a sigh of exasperation.

"Whatever." Without showing any strong interest in her true nature, she nonchalantly commented on the fact.

"You don't seem surprised. Did you know anything about it?"

"Nah, I just don't believe in straight-up good guys. The same goes for Hirata and Ichinose. It's a rule that people who pretend to be good people are always dark behind the scenes."

"That's an interesting way of thinking."

She might have a surprisingly good point.

"So, in your mind, is Ryūen-kun quite highly regarded? He's not a good person on the surface but he's not a good person behind the scenes either."

"That's why I hate him more. I also dislike guys who seem harmless like Ayanokōji these days. People like that fucking piss me off."

When you go that far, on the other hand, I wonder if there exists anyone that Ibuki-san finds likable...

"Well, I don't hate the idea of exposing a person like that. I'd enjoy asking them how it feels to be exposed as a bad person."

If she goes too far, I'll have to stop her, but that kind of forcefulness is something I need to learn from.

"You want me to drag Kushida out of her hiding place, right?"

"Yes."

Seeming quite confident, Ibuki-san walked lightly to the front of Kushida-san's room.

"Are you going to do this all by yourself?"

"Just shut up and watch."

Very well Ibuki-san, let's see what you do.

When she walked to the front of Kushida-san's room, Ibuki-san suddenly held her stomach and knelt down onto the floor.

"Oh shit! Ouch ouch ouch!" She then let out a scream that echoed down the hallway.

I couldn't understand what she was doing for a moment, and stared at the scene in amazement.

"This stomach-ache... I can't! No way I can make it back in time..."

A stomach-ache? Don't tell me this is the best you've come up with... Aside from that clichéd idea, it's devastatingly poorly acted.

To begin with, this is not the floor of Ibuki's room. Even if the floors were the same, it would definitely be faster to run to your own room.

"Uh, excuse me?! Can I use your toilet real quick?" She rapidly hit the chime on Kushida-san's door and continued to do so for about ten seconds, but there was no sign of Kushida-san opening up from inside.

It seems that asking Ibuki-san for help was an obvious mistake, I was ready to lose my head from all the pointless noise she was making. She continued to keep acting for a few dozen seconds until she got up and turned to face me with a straight face.

"I thought she was home?"

"First of all, I'm pretty sure she's in her room."

"Really? If she doesn't get caught by that act, she's quite a tough one, isn't she?"

"Yeah, I guess so." I said, motioning Ibuki-san to follow me. I instruct her to follow me quietly and open the box with the built-in electric meter attached to Kushida-san's room. "You see a disk here, right? If the speed of this disk is slow, she's probably not home. But if she's at home and using the TV or computer, the rotation speed will increase." The disk was spinning slightly faster than normal. "Now you know it's more likely that she's at home, right?"

"I didn't know you knew about being a thief?"

"I learned a lot about it last weekend while I was waiting for her. Don't abuse it."

"Of course I won't" She answers while giving me a cold look.

"Can you think of any other way? If you don't, then I suppose we should give up now..."

"We're doing it wrong."

“What?”

“It’s a toss-up, but it’s okay, right? I’ll forcefully pull Kushida out.”

I feel like I should inquire further, but I see her spirit and decide to leave it to her once more. I keep my distance, and then she steps to the door again.

“Hey, Kushida. I’ve heard a lot about you. I heard that you’ve been wearing a catsuit until now, and it was exposed in the exam?”

When I wondered what she was going to do, she started blabbering nonsense. For a moment, my brain thought I should stop her, but there was no point in doing so. Even if I stopped here, it would have already reached her ears.

“That’s gotta hurt... How does it feel to go from being the most popular person in the world to falling down so low? How does it feel to fall from the podium?”

The technique of stirring up agitation is much better than the deplorable acting she did earlier. Furthermore, Kushida-san might turn exquisitely angry because she’s being told by an outsider, Ibuki-san. But no sound came back. I guess rough treatment wasn’t enough...

Ibuki-san didn’t change her expression, nor did she try to stop her words.

“I heard the catsuit went hard... Can I see it?” She slams her right toe against the door extremely hard. “I’m so stressed out because of Horikita right now, I just want to see the suit.”

Honestly, that was Ibuki-san’s true intention, she didn’t want to save Kushida-san in the slightest. I’m sure she’s on the other side of the door listening...

“Maybe kicking in the door of someone’s room isn’t such a bad idea. I can kind of understand how Ryūen feels.”

After a few such kicks, I heard a sound from inside the room. Despite this, as she was about to unleash more kicks, the door to the room suddenly unlocked.

“It’s annoying, so can you please stop, Ibuki-san?” Kushida-san, in her pajamas, finally showed herself.

I honestly didn’t expect Ibuki-san’s violent strategy to work... I’m a little shocked, wondering what all my efforts were for during the past week.

“There she is. See? I knew she was that type of person.”

Maybe there were parts of Kushida-san's personality that Ibuki-san could relate to...

"Whatever you're trying to do is pissing me off, can you stop?"

"Are you more likable when you put on the catsuit or something?"

"I've never actually liked you, you know. I can see Horikita-san over there, that was probably the reason you're even here." Her mental state seems to be calm, judging by the fact that she used "san".

Since there was no point in hiding, I walked without hesitation to the front of Kushida-san's room.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to come inside your room. I'm getting a little tired of waiting around all the time."

"Well, it's no use trying to close it."

She can't close the door because Ibuki-san has one foot firmly inserted in the gap between the doors. Kushida-san looked down at the foot for a few seconds before suddenly, without warning, stomping on it.

"Shit!" She continues to stomp forcefully, but Ibuki-san doesn't pull her foot back either.

"Yeah... it's not closing." Kushida-san sighs.

"That's enough...!"

I try to force the door open and step in, but she only retreats and greets us with a straight face.

"Come on in, then. This may be the last time you'll see me, so take your time." She says it with an implied tone, but I guess she's been prepared to do something like that for a while. It was no small feat for Kushida-san to annoy the class by maintaining the status quo indefinitely. She must have invited us in because she's made up her mind about something. This is our last chance, I guess. I could tell at a glance that Kushida-san's room was being used in a clean and neat manner. I get the impression that she's even more solid than I am in terms of her love of cleanliness.

"Well, well, it's pretty tidy." Ibuki-san says, looking around the room with a hint of admiration and surprise.

Kushida-san saw this attitude and made a strange face.

"Ibuki-san's room looks like it's in disarray, with her undressed clothes scattered all over the place."

"Wh-what? How do you know if you haven't even seen it?"

It's clear from Ibuki-san's reaction that it's true.

“Sit down. I’m not going to offer you anything to drink or snack on, but that’s okay, right?”

“Yeah, no thanks.”

We looked at each other for a moment and then sat down. Kushida-san sat across from us, making it a two-on-one situation across the table.

“You’ve been making noise in front of my room for so long, what do you want?”

“You know what I want, don’t you? You’ve been out of school for the past week.”

“Oh...” With an absent-minded reply, Kusida-san continued. “Do you really think I’m going to go to school after what happened? I’m not really surprised, but you told this girl about me, didn’t you? Is that another way to get back at me?”

“No, it isn’t. She wouldn’t carelessly tell anyone else.”

“Do you trust her?”

“No, I don’t. It’s just that she doesn’t have anyone to talk to.”

“Hey!” Ibuki-san slammed her fist on the table and glared at me, but I ignored her. It is true after all...

“Even if that’s the case, you’re not thinking about my feelings, are you? I’m hurt.”

“Do you really have the right to say that?”

“Even if I don’t, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t think about how I feel, Horikita-san.”

The sharp exchange of words quickly brought up new tension.

“Let’s move the conversation forward. I know I have been inadequate in some respects. But you were the one who initiated the hostility in the first place. Isn’t that right?”

We were just classmates, but she had always seen me as someone who should be expelled.

“I won’t deny that point. But I can’t help it, I couldn’t stand you...”

“I don’t know what I should have done. I look back on it now and I can’t get a clear answer.”

“I know, I know. I’ve thought about the same thing a few times. And I’ve come to one conclusion. Maybe you should have voluntarily withdrawn from school for me, because I couldn’t stand your presence.”

“Don’t be absurd. That’s not a solution, it’s just your angry feelings.”

“It’s complicated. But it’s the only argument I have.”

Although she answered my questions, it was hardly a friendly dialogue. I suppose they were just her true feelings.

At first, I was trying to listen to her, but then she started to slowly stop talking and the lifeless look in her eyes returned.

“I wonder if you’d be willing to help me and put all of this behind you.”

“I knew that’s what you were getting at, but come on, don’t make me laugh.”

“You’re good enough and worth it.”

“I know.”

She answers immediately, not even showing any pretense of modesty.

“I’d have thought you were super self-conscious...”

To Ibuki-san’s muttered response, Kushida-san simply turns and stares at her.

“Did you think so? Well it’s not very true. However, I wouldn’t expect someone with your competence to realize that.”

“Do you think you’re all that? Why don’t we go at it here or something?” Ibuki-san said and clenched her fists.

“You’re even more of an idiot than I thought, Ibuki-san. That’s not what competence means, okay? Why don’t you take a look at OAA? My ability in this school is my good grades, right? I think the difference between me and Ibuki-san is more than physical aspects, don’t you?” Miffed, Ibuki-san took out her phone and checked the OAA. She then compared it to her own overall strength, paled, and silently closed her phone.

“I want you to use your high ability for the good of the class. If you continue to be absent from school without permission, you will eventually lose your seat.”

“It’s already gone. As for you, you were prepared for the backlash and opposed my leaving the school, right? So the one who would be troubled if I’m useless is you. I can understand why you would want to desperately try to persuade me to come back.”

The situation in the class must have been palpable to Kushida.

“I’ve lost. There’s no reason to stay anymore. But the reason why I stayed quiet at the end of that unanimous special exam was to damage you as much as possible.

If I continue to be absent from school, the school will punish the class that caused the truancy, right? And the blame for that punishment will go to you.”

Indeed, if Kushida-san continues to be absent, the class will be continuously damaged like a continuing poisoning. It was possible that the truancy strategy would eventually get clogged up with special exams, but Kushida-san would be able to accomplish her revenge with flying colors.

“There’s no gain in it for you, why keep this up?”

“It’s too late, I have nothing to lose at this point. Isn’t it normal I give you a little roadblock?”

“How is it normal? Don’t get carried away just because your OAA numbers are above average.” Muttered Ibuki-san from next to me.

“I invited you in just for the fun of it, but I guess I was right. You’re funny, Ibuki-san. If it was just me and Horikita-san, it would have been a boring conversation. I guess I was wrong when I said it was normal. What is normal to me must be abnormal to you.”

“So you admit that you have loose screws?”

“Not in my eyes. To me, I do everything right and you do everything wrong. I can’t tolerate anything that doesn’t suit me.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“Whether it’s disgusting or not is irrelevant, I can’t just change my way of thinking... I was born that way.”

Kushida-san was acting more strange than usual, trying to keep a calm image as she let her dark thoughts spill. No... maybe she found it amusing.

She was much more charming at the moment rather than when she was screaming and crying.

“I’ll continue to be an issue until the school does something to force me to change my ways.”

Kushida-san declares that she will continue to hinder our class with determination. I can tell she isn’t lying, as she preaches to me in a matter-of-fact voice.

“What are you going to do?”

“What am I going to do? Nothing, I have no choice but to have a talk with you like this.”

“You’re inconsiderate, aren’t you? You’re very different from Ayanokōji-kun.”

At the mention of Ayanokōji-kun's name, Ibuki-san lifts her head up.

"I thought I was taking advantage of him, but it seemed I was very wrong. On the contrary, he was planning to use it against me the entire time. I think he was someone I shouldn't have made enemies with."

"Ayanokōji-kun is very different. It's clear that he can see things deep into the future. It's only recently that I've been made aware of this."

"Then I suppose we're in the same boat."

"I suppose so."

A bit of silence.

"You're mostly an idiot too, Horikita-san. It would have been so much easier if you had just cut me out."

"Maybe I am an idiot. Unfounded intuition, unfounded confidence. That's what you might take me for. However, there is no doubt that you are undeniably an excellent student. Although I can understand how my knowledge about past events the past and your desire to remove Ayanokōji-kun have caused troubles, at least the reputation you have continued to contribute to the class for a year and a half remains unchanged."

Kushida-san has done well and she shouldn't be ashamed of it.

"If annoying the class is really your top priority, you might be able to succeed in your revenge if you just keep taking time off. But, is that what you want?"

"What's your point?"

"I'm asking if that's enough to satisfy you."

"I can be satisfied. I don't want anything more than that right now. No matter how many words you try to convince me, it's useless, I won't ever agree with you."

I could never persuade her. Hearing such words, I felt as if I couldn't say anything anymore. Surely I want Kushida-san to come to school as it would be beneficial for everyone, but I also want to prove that my choice was not a mistake.

Kushida-san, who is right in front of me, knows that better than anything else. In the end, it's still for my sake. It's hard to say that it's the best choice for Kushida-san to come back.

"Maybe I was wrong about you."

"What do you mean?"

“I thought I was here to ‘persuade’ you, but I was wrong. It was for myself and the class. I wasn’t able to take your feelings into account.”

“What? Now you’re going to pity me?”

“I just realized that taking you out of a school that you don’t want to go to is over-ambitious.”

“Then I guess we’re done talking. If I drag my feet, Horikita-san will automatically fall too. I’ll be happy if you suffer through school without me for a long time.”

“That’s fine with me. But at the same time, it means you’ll suffer too.”

“I’ll suffer? Why’s that?”

“Because you still have a place to go back to and you’re going to lose it.”

“You’ve become so selfish. There is no place to go back to.”

The more I think about her, the more one emotion comes to mind.

“You keep driving me crazy, don’t you Kushida-san...”

“What are you on about...?”

“I try to lean on you, but you can never support me because you’re a child. The point is, you’ve just made the wrong choice at every turn. This wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t tried to get rid of me, especially since I don’t tell secrets and don’t actually know anything of the past. The same goes for Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Even then, I just can’t stand you.”

“That’s what kids are. You can’t stand it, so you lash out. That’s the same as a child.”

Ibuki-san, who was hit first by my words, bursts out laughing. This irritated Kushida-san as she looked at Ibuki-san with annoyance.

“We have to put up with such an act. You’re in high school, remember? All you have to do is walk to class and you’re not even doing that. Don’t just lie on the ground and waste your time forever, just get up and walk by yourself.”

“Ha...you’re right, Horikita-san. But I’m a poor, poor girl who’s hurting. If I go to school now, my classmates will smoke me out, and things won’t be the same as before. Isn’t it cruel to try to take me out of such a painful place when you’re not even close to me?”

“I’m not in a position to speak for others, but you’re not looking very good right now either.”

Kushida-san was at a loss for words.

“The class already knows who I am. I can’t mend my ways any more. I can’t fix it anymore. That’s what you think right now, right? When you cried and screamed in class, you looked like a child. No, a toddler. I still feel like I’m dealing with that toddler right now.”

“Don’t be stupid!”

She raises her hand and tries to slap my cheek before I calmly grab her hand and stop it in motion.

“You want to make fun of me, don’t you? You’re nothing more than a toddler, annoying me, annoying your classmates, and making it your top priority just for your own pleasure.”

“So I’m supposed to be the only one who has to suffer, put up with, and help you and the rest of the class?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way. You’ve got solid power. Then use it for ‘your own good’. It doesn’t matter what’s around you. If you act for yourself, and you’ve risen to Class A for yourself, that’s unquestionably your “achievement”. And you can use the privilege of Class A to do whatever you want. If you want to do the same thing, this time go someplace where no one knows about your past.”

Kushida-san glared at me but she didn’t say anything.

“You only have a year and a half of school left. It shouldn’t be that hard, should it? For the past year and a half, you’ve only been putting on a good front for your classmates. It’s easier than that. Or is that not even possible with your abilities?”

I could feel Kushida-san’s hands trembling with anger as I clenched them.

But I’ve come to another conclusion.

“This is the only time I will be visiting here. The rest is for you to think about. If you’re still going to be my enemy after all I’ve told you, then I have no more treatment for you. You’ll remain a child for the rest of your life.”

“That means that while I’m standing still, Horikita-san will continue to move forward...”

Even if I didn’t explain everything to her, Kushida-san could see where things stood now.

“You’re going to be expelled. I’ll be graduating from Class A and fulfilling my own dreams. It’s a big difference.”

Kushida-san contemplates a future in which I've won, and it's something I know she despises. School life is only a small percentage of a long life.

"Do you really think that from here, I have a chance to go back to school?"

"That's up to you. You can decide whether you want to fight with your chin up high or wallow around in sadness and anger."

Although I could still feel the strength in her arm, it was slowly fading away.

"I'll at least listen to you. Tell me what strategy you have in mind, Horikita-san."

After many twists and turns, we arrived at a situation where Kushida-san was willing to listen.

But I can't try to fix things to make her feel better. I have to convince her with a plan for her survival. I have several tentative answers, and I'll reconstruct them here to arrive at the ideal answer.

"I'm not going to spend my school life carrying you, Kushida-san."

"No, I wouldn't want that. But then, it's impossible, right? My classmates saw my true nature, and that fact can't be changed no matter what, right?"

"That's true. But in other words, there is a possibility that you can recover yourself for those who haven't seen your true nature, right?"

Kushida-san showed a slight gesture of consideration, but muttered, "I don't know."

"Up until now, there were only a few people who knew the real me, like Horikita-san and Ayanokōji-kun. That's why I didn't hesitate to mend my ways yet, but now we've got more people in our class, right? Not only are there smart people, but there are also a lot of stupid and shitty students mixed in among them."

Kushida-san had a point. But before I could react, Ibuki-san reacted.

"You're one to talk!"

Ibuki-san overreacted when Kushida-san brought in other students.

"I'm not talking about you, so what does it matter?" Replied Kushida-san.

"If you can't keep your mouth shut, Ibuki-san, you can leave, okay?"

"Oh, yeah. Then I'll leave. It's okay if you keep your promise, right?"

As she tries to stand up, I tell her what I need to tell her.

“No, you can’t. If you leave now, it’ll be considered abandonment and I’ll have the contract voided.”

“Huh? What the fuck... Oh my god, then I’ll shut up and you can get on with it.”

“Contract? What does that mean?”

“I’m only promising to fight her during the sports festival if she’ll help me get you to school.”

I quickly explained the reason for Ibuki-san being willing to help.

“So that’s what it was about, huh? I was wondering why it was Ibuki-san, but that explains it...”

“At least thanks to her, I was able to visit your room, so I need to thank her.”

Ibuki-san had a great deal of things to say, I could see it on her face. Even so, she stayed quiet as instructed.

I admire her spirit, she’s willing to be patient in order to fight with me.

“Back to the topic at hand, can I take that to mean that it’s painful to continue to play the role while your true nature is known?”

“Yes, it is. You can do your best when you’re acting in a meaningful way, but you can’t do your best when you’re acting in a meaningless way, can you?”

Up until now, if she expelled me or Ayanokōji-kun, the meaning of continuing to act would live on. However, it was nearly impossible to expel the entire class. In junior high school, when Kushida-san was in a similar situation, she brought the class down and ended it all.

She tried to do the same here, but it didn’t work out.

“If you don’t want that, then you don’t have to hang out with your classmates like you used to.”

“Huh?”

That seemed to be a surprising response not only to the Kushida-san in front of me, but also to Ibuki-san, and both of them reacted similarly.

“Even if you keep your mouth shut to some extent, there is no absolute guarantee. If that’s the case, it’s inevitable that the rest of the class will stand around with the assumption that Kushida-san is a two-faced and troubled student.”

Kushida-san would then lose half of her effectiveness.

She can study well and play sports, but she's not top notch at either of them. Just another honor student. Even if she is superior to Sakura-san in her natural abilities, she lacks charm in other areas.

"I'm not trusted by anyone. I don't think everyone would be satisfied with me anymore. Don't you?"

"It certainly wouldn't be the same as it has been. But can I really say that I've completely lost faith in you? What do you think? Ibuki-san." I looked over to Ibuki-san, who was staring at the wall not even letting me know that she acknowledged my statement. "Ibuki-san, answer me."

"You told me to shut up, didn't you?"

"I'll allow you to speak."

"What the hell, first shut up, then speak, I'm not your student or anything."

"You don't want to compete? Then just tell me so..."

"Oh, my God!" While scratching her head, Ibuki-san replied. "You've just been playing the good girl too long, that's all. I don't believe in the perfect good person, and I think you acted worse before. If I had to choose who to believe, the old you or the new you, I'd say the new you is more honest."

She said what she thought quickly. I guess it sounded straightforward to Kushida-san because she didn't have any tricks or wisdom.

"Hahaha, that's an interesting answer. I mean, you have an unusual way of thinking, don't you? But not everyone is as unusual as Ibuki-san. If anything, normal people would hate her hair."

"Well, she's certainly not normal, that's for sure."

"Hey!"

"But everyone has two sides to them, big or small. Ibuki-san appreciated the part of your true heart that acts for yourself above all else. That's why you'll never change your true intentions."

This talk of making her change her true intentions was wrong to begin with.

"And if you don't change the way you speak and your tone of voice to the outside world like you have been doing, it will be difficult for those who haven't seen your true nature to imagine what you really are. No matter how many words are used to explain it, a person cannot understand it until they experience it firsthand."

“What do you mean?”

“For example, Ichinose-san. She’s someone you could say is certainly more of a good person than Kushida-san. But the truth is that she’s really a violent, foul-mouthed person who likes other people’s failures more than anything else. Would you believe her right away if she told you that?”

“That might be difficult. That girl seems like a really good person.”

“You’d have your doubts, though.”

“It’s not about Ichinose-san, it’s about the existence of good people, right?”

“Well, you’d certainly have to see it in person to know for sure. I couldn’t know for sure just by hearing about it from Horikita-san.”

“Isn’t that right? At least for the past year and a half, Ichinose-san has been a good person. Even if someone were to make such a revelation, they wouldn’t believe it. Nevertheless, if all of her classmates were to say out loud that Ichinose-san is that kind of person, we would naturally be suspicious. But I guess the image is still not completely clear, is it?”

No matter who says that Ichinose-san is ruthless and violent, I couldn’t believe it. Even if I was told repeatedly, I couldn’t believe it unless I saw it for myself.

“It’s true that you can’t understand something until you experience it. In martial arts, there are times when you are warned that a technique is dangerous, but you don’t feel like it is at all. Then when you’re actually hit, you understand how amazing it is.”

“That’s exactly it, Ibuki-san.”

But as long as there are still doubts, they won’t trust you completely.

“That’s where your skills come in. You have to do the best you can with the way you’re going. It’s a fact that your fallout control and communication skills are better than others.”

Whether or not she would be able to gain their trust beyond that was unknown at this point.

“Even if that’s fine for the other classes, what about our other classmates? Shinohara-san, Wang-san, Hasebe-san, would probably all resent me. I don’t know if I can unite with them..”

“Maybe not with all of them. But it can produce results if you use your abilities to the best.”

Even if they just kept getting higher than average results, students who only got grades below Kushida wouldn't be able to complain easily.

"If the untrustworthy side of you comes out, I'll help you."

"Do you think I would honestly believe such sweet words? I'm afraid you'll betray me."

"Being doubtful is fine. I'll accept your bitterness, but I've accepted you even after you betrayed me."

For Kushida-san, there is nothing to be afraid of, as she has already done it once before.

It was all up to her to decide whether to stand up again or not. After staying quiet for a while, Kushida-san opened her eyes. Then she started mumbling something, but I couldn't catch it. Eventually, she opened her eyes, as if she had come to a conclusion.

"All right. I'll fight for a year and a half just for me, and contribute to the class. I won't fight for Horikita-san or for my classmates. That's fine with you, right?"

"I'm not complaining at all. I just want you to respond with results."

Standing up, Kushida-san holds out her left hand instead of her fist.

"Wasn't it the other way around last time?"

Kushida-san didn't respond to the hand I offered all that time ago.

"A left-handed handshake means hostility."

"Is that so? Which hand did I offer you before?"

"Left hand."

It seems that she remembered clearly, as Kushida-san answered immediately. This time, it was her own left hand that was extended. I stood up and offered my left hand in response and we shook hands.

"It's like a hostile commemoration, isn't it?"

"Don't you think that's more like us?"

"I suppose it might be."

She squeezed my hand back forcefully, and I squeezed it back.

"Yes. There's one thing I've been wanting to do to you, Horikita-san, if you don't mind..."

"Please go on. What is it?"

"It's..." She smiled and slowly extended her arms towards me.

Her hands came close to my face. And as soon as she gently touched both cheeks, I felt a sharp pain surge through me.

It was immediately after that that I realized that the pain was caused by being pinched on the cheek as hard as I could.

“W-what are you doing...?”

“I really hate you, Horikita-san.” She said and pinched my cheek even harder. “I’ve been on edge since we met today, and I’m still on edge now that we’re cooperating. I just thought it would be bad stress to think that this would go on all the way from Monday. I need to let it dissipate like this for a bit.” The force she put into it gained even more momentum and showed no signs of stopping.

“Is that enough?”

“No, no, no. It’s not enough.”

I was willing to accept a little bit of this, but Kushida-san was getting carried away and wouldn’t stop pulling on my cheeks.

If she’s not going to loosen up at all, I have no choice but to retaliate.

I reached out with both arms and pinched her cheeks in the same way.

“Excuse me?”

“I wonder if you’ll let me go now?”

I assumed that she would stop once she felt the pain.

“Come on Kushida-san, time to wipe that frown off your face.”

Without hesitating, I put all the strength I could into my fingertips and gripped back with the determination to tear her cheeks off



It's a battle of wills and stubbornness when it comes to such a thing.

"You guys can keep going until you're both shreds, I'm leaving."

Ibuki-san, who was the only one that was still calm, said that and walked out of the room first.

The battle of wills continued for two or three minutes, when the pain started to paralyze us.

We both realized that we were making each other look incredibly stupid, and we both let go of each other's face without a second thought.

When I saw Kushida-san's face turn bright red, I realized that I must be the same.

"Come to school on Monday."

"You're so persistent. Can you please just leave?"

Half-heartedly pushed out of the way, I walked out of her room and into the hallway.

"Ouch..." Stroking my aching cheek, I looked towards the elevator and saw Ibuki-san getting in.

"Were you waiting for me by any chance?"

I said and walked to her, Ibuki-san stuck out her tongue and pressed the button for the elevator.

"Maybe you have a talent for making people angry."

Even so, it was thanks to her that I got to meet Kushida-san today. I'll have to give her my all at the sports festival, just as she wanted.

2

I raised my heavy head then rolled myself out of bed. It wasn't like I had a fever, but I had a mild headache that had been going on for a long time.

The reason was obvious. I had skipped five days of school with a feeling of guilt. I've never missed a day of school before, except when I was sick. Tormented by the guilt, I try to think of something else to wipe out the feeling, but I fail to get it out of my head. If I could just get rid of it by trying to forget about it, I wouldn't have taken five days off.

I'll have to do something for a change. I grabbed my cell phone and tapped on the photo folder, leaving several messages unread, and I accessed

the earliest records I had taken. Scrolling through the photos, I looked at them nostalgically.

The first photo that made me stop was one taken just after I entered school, when I didn't have anyone I could call friends yet.

It was the first and only two-shot I took with Hirata-kun, who was smiling gently beside me while I was still unable to smile. I'm still not very good at smiling, but I think I've improved a lot since then.

"I miss this..."

School life in Japan, where I didn't know my right from my left. Hirata-kun was the first person who helped me unwind when I was surrounded by tension. At that time, I was still unaware of my feelings of love. All I could think of was that he was good-looking, kind, and a wonderful person.

I didn't realize it because I didn't have the time to fall in love in China, where competition was so strong and the level of study so high. I don't know when I realized that I was in love, but from the day I became aware of it, I knew I would never put it into words.

Hirata-kun is very popular and not someone I can reach.

If I conveyed my feelings to him by mistake, it would only embarrass him. So I kept it to myself and was content to just be by his side.

"And yet..."

I was so embarrassed and scared just thinking about it again, tears welled up in my eyes.

"How can I..."

Everyone in my class knew that I liked Hirata-kun. When I changed my seat, I'm sure they noticed that I was trying to be near him, right? I don't know what I should act like when I go to school... After I came to this conclusion, I was struck by another guilty feeling. Sakura-san, who had shown both kindness and strictness to Hasebe-san, left the school. Her feelings must have been immeasurably painful. And yet, I was so full of myself that I pushed the button in favor of expulsion, just wishing that those exams would end.

"It's the worst..."

I hated myself for being such a jerk, and I was in so much pain. I'm such a burden... I was about to turn off the screen of my cell phone because I didn't want to look at myself smiling awkwardly when I remembered the

email I had received from Ayanokōji-kun on Monday night. I wonder how he is feeling right now. Is he still able to go to school after having his precious friend expelled by his own hands?

If he is.. how is he doing it?

I'd like to meet him and talk to him in person, so I read through the email that he sent me.

[I want to talk to you in person.]

“Oh...”

Ayanokōji-kun's message was linked to mine, as if my feelings had become text. A phone number and room number are attached, just in case.

Is he going to give me advice?

There are a few people besides Ayanokōji-kun who are worried about me. *Are you okay? Do you want me to listen to you? Don't force yourself, okay?* While I was grateful for such kind words, I didn't feel confident that any of them would lead to a solution.

However, Ayanokōji-kun can be different...

I want you to listen to me. I want to hear what you have to say.

“He wants me to come to...?”

It was still 5:30 p.m.. It's early for dinner but... I think it's rude to visit him out of the blue. I paced back and forth in my room for a while, pondering, and time just flew by.

I made up my mind and resolved to visit Ayanokōji-kun. I pick up the phone nervously. Five times, six times... I hear the tenth ring, and I'm wondering if I should hang up.

Ayanokōji-kun answered the call, and I panicked and shouted.

“Oh, um... this is Wang, Wang! Is this Ayanokōji-kun?”

“You called me, didn't you?”

Ayanokōji-kun's slightly echoed voice and the sound of the shower running faintly reached my ears.

“Yes. I've been having trouble leaving my room for a long time. I feel like I can get out now, so I was wondering if I could talk to Ayanokōji-kun for a minute...”

“Now?”

“Is this a bad time...? I'm sorry for calling so suddenly. I'm not good at these things...”

Maybe it's just a bad time and I can't do anything about it.

“I don’t think so, but can you give me a moment of your time? I’ll be ready in half an hour, no, twenty minutes.”

Knowing how depressed I was, Ayanokōji-kun said that to me.

“Oh, thank you very much! I’ll be there in 20 minutes! Excuse me!”

I was strangely nervous and hung up the phone immediately, unable to stand it.

“Fuuu... I’m so thrilled.”

Maybe the fact that I hadn’t talked to someone in a week had an effect on me. While I waited, I made myself presentable and after almost 20 minutes, I got ready and left the room. When I opened the front door, which now felt heavier than usual...

“Oh, it’s there again.”

There was a plastic bag placed by my door.

“They’ve come again today.”

Inside are jellies, tea, and sandwiches.

I first noticed it on Monday night when I quietly left my room to go to the convenience store.

At first I thought that someone had just put it there by mistake, but the plastic bag contained a small piece of paper with my room number written on it. It didn’t have the sender’s name on it though, so I didn’t know who it was.

“Oh, there’s also a salad in there today but not quite my kind of salad...”

Lots of protein, and a chicken caesar salad.

Still, it’s kind of nice to see that the selection changes a bit every day.

“I wonder who is doing this.”

There’s nothing else in the plastic bag that could be a clue, and no receipt. Thanking them, I leave it at the door for now and take the stairs to the fourth floor where Ayanokōji’s room is located. I feel strangely nervous on the floors where the boys’ room is located. With this in mind, I opened the door and entered the hallway, just as the door to a room opened. It looks exactly like Ayanokōji-kun’s room. But the person who came out from inside...

For a moment I wondered who it was, but it was Karuizawa-san. She didn’t have her usual nice ponytail, but her hair was smooth and straight.

And the two of them were dressed roughly.

Could it be that they were on a date in their room?

If that's the case, I must have made a ridiculously annoying phone call... I almost felt depressed again, but I couldn't run back home. My eyes met with Karuizawa-san's, who immediately took action to look around, as if other people were watching.

"Speak of the devil, there she is." Said Karuizawa-san as she saw me walking up to Ayanokōji-kun's door. "See you later, Kiyotaka!"

Nervously, I took a deep breath, and Karuizawa-san also took two deep breaths. She might say something about Hirata-kun.

"Ba, bye!"



“Eh, what?”

I brace myself, but she just says goodbye and walks past me without making eye contact.

I stop her as she leaves in a hurry.

“Um, Karuizawa-san!”

“What?”

“I’m sorry... for suddenly calling Ayanokōji-kun, I’m sorry for disturbing you...”

“That’s not true, not at all. Really.”

“But...”

“You wanted to ask him for advice, didn’t you? You’re not going to call him now, right? It’s best to use your newfound courage.”

It seemed that my feelings had been conveyed over the phone after all. Karuizawa-san stopped and came back a bit and smiled gently at me.

“Don’t hesitate to ask him for advice, I guess. That guy seems to have a lot to say, but he’s not very good at talking. Even then, I think he can give you an answer.”

“Yes.”

I’ve come this far, I’ve come *this* far. I have to put everything I’m thinking into it. I feel that Karuizawa-san has helped me to create that kind of feeling.

“Well then, I’ll be waiting for you next Monday.”

She gave me an encouraging pep talk and she went straight to tapping the elevator’s up/down button in succession. But when she realized that the elevator wouldn’t be coming soon, she left by the emergency exit stairs.

“Thank you, Karuizawa-san.”

At least it didn’t look like she was unhappy with me.

I always had a strong impression that she was scary when she got angry, but today Karuizawa-san seemed soft and kind... And now I don’t have time to think about anything else, so I hurried to Ayanokōji-kun’s room.

I pressed the chime and the door opened in about 30 seconds.

Ayanokōji-kun was silent as he welcomed me in, so I immediately started to get impatient.

“Oh, um, I was contacted by... and... well, I just wanted to talk to you!”

3

Mii-chan came to my room at almost the exact time I had planned. I really wanted to send Kei back to her room a little earlier, but we were in the middle of something. I wanted to have a few more minutes to get ready, but I had to be careful not to change Mii-chan's mind.

"Don't hesitate to come in."

"Sorry to bother you...!"

Mii-chan couldn't hide her nervousness, but there was no pretense of turning back. From the little I saw of her, I could tell that she was trying very hard to get up on her own. Unlike Haruka and Kushida, she didn't want to stay where she was.

"Do you want something to drink?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you for your concern." She politely declined, and sat down on the carpet in a reserved manner.

I also sat down across from her and prepared to talk.

"The reason you're here has something to do with the leaking of Kushida's secrets regarding Yōsuke, right?"

Mii-chan's shoulders jerked at the mention of his name, then she nodded quietly.

"Also, I'd like to know what's going on in class. Shinohara-san, Matsushita-san, Hasebe-san... At least the ones who are hurting much more than I am. And also about Ayanokōji-kun."

I didn't expect my name to be mentioned here, I suppose it isn't surprising. From her perspective, it looks like I've cut off one of my friend groups with my bitter decision.

"Aren't you getting a lot of calls?"

"Thankfully, there are a lot of people who are worried about me. But I just can't see them. If I do, I'll have to reply to them."

She sees the messages and calls, but never checks them. Otherwise she'd be tempted to look at them.

"Well then, I guess you're right. It doesn't have to be in order, but if you have any questions for me, feel free to ask."

It's not often that two people talk to each other alone like this. We don't need to talk smoothly, but we can't solve things if we are reserved. It's better to find a way to get to know each other a little better.

“Well, you know, I’d like to talk about the matter with Kushida-san... Ah, but before that... just to confirm, was it Ayanokōji-kun who bought and placed various things in front of my room?”

Mii-chan explains to me, as if to supplement my lack of understanding. There was a person who delivered food to her once a day after she started taking a break from school. There was a piece of paper with only Mii-chan’s room number written on it, but nothing to identify the sender.

For a moment, Yōsuke came to mind, but there was no mention of him in the vicinity of Kushida and Haruka. Yōsuke treats his classmates equally, but if he were to offer it to Mii-chan, he would have done the same for the other students, and he would have told me about it in the several times we had met.

“I’m sorry, but that’s not me, and I don’t think I have any idea what you’re talking about.”

“I see. That person also helped me a lot and... I wish I could thank them.”

“Well, whoever it is, it means that there are students who care that Mii-chan is absent.”

Some of them message her, some of them call her, some of them bring her gifts. Or even if they don’t contact her, there will be plenty of students around her who are worried about her.

After nodding a bit happily, Mii-chan popped a question.

“Ayanokōji-kun is still going to school, right?”

If she’s not in contact with the outside world, it’s not surprising that she doesn’t even know for sure that I’m attending. Of course, you wouldn’t expect someone who claims to consult with you to be sleeping away themselves.

“I went to school, this week was no different.”

“Wasn’t it hard? No, it was hard, of course it was hard, but you didn’t think you’d hate going to school?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer isn’t it? I’ve never been one to lead my classmates on before, and I’m sure everyone was surprised by my actions in pushing my friend out of school.”

“Yes. It was different from the Ayanokōji-kun I knew. It was a bit... scary.”

She is straightforward and honest, and frankly states what she feels.

There is no point in talking about the superiority or inferiority of friends and classmates here, or their priorities. Such things were explained in the special exam, and it's not something to dig up now.

"It's just that I was never good at letting my emotions out, and no one noticed that. I think the only reason I can go to school now without missing a day is because I think it's uncool."

"I've thought about that a bit too. I don't like the idea that by taking a day off I'm illustrating what Kushida-san said, that I'm hurting, and that people will know that. On Monday morning, I changed into my uniform and went to the door. But I couldn't take the next step, and after taking a day off, the door became more and more distant and heavy. It's all my fault, though..." Then, as if remembering, Mii-chan bowed her head. "I'm sorry I missed a week because of this."

"You don't need to say these things to me. It must have taken a reasonable amount of courage for you to come here. Besides, you haven't completely given up on going to school, have you?"

"Of course I haven't! I really want to go to school right away. But still... I'm so embarrassed and ashamed..."

Secret thoughts. I'm not sure how many students were aware of it, but if it was exposed in a more public way, it's understandable that she would be deeply hurt.

"I can't say that I can understand the position you're in, or that I can replace you. But at least our classmates are worried about you."

"Yes..."

"And it's also true that you're causing trouble for the class right now."

She gasped, stiffening as if I had pointed a gun to her head.

It's easy to put up words that are pleasing to the ear, but they only have the effect of postponing the conclusion. The side may seem like a rough treatment from the outside, but it works to touch the heart.

"But fortunately, right now, Kushida and Haruka haven't surfaced. But next week, we won't know. What will happen if those two come to school and only you remains absent? Do you understand?"

Imagining your own situation is something even elementary school students can do.

She nodded her head, her arms trembling slightly, as if fear was rising in her. If the stimulation was too strong, she wouldn't take it easy, but

surprisingly, there was no sign of danger. She was small and timid, but I judged that her core was relatively strong and would not be easily broken.

“You can just come to school with an unsuspecting face. You don’t even have to tell Yōsuke anything special.”

“But... I’m in the seat in front of Hirata-kun, and I’m... close to him.”

“Oh, by the way, when we were changing seats, you were the first one to grab the unpopular middle seat. Was that because you thought that Yōsuke would take the seat behind you?”

“Fuu..!”

Because of her blatant attitude, I knew the answer without her having it directly put into words.

“That’s important. You’ve observed and understand Yōsuke very well.”

“Ugh, this is embarrassing...” She hugged her knees and shook her face sideways. Apparently, shame is a stronger issue. “Well, did Hirata-kun say anything about me... Do you think he cares?”

She steps into the part that must have been bothering her all along. But her face was hidden behind her knees so that I couldn’t peek at her.

“Of course, he cares about you. A lot more than he cares about Kushida and Haruka.”

“That’s because he still feels annoyed... right?”

As the party in question, it was natural that Yōsuke would be more concerned than about the other issues.

“It’s different from annoyance. That guy feels sorry for the opposite reason, that he caused you to stop going to school.”

“Oh no... Hirata-kun didn’t do anything wrong!”

“I know. It’s just that you should know very well that he’s that kind of guy.”

Yōsuke can be happy for someone else’s happiness as if it were his own. On the other hand, when someone is unhappy, he feels unhappy as if it were his own. That’s the kind of personality he has. Yōsuke is also suffering because of Mii-chan’s own seclusion.

Understanding this is the most effective and important thing to do in order to overcome the current situation.

She looked up slowly and her eyes were a little red, but she didn’t show any tears as she lowered her knees.

“It’s not that I didn’t think about it. It’s just that I didn’t think that Hirata-kun might be suffering because of me. But I put myself first and tried not to see it...”

Apparently, I didn’t have to teach her from scratch, but just giving her a chance to reflect was enough. When looking at her as a sophomore in high school, it was safe to say that the student named Mii-chan was almost complete.

“Your expression is different from earlier.”

“Thank you. I feel so much better after talking about everything. It’s thanks to you, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“I didn’t do much. It’s just that I happened to be there when you were recovering.”

“That’s not true. I thought that if it was Ayanokōji-kun, he might be able to solve the problem if I met him, that’s what I thought.”

She told me firmly and bowed deeply.

“I-I’ll definitely go to school on Monday, without fail.”

“I know. But when you really have a cold, you should honestly take a day off.”

“No, I’ll go to school on Monday, even if I have to crawl.”

I feel like she’s trying a little too much, but if she’s enthusiastic, that’s good enough for me.

“Also, I’m worried about the person who’s been supplying me with food, because I’ve made them do a lot of shopping over the past five days, and I think the total amount is close to 10,000 points.”

If it’s just one person’s action, that could be a pretty hefty sum indeed.

As she was leaving, she kept thanking me repeatedly, so I ushered her to leave quickly.

“I guess it’s the result of my parents’ teachings. I understand if it’s a little too much.”

She’s too polite even for her classmates. Although, that can be considered one of Mii-chan’s strengths. Now that I’ve solved one problem, I’d better finish what I left in my room. The number of students visiting my room has been increasing lately, so I can’t afford to be complacent.

I can’t afford to be distracted, as I’m sure that Horikita, Yōsuke or any other student could come and visit me at any time. Just as I had resumed my quick cleanup, the doorbell rang again.

I quickly looked at my cell phone, but there was no notification of any contact from Kei or any of her friends.

An unannounced visitor. That's extremely bothersome timing.

I'll try to stay silent for a while. In some cases, I could have used the answering machine. But about 30 seconds later, the doorbell rang once again. It was dusk, and after turning off the lights in the room, I decided to slide the lid of the peephole and look through the hole into the hallway, killing any sign of my presence.

The person I least wanted to see was standing there, a freshman named Amasawa Ichika.

Thinking back, this had happened to me sometime ago. I remember that day, too, the timing of her was bad, and I didn't want her to come inside. Seeing that she was wearing her school uniform even though it was Saturday, I wondered if she was visiting school. Should I view her visit as a mere appearance or as a deliberate act?

Considering what happened last time, I couldn't help but wonder if it was intentional this time as well. She obviously knew I was in the room and came to visit me.

In the meantime, the doorbell rang for the third time.

"Hi, Senpai~ I've come to visit you!"

As I was still looking for a response, Amasawa called out to me in a sweet voice.

"I'm sorry, but I'm in the middle of something. Could you come by tomorrow?"

"That's not going to happen. I've heard that my senpai is doing something bad with the girls, so I've come to investigate. If you don't open the door, we'll have a problem!"

A voice echoed through the hallway, trying to force the door open.

If I let her speeches go unchecked, the neighbors would eventually hear the commotion. I had no choice but to open the door and face Amasawa.

"Where did you hear that I was bringing girls in?"

"I'm the source of that information."

"That's a totally unreliable source."

"That's not true. You brought in Karuizawa-senpai and Wang-senpai today."

It wasn't just a hunch. She didn't hesitate to mention the names of both of them. Even if she could have guessed Kei at random, that would not be the case with Mii-chan. She clearly knows my movements.

"Oh, I'd like to reassure you that I didn't plant any listening devices in your room, okay? The school seems to be doing a thorough inspection."

It's true that you can't buy those kinds of nosy things through mail order. However, there is a way to obtain them, but only for Amasawa.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you had one or two in your possession from when you were connected to Tsukishiro."

She simply continued to smile at me, even after I pointed that fact out.

"Can I come in for now? I'm sorry to disturb you."

Before I could give her permission, Amasawa walked into the room with the momentum of taking off her shoes. She then began scurrying around the room without reservation.

"What are you doing here?"

"Huh? Ohhh, I'm just checking the room."

I would like an answer as to why she needs to check the room.

Amasawa, who continues to rummage without hesitation, approaches the bed with her gaze.

"You're probably wondering how I was able to guess about Wang-senpai, right? Did I happen to see her come and go, or do I know her in some way?"

"Do you always go into people's rooms to brag about your own information network?"

Quickly affirming without denying, Amasawa touched the bed with her hand. While fixing the wrinkles in the sheet, she was searching for something with her fingertips in every corner.

I sat down on the carpet and observed Amasawa, who would investigate until she was satisfied.

"Senpai's girlfriend has long hair, doesn't she? That means you like girls with long hair, right? That's why I'm growing mine out little by little."

She continued to move her hands and eyes while talking about her hair, which I hadn't even asked her about. I couldn't force her to stop, so I had no choice but to watch her, when she suddenly stopped moving.

Then she picks up something from near the pillow of the bed with her index finger and thumb and lifts it up.

“What’s this?”

She holds up a strand of long, golden hair as if it were the head of a demon.

“It must be Kei’s. She comes to visit often these days.”

“I’m sure she does, but why is it near the pillow?”

“I’m sure there are many possible cases, but do I have to list them one by one?”

“No, no. There’s no need for that~”

Then she got down on all fours on her knees on the floor and started looking at the floor like a detective, searching for something.

I don’t know what she’s looking for, but I doubt she’ll be satisfied.

“Did they teach your generation how to ransack people’s rooms in the White Room?”

When I posed a question about the White Room, Amasawa stopped dead in her tracks.

“Don’t you have any doubts, senpai? Those, who were sent to this school in order to get you expelled, could still be blending into everyday life without being noticed by my senpai?”

“At least you seem to have been branded as disqualified and unwanted by the White Room.”

“I won’t deny that, but then what do you think about other potential candidates?”

“I’m not interested.”

“Well, you’re right. If you’re still wary, you won’t act carelessly.

“I’d recommend that you leave me and yourself out of it and just enjoy your school life.”

“I agree with that. I think you should do the same...”

After a short pause, Amasawa continued her search. With her back to me and her butt sticking out, her underwear was slightly visible through the short length of her uniform skirt.

It’s not like she didn’t notice, but she continued to crawl while pretending to act as if she didn’t care.

As she crawled under the bed, her underwear became even more exposed.

“You’re glued to my underwear, you’re so naughty, senpai.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m more wary of what you’ll do to me if I take my eyes off you than if I’m looking at your underwear.”

As I keep my eyes on Amasawa, she pulls her face out of the bed and looks back at me, looking far too mature to be my kouhai, and crawls straight up to me.

“I think you’re getting out of control, don’t you? I think you’re confusing the means with the end. That person is more concerned with getting his senior expelled than he is with getting himself back into the White Room.”

A murmur at close range, only a few centimeters between our lips.

A sweet smell reaches my nostrils.

“They seem like quite the nuisance, don’t they?”

“For a senpai, yes it is. So I’ve been thinking about it lately. I’ve been thinking that it would be better if I told my senpai, who I really adore, and ask him to lead me away~”

“Or maybe I’ll be the one to be led away.”

“Fufufu~ that’s hilarious.”

I didn’t seem to find the topic of my kidnapping back to the White Room all that amusing.

“What shall we do? Do you want to hear the name perhaps...?”

As she got even closer, about an inch, Amasawa waited for my response.

“I appreciate the suggestion. But I’ll refrain from asking.”

“Is it because you’re not confident that you can win when you hear their name?”

“If their identity leaks out from an unexpected source, you’ll be the first one to be suspected. What will be the result of that?”

“They, of course, might point the finger at me.”

“There’s no need to make your school life uncomfortable just to find out what I am.”

I wouldn’t show any mercy if she stood in my way as an enemy, but Amasawa doesn’t seem to be doing that at the moment.

“You’re very kind, senpai.”

Besides, trusting her too much in a bad way is also a problem. If she was acting with some strategy, I couldn't deny the possibility that this statement of Amasawa's was also a trap.

"Now that you've rejected me, I'm going home."

"Did you come all the way to my room just to tell me that? Or did you mainly come to look for trash?"

"Hmmm I wonder..." Laughing devilishly, Amasawa quickly turned her attention to the burnable garbage bag that didn't contain much in the kitchen as she tried to head for the door.

"I've visited your room a few times, but today you take out very little garbage, don't you? I thought you were the type to fill the bag to the brim with garbage like this and then throw it away."

"It's just that there's so much food waste from vegetables and fish that I'm not comfortable leaving it until next week."

"In that case, would you like me to take out the trash on my way home?"

"I'm sorry, but it's forbidden to take out the trash after eight o'clock at night."

"I see you're following the law."

I hadn't expected Amasawa's visit, but I had finally been tipped off as to her true motive for coming here.

"I see a little of the purpose for which you came here today. You've come to visit me to make your current proposal. The reason you were searching every inch of the room was because you were wary that someone else might be listening in."

The fact that she pretended to ransack and find something private about me personally was all because she was on the lookout. Amasawa was wary that the White Room students had already done what she feared.

"Senpai, oh senpai. I'm sure senpai will be fine, but still, if I'm expelled from school, please consider that something unexpected is going to happen to you as well." On her way out, Amasawa left the room with those words.

I checked my phone to see if there was anything unusual, and found that I had received a chat from Akito.

That was good news for a start. As a member of the group, he might have succeeded in convincing Haruka to come to school. The problem is that

the message was not sent in the group chat of the Ayanokōji Group. After staring at the screen for a while, a new text was sent to me.

The text itself was plain and simple:

*[Please keep a **quiet** eye on Haruka for a while.]*

The text itself is plain, but the “quiet” part is emphasized.

She’ll go to school, but she doesn’t want to talk to me. If I talk to her carelessly, she might not go to school again. I guess that’s the reason. I have no objection at all if she comes back to school.

[All right. I’ll be very careful.]

[Thank you. I hope you can be friends again.]

After a little while and after a few encouraging texts from Akito, I ended the chat.

“Another problem solved...”

However, this fix is not a true solution. It’s better to think of it as just a temporary revival of Haruka.

The dizzying few hours were over, and I was feeling a greater fatigue than usual.

“I think I’ll go to bed early today.”

I’ll just have to make sure I remember to take out the trash.

4

Monday came around again. Saturday was a big day, with Mii-chan directly consulting me, and Akito indirectly informing me of Haruka’s intention to go to school.

Still, there was no guarantee that she would come to school, and it was up to her to decide whether she wanted to or not. As for Kushida, I haven’t received a single call from Horikita until this morning. Even if she did come to school, there was no telling how she and her classmates would react.

I arrived at school at the same time as usual, and sat down to wait for the three of them to arrive. After about a quarter of the class had arrived at school, I saw the surprised smiles of some of the girls.

Mii-chan walked into the classroom in a reserved manner.

“Oh, good morning...”

Mii-chan, who had come to school prepared to be tormented, looked up fearfully. But her worries vanished into thin air, as the girls immediately welcomed her without mentioning the subject in any way.

“Good morning, Mii-chan.”

“Oh, good morning, Hirata-kun.”

And he also welcomes Mii-chan back with a smile that hasn’t changed one bit. At this point, I don’t know if there is a way forward for Mii-chan’s love life. However, even if it hasn’t started, it certainly hasn’t ended. It is conceivable that there will be a major turning point in their school life in the future.

After that, the girls never left Mii-chan, who was still somewhat tense, and they started laughing about what had happened at school last week. After most of the classmates had arrived at school, Haruka showed up at the door. Akito accompanied her to her seat, following her to prevent her from running away, as if she might do so at any moment.

Keisei was a little hesitant, but he made up his mind and walked over to Haruka and called out to her. I never thought I’d see the day when I’d be glad I wasn’t around those three people when we switched seats.

Haruka looked at me for a moment, but then quickly looked away and down at her cell phone.

Mii-chan and Haruka both came to school. They have friends who support them when they are in pain. For Mii-chan, it was many of the girls. For Haruka, it was Akito and Keisei. Even though they aren’t that many, they can be called best friends.

For the moment, it seems that the class has avoided the negative impact we were all fearing.

But what about Kushida?

With less than three minutes to go before morning homeroom, a stiff-faced Horikita came to school alone. After a quick glance at Kushida’s seat, she took her own seat and stared straight at the blackboard.

She was not in the lobby this morning, so I was hoping that she would be there, but I guess she was not. Shinohara and some of the other students must have thought the same thing when they saw Horikita. Eventually, the bell rang and it was time for homeroom.

Chabashira-sensei appeared in the classroom, with all the seats filled except Kushida's.

"I see you two are feeling better. It looks like it was a long cold, but you'll have to take better care of yourselves in the future."

She scolded them lightly, but confirmed their attendance without strong censure.

"So today's absence is Kushida? I don't think I've heard from her, so..."

At that moment, I heard the sound of the classroom door being opened. And although she was slightly out of breath, she quickly adjusted herself.

"I'm sorry, I'm late."

With a calm voice, Kushida made her way into the classroom.

"This is your first time being late, Kushida. You've been absent for a long time, but is your body okay now?"

"Yes. I'll be more careful next time."

She replied matter-of-factly, without any panic. Kushida sat down in her seat. She didn't exchange a word with anyone, but kept her gaze fixed forward.

The classroom became tense at once, but since there was no room for private conversation, silence followed.

"I know a lot has happened, but it's been a week since we've all been together."

Chabashira-sensei nodded in satisfaction, though she could still sense the unstable situation of the class.

"It's almost time for the sports festival. I expect you to make great strides and perform well."

After that, homeroom was over and the classroom was suddenly in an uproar. Needless to say, it was due to Kushida's arrival at school.

The students stared at her as if she were a ghost or something. Will she remain silent, or will she put on her usual smile? Or will she bare her fangs again? I quietly pulled out my chair and walked out of the classroom to head down the hallway.

Then I opened the door to the hallway. I didn't want to accidentally expose my inner thoughts to the rest of the class.

I thought so, but...

“I’m watching you, don’t worry.”

I received such a message on my cell phone. In the corridor, where I only showed my face, Chabashira-sensei spotted me and answered with a single nod. After confirming this, I decided to close the door without being noticed. As a teacher, she will do everything she can. I’m sure that’s what Chabashira-sensei is following up on.

No one was able to make a move in a situation where anything could have happened.

When Horikita was about to pull out her chair, Kushida stood up to overtake her. With that one action, she seemed to be threatening to do something unnecessary.

The first thing she did was to go in front of Mii-chan, who was also sitting near her. When Mii-chan finally came back to class, she stiffened like a frog being stared at by a snake.

“I heard from Horikita-san that you were absent because of me.”

“Oh, yeah, um...”

“Do you hate me now?”

“No, no, it’s not like that...”

“There’s no need for you to like me, Wang-san. I can’t change the fact that I revealed your secret in front of everyone, and I don’t intend to get along with you either. I guess I don’t have to tell you this.”

I don’t intend to get along with you. The tone of voice was soft, but the strong words made Mii-chan stiffen even more. The eyes of many of the students looking at them showed dissatisfaction, anxiety, and doubt.

Normally that would be painful enough, but it didn’t affect Kushida in the slightest.

“I’m not going to ask you to understand how I felt at that time, but I had to do that. I’ll apologize for making you one of the targets.”

She said and bowed deeply. It seems more clerical than a sincere apology, but at least I don’t sense any malice.

“I’m sorry for causing trouble to Shinohara-san, Matsushita-san, and the others. It looks like you’ve made up for it.”

If you ask me, Shinohara, Matsushita and the rest of the group are very close. Maybe Yōsuke, Sudō and the others had been working during this weekend to make things right.

“Do you think you can just apologize?”

Shinohara's words were a little harsh, but she was trying to restrain herself.

"I'm sorry, but if I don't apologize, we can't move on, can we?"

"What kind of apology is that?"

"I don't know. But this is the real me."

This isn't the false mask that she's been wearing. That fact alone must have made the whole class nervous.

"In the days to come, I intend to maintain some semblance of appearance as I have in the past, so I can gather information from other classes as the occasion demands. But if anyone in the class wants to interfere with that, that's fine with me."

No matter how much Kushida tries to arrange things on the outside, if someone on the inside gets in the way of that, the relationship can't be built.

"I'll leave it up to you all to decide if you want to use the weapons I've built or not."

If Kushida was someone who valued her friends and feared being alone, isolating her would be a way to get back at her. But Kushida was not passive, she was on the offensive.

"And I have no mercy for anyone who turns against me. It's really only a small part of what I exposed in the special exam. I'm sure there are plenty of others who have facts they want to hide, right?" She muttered nonchalantly, as if threatening the entire class rather than someone in particular.

"But I'll promise you one thing. I won't reveal any secrets you have unless you're trying to trick me. This isn't for the good of the class, this is for my own good, to graduate from class A. It's my last line of defense so that I don't lose my value as a person."

As long as my classmates resent her, complain about her, and distrust her, depending on the situation, she could be the one to be cut down. So, in order to not let that happen, she will not reveal any more secrets. However, if you stab her in the back, you will not be tolerated. She promised to contribute to the class as soon as she learned how to protect herself.

Kikyō Kushida's abilities are among the top in our class. At least in academic and physical challenges, she would not be a drag.

"Hey, Hasebe-san, are you okay too?"

She directed her words at Haruka, who hadn't moved from her seat or even looked at her. Haruka didn't respond and let her gaze drift out the window.

5

My daily life has begun to change drastically in the last week or so. Not once did the Ayanokōji Group get together, and that didn't change, or even return, when Haruka came to school. With the disappearance of the gathering that had been the norm, the way she spent her time at school was different.

During the ten-minute break, I was usually alone or talking with Kei. Occasionally, I'd have a quick chat with classmates like Sudō or Matsushita, but the chances of talking with Akito or Keisei were noticeably reduced.

My life was strange at first, but little by little my body began to accept and adapt to it. Lunch break is a similar cycle, but when Kei goes out to eat with her friends, I go to the library. It's the same as before, my own personal repose time.

It's just a shame that Hiyori hasn't been coming to the library lately and we haven't been able to talk about books.

And the sequence of events remains the same even after school. Today, Kei had told me in advance that she was going home to hang out with her friends, so I didn't have any special plans.

I decided to go back to the dormitory as soon as possible, as staying behind would be a mental burden for Haruka. However, something unexpected occurred.

"Kiyopon, do you have some time now?"

Haruka, who I thought would never come into contact with me, approached me as I went out into the hallway to leave.

Her voice was filled with a sense of urgency.

Perhaps the purpose of her coming to school after a week was to make contact in public.

Without looking back to check her expression, I answered that I did.

"I'll make time if I have to."

I tried to give off the vibe that I had plans, so I could find her true reason for asking.

"Then make time. Okay?"

She didn't seem to shy away from asking me forcibly.

"I've already talked to Horikita-san. I'll wait for you at the cafe in the Keyaki Mall first." That's all she said, and Haruka left the classroom.

Shortly after, Akito followed Haruka and came towards me.

"So she came to school to talk to me?"

"I don't know... I've never heard of it either. So I don't know what we're going to talk about. But I don't think I can take your side in this situation."

Akito apologized, but he would rather not take mine or Haruka's side.

"That's fine."

After a brief conversation that didn't raise any suspicions, Akito and then Keisei also left the classroom.

It seems that she's gathered all the members of Ayanokōji Group, and even called Horikita there as well.

Of course, it had to be about Airi's expulsion.

Horikita came up to me as the three of them left.

"I tried to make sure it was just me she called out, but she wouldn't listen to me saying that you definitely need to be there."

She seemed concerned and tried to solve the problem alone, but this time, circumstances were what they were.

The two of us left the classroom together and headed to the café.

I decided to confirm what I had been wondering about before we got into the heavy stuff.

"It looks like you succeeded in bringing Kushida back to school. I'm honestly impressed."

"Well, she's officially back. But there are still many uncertainties. It's not going to be the same as before."

"Still, you can't ask for much more than that right now."

Although Kushida's tone of voice had changed drastically, she came back with an answer that was close to the best for the class. I'm sure that Horikita's advice helped her to come to that conclusion.

Fortunately, the leaks to the other classes have been minimal. Even if it does eventually become known, it is likely that by then some time will have passed and the severity will have faded away.

"How did you convince her? I don't think you've been straightforward with just a good suggestion."

Even if the final landing point is today's statement, there must have been many twists and turns to get there. I was more interested in that than the current situation, but Horikita's expression was complicated.

"I'm too mature to do something so childish as to bribe her or something. But I've done more than I'd like to say."

From the way she avoided talking about specifics, she must have done something she really didn't want to talk about. She didn't seem likely to answer if I pursued it too deeply, so I had no choice but to give up.

"But considering the person I'm talking to, I might have made the right choice." She replied, lightly stroking her cheek with her left hand, as if remembering the details. "Anyway, it took a week, but we managed to get the whole class together."

"Come to think of it, the girls' troubles have calmed down as well."

I had told Yōsuke to rely on Horikita, so she was definitely involved.

"Shinohara and the others' case was initiated by Hirata-kun, and we gathered at Keyaki Mall on Sunday."

"You were also present?"

"I was. On top of that, we agreed to let bygones be bygones regarding the exposed secrets. Shinohara-san was protesting strongly for a while, but Ike-kun appeased her, and that was a big thing." She replied with a bare face, like it didn't mean much.

The way Horikita was talking, it was clear that Ike had played the role of boyfriend.

"So many different students are growing up without even knowing it."

"You don't seem happy about that."

"I'm happy for them, you know. It's just that it makes me look relatively pathetic. I get... anxious about whether I'm growing or not."

It is easy to evaluate others, but difficult to grade oneself. If you want to be lenient, you can be as lenient as you want, and if you want to be strict, you can be strict.

"I'm sure a third party will eventually give you an answer."

"Sure."

She needs to focus on getting the class back on track first. Her own reputation will follow on its own after that.

"I heard that you were the one who helped Wang-san, she was one I couldn't reach. Thank you."

“I was just giving her some advice. Even if I hadn’t done anything, someone would have rescued her eventually.”

“You helped me get back on my feet as soon as possible. I feel like I’ve been confronted with the fact that I can’t do anything on my own.”

She speaks in a rather light tone, even though she would normally be depressed.

“Oh, that’s right. I’d like to give you a message from the student council president, Nagumo.”

“A message? You seem to be acting like a messenger these days. What is it?”

“He said that he’s open to suggestions, otherwise to accept the offer..”

“Take the offer?”

“I don’t know, Kiyotaka-kun. I was just instructed to tell you.”

“Fine. I’ll go to the student council room later, and I’ll figure things out.”

This sports festival. I still haven’t decided if I want to participate or not. But now that the deadline is a week away, I guess I’ll just have to say yes.

I’m sure Nagumo would mind if I don’t compete with him in some way sooner or later.

“Now it’s just a matter of Hasebe-san. I honestly can’t read too much into what she’s going to say.”

“Judging from the way she’s been acting all day, I wouldn’t be surprised if some rude words came out of her mouth.”

“Just don’t be caught off guard.”

Mii-chan and Kushida came to school after overcoming their assignments. But the waves would be different for Haruka.

It is highly likely that she will now stand in the way as an obstacle.

“While I was waiting to meet Kushida-san, I also lightly felt Miyake-kun and Yukimura-kun a few times.”

I didn’t realize that she was paying attention not only to Shinohara and the others, but to the Ayanokōji Group as well.

“Hasebe-san was the one who had the hardest time with the special exam. Following you is inevitable.”

Still, the expression on Horikita’s face as she walked beside me didn’t clear up, probably because she hadn’t achieved much at all.

“The only time I’ve talked to her was when she showed up at my door, but she didn’t tell me anything. Miyake-kun told me to leave her alone, so I decided to give her a week.”

So that’s what happened today. I guess Horikita didn’t expect Haruka to come to school.

“Either way, Akito-kun was able to bring her to school today so I suppose something should work out.”

“I hope that’s the case, but... that might not be true.”

Since the two of us were summoned in this way, it is normal to think that something is going on.

It’s not like she’s going to be working hard again from now on.

“I’m the one who nominated Airi for expulsion at that moment, and I’m the one who pushed her into it. All you have to do is listen to what I have to say.”

“That’s not how it works. I was of the same opinion, so I’m equally responsible. No, it’s all because I made a promise that I failed to keep. I have to take it all in.”

She seems to have more room in her heart now than she did then, but I’d be worried about her getting too worked up.

“It’s important to take care of Haruka, but you also need to shift your mind towards the sports festival.”

We’ve already spent a week trying to resolve our class issues. In the meantime, as long as we’re starting to focus on Class A and our efforts to win, we can’t afford to miss the boat on this one either.

“Right. Of course, we’re thinking hard about how we’re going to compete in the sports festival. I think we’ve got some ideas of what we’re going to do.”

While backing up Kushida, Shinohara, and the others, she seems to be on top of that as well.

“Then let’s hear it. What’s the goal for the sports festival?”

I asked Horikita about her goals in order to succeed.

“I’ll go for first places, naturally. No, I will definitely take first place, I have to.”

Confidence peeked out from Horikita’s profile as she stared ahead.

“There’s nothing wrong with setting high goals. We’ve got some strong students in our class, and we’re not going to lose to anyone else. So, do you have a strategy in mind? It includes a battle of all the grades, but the focus will basically be on fighting for overall points in the same grade. Sakayanagi and Ryūen can come up with strategies that you wouldn’t expect.”

“The rule is that if you finish with less than five events, you forfeit all your points. If it’s Ryūen-kun, he could feign an accident during the competition and try to injure you and get you to leave the competition.”

It’s not surprising that Ryūen would try to use such a method, as he did last year when Horikita was targeted. If it was Sakayanagi, she would look at the participants of the competition and guide her classmates to the best possible outcome.

“Against all odds, what moves are you going to use?”

“Basically a straightforward one. Have Sudō-kun and Onodera-san ramp up the scoring, and then use students like Kushida-san and myself to score points. We’ll just do what we need to do to win.”

“If we can win with that, though, we won’t have any trouble. There’s also the handicap of having thirty-eight people in the class.”

Horikita nodded immediately. She had expected that response from the start.

“That’s why I’ve decided to take one risk. I’m preparing for it now.”

“Risk?”

“I was wondering if you could join me tomorrow after school to talk about the specifics.”

“You mean you need my help?”

“No, I don’t. Just stay with me and listen to what I have to say. And finally, I just want you to give me an objective answer as to whether or not it’s worth the risk.”

“Are you sure that’s all you want?”

“I don’t need you to keep spoiling me with solutions, it’s fine.”

She doesn’t need advice or suggestions because she already has some idea of what she wants. If that’s the case, I’ll just wait and see what Horikita thinks of her strategy for the sports festival.

“Alright. I’ll let you know tomorrow after school.”

When we eventually arrived at the café, the three members of Ayanokōji Group were seated and waiting for us.

There was no sign of chit-chat, and three drinks were placed on the table.

As long as you're using a restaurant, it's common courtesy to at least order one drink. As soon as we arrived, Haruka said and urged us to sit on the two empty seats. We individually chose our drinks at random and then started to take our seats.

"It seems like you wanted to talk to me a few times while I was resting, so I thought I'd ask you about it."

Haruka cut to the chase nonchalantly without looking at either Horikita or myself

It seems like both of them wanted to ask questions, but right now Horikita was on the stand.

"Well, the problem has sort of been solved. You were out of the school, now you're back."

"You mean you were worried because you might lose your reputation in class."

"Of course, that's not the only reason, there's a good reason why you missed a week. Don't you think?"

"I'm not feeling well. That's what I told the school, so there shouldn't be a problem, right? Miyake told me that there might be a penalty if I miss another week, so that's why I came to school today."

What's wrong with that? Without showing any joy, anger, or sorrow, Haruka answers calmly.

"Indeed. But the reason you were absent wasn't because you were just sick, right?"

"How can you be so sure it was? It could have just been purely physical." Without denying it, Haruka took a sip from her cup.

Whether the absence was due to health problems or not, that was just the preliminary stage of the problem.

No matter how Horikita answered, Haruka would never be satisfied.

"I know you're doubting me, but it's true that I've been sick. It wasn't sickness. I just had a hard time mentally, I couldn't sleep, and because I was so stressed and tired I just couldn't find the strength to come to school."

Akito and Keisei seemed to be listening calmly, but that was not the case. They understand that although they are suffering as well, their suffering

is far from Haruka's.

So they can only listen in silence.

"Why don't you stop playing with lame words and say what you want to say?"

Rather than resorting to subterfuge, Horikita takes a strong stance.

That attitude usually has the opposite effect, but Haruka is unfazed.

It's as if she has kept his emotions bottled up deep inside. That's the impression I get from her.

By her side, Horikita felt the same thing, which is probably why she used excessive expressions.

"Are you satisfied with the fact that you got more class points from the special exam?" Haruka coldly asked Horikita.

"I'm not satisfied, no. There's still over five hundred points separating us from Class A. Besides, if possible, it would have been ideal to aim for Class A without missing anyone, which was the goal. But there's no point in talking about it now, is there?"

No one wants to drop out of school. Only appointed Airi for a compelling reason.

I've already had that validation.

"My best friend was a victim of Horikita-san's selfish decision. Are you aware of that?"

For the first time today, the words that Haruka wanted to say come spilling out.

"Yes."

It's been more than a week since the special exam ended, and Horikita has been fighting against her own judgment.

You don't have to ask her that directly, but you can tell by watching her every day.

But such things have nothing to do with Haruka.

She won't forgive her because she is working hard or if she gets results.

"You're a great leader. You don't care what it takes to get your class to win."

"I'm not there yet."

"You know I hate you and detest you, right?"

"Of course, I know."

"Where's your promise to cut off the students who were the traitors?"

“I’m afraid I didn’t look far enough ahead on that one. But since we can’t pretend that the special exam the other day didn’t happen, we’ll just have to make use of it next time.”

“There are some mistakes that can’t be forgiven.”

“I won’t deny that either. You’re right.”

“Kiyopon... do you think it was the right decision to leave Kushida-san in the school?”

“I decided it was the right thing to do, so I left her, ready to face the backlash. I guess I’ll have to repeat myself.”

“Ah, yes.”

Horikita didn’t show any change in her composure, and her speech intensified slightly.

“I’m not going to make a lame apology. No matter how much you argue with me, the fact is that I changed my mind and decided that Kushida-san should stay. It’s natural for you to hold a grudge, and you may suffer a painful reprisal someday. But I decided that the person who could be a more valuable asset to the class was Kushida-san. I’m slowly becoming more and more convinced of that.”



“Even if Kushida-san was brilliant, there were others who were incompetent. It didn’t have to be... her.”

There were other people to cut.

With Horikita in front of her, who couldn’t come to such a conclusion, Haruka continued.

“I don’t approve. No matter how many people recognize Horikita-san in the future, I will never recognize her.”

Saving her emotions as much as she can, Haruka shows no signs of trying to forgive.

“I guess I’ll just have to try harder to get you to admit it.”

“I told you I won’t approve.”

“I’m responsible for Sakura-san’s expulsion. I won’t deny it. I can’t deny it. But that doesn’t mean I should go about reprimanding it to everyone who’s affected. Are you now asking me to expel you from school or something to make you feel better?”

It’s not like that would bring Airi back. The 100 class points she had sacrificed for the class would be wiped out by that act.

“Or do you want me to get down on my knees? Would that make you feel better?”

Bullheadedness. A competitive spirit. That’s what it looks like, but it’s not. Horikita is suffering. She’s suffering, but she’s facing Haruka with an air of defiance.

As I sat next to her, I was able to peek into the true meaning of her wavering eyes.

“Give me back Airi.”

“I can’t meet your demands if you ask me to do something I can’t... do.”

“That’s all I want. I don’t care about class, I really don’t care.”

She grabbed a few strands of her own hair and tore them out as hard as she could.

“I made the wrong decision back then.”

“If you were frustrated, maybe you should have fought.” Immediately after those almost provocative words were released, Horikita followed up with more. “But it’s useless. Even if you had fought, there would have been nothing you could have done to resist.”

“That’s true. You’re right, there’s nothing I could have done. Kiyopon used Airi’s feelings to push her into a corner without mercy. No normal person could have done something like that.”

This was the first time she looked at me with contempt.

But she didn’t seem to want to talk to me, so she turned her attention back to Horikita.

“Is Kushida-san really going to act for the class’s sake? She could betray us.”

“I’m sure I’ll regret it if Kushida-san drags the class down in the future.”

Indeed, Kushida wasn’t necessarily guaranteed to be useful to the class.

If Horikita made a mistake in steering the ship in the future, there might come a day when she would regret her choice to cut Airi.

“But even if I were to go back in time with my current memories, I’m sure what I would do would not change much. I’d repeat my decision to bail out Kushida-san and choose Sakura-san as my victim. The only difference is that I won’t make anymore wild promises.”

She reiterates that she will not change her conclusion.

“Why not. Kiyopon... what did Airi ever do to you...?”

Horikita would have answered even if I hadn’t said anything, but here I decided to speak my mind.

“It’s a matter of perspective. This incident has been a strong stimulus for the students whose names are in the lower ranks of the OAA. If we continue to stay low, I might be the next one to be expelled. I think it’s a plus just because I now have a strong sense of such danger.”

Because that was also my role in naming Airi.

“You sound like Ryūen, cutting off people who aren’t good enough?”

“I suppose so. I don’t know what kind of policy Ryūen’s following right now, but it’s true that it’s almost autocratic system. Up until now, the class policy has been too vague and lax.”

“It kind of reminds me of when I first started school. It’s just like when we were selfish and had no cohesion whatsoever.”

She may believe it’s similar but it’s not the same thing.

“The situation is different from that time. Preventing damage that doesn’t need to be released is a necessity, but minimizing the damage that needs to be released is what we did this time.”

“But...!”

Here, for the first time, Haruka raised her voice.

“It’s Kushida, but Horikita came to that conclusion because she felt that the effect she would get when she became an ally had the potential to be far, far greater than Airi. And because I could see that future as well, I respected Horikita’s opinion and decided to give her a helping hand.”

Basically, there is no such thing as a definite future. We can only imagine and act to grasp the future we see. People are not all-powerful.

“Airi is gone, but I’ve noticed the class is back to its usual routine.”

“I understand your frustration, but did you feel the same way about Yamauchi-kun?”

“That guy got what he deserved. This is a different case.”

“It’s the same. You’re just angry at your friends sacrifice.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

There was no clear goal to this discussion.

Strictly speaking, there is no solution other than for Haruka to snap.

“I can’t accept such a reality. I can’t accept it.”

And if Haruka doesn’t break, then there’s a big problem waiting for her.

“Kushida-san may indeed have been a threat. Maybe she’s ostensibly reformed now and is going to act for the good of the class from now on. But do you think I’m going to take that seriously and cooperate?”

“Yeah... when you took a week off, I felt it was going to be a longer lasting problem than anyone else.”

Horikita said that while Kushida needed to be dealt with quickly, Haruka was prepared for the long haul.

Having lost Airi in the exam, Haruka was not afraid now.

“But you came to school. If you just wanted to talk to us, you can do it even if you’re still not going to school. Isn’t that right?”

I was grateful for the faint hope that Haruka had submitted herself to come to school.

However, the world is not so naive.

“I just came here because I don’t have an answer yet.”

“Answer?”

“I came to school to look for the answer that I couldn’t see when I was locked in my room.”

Akito and Keisei heard those words, and their eyes fell down.

“I’m looking for the answer to how I can get back at Horikita and Kiyopon.”

Haruka said coldly, the coldest she had ever said.

The words that escaped from her slightly dry lips were different in nature from any kind of threat or bluff.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Horikita was also reminded of the weight of those words.

“Because that’s what I wanted to tell you today. I’m going to make sure you regret expelling Airi.”

Without even touching her own drink, Haruka left her seat.

Akito followed behind her.

It was not only Horikita who looked away in dismay, but also Keisei.

“I don’t think Horikita or Haruka are wrong. It’s a sly way to put it, but that’s what I really feel. At the end of the day, I’m fundamentally of the mindset that as long as I can save myself, that’s all that matters.”

As if Keisei is ashamed of himself, he still comes to tell the truth without hiding it.

“It’s the same for everyone. It’s not strange that you want to save yourself.”

“That’s why I can’t understand what Haruka is feeling right now. But that doesn’t mean I think I have the right to tell her to stop. Even if it’s to prevent trouble for the class.”

He tapped the table with his fist forcefully, and Keisei also left his seat.

“The group is already half destroyed. Still, I’ll be useful to the class as I am. As long as I can’t play an active role in the sports festival, I’ll study harder and contribute to the class. If I don’t do that, there’s a... virtually no chance that I’ll be cut.”

Even though he is good at studying, Keisei is lagging behind in terms of athleticism and social contribution.

When it comes to the number of friends he has, it’s clear that he’s at a particular disadvantage.

Chapter Four: Agreement

I CAME TO HEAR the rest of yesterday's story at a karaoke bar in the Keyaki Mall. Indeed, this is one of the best places to have a private conversation except for the dormitory. When I stepped into the room, there was no one in sight except for me and Horikita.

"If we're just going to talk, we don't have to come all the way to the karaoke bar, do we?"

Since we have a history of going into each other's rooms, we have no problem talking to each other in one of our rooms.

In other words, the fact that she chose this location means that there are going to be other people joining us. I don't go too deep and just leave it to Horikita's initiative.

"We have a little time before our scheduled time, so... do you want to sing something?" She takes the microphone that was on the table and holds it out to me.

"No, I'll pass. Why don't you sing, Horikita? I'll at least give you a hand to go with it."

"No."

Immediate denial. You encourage people to do things you don't want to do...

"I'm studying." Saying so, she silently took out her notebook and took out her own reference book and began to study.

At school, tablets and other equipment are now used in many of the classes, but I guess independent study is still easier to learn by directly opening a book and notebook.

The room is quite quiet when no songs are playing. The strange atmosphere was caused by the odd and bizarre exchange, but I decided to sit quietly on the sofa and wait for the time to come.

It was after 5:10 p.m.

Horikita, who had been checking the time on her cell phone every few minutes since before 5:00, looked up with a sigh.

"I'm sorry. This may turn out to be a longer game than I thought."

I didn't ask who she was meeting with, but I can assume that they were confirmed to come late, although the meeting time was 5:00. The lack of communication suggests that there are compelling reasons for the delay, that the person is a bit loose, or that the person is late on purpose.

I thought of various students and repeatedly checked them off, then waited for about 15 minutes.

The door to the room, which had not moved an inch for a while, was slowly opened by an outsider. The person who appeared there was... someone I had not expected. The first year D class student, Katsuragi Kōhei.

At first glance, he seemed to be a stickler for punctuality, but I was surprised.

“Sorry I'm late.”

“No, I don't mind. You must have gone through a lot of trouble yourself, Katsuragi.”

“Somewhat...”

Muttering this, Katsuragi urged the figure lurking behind him to enter the room. Another person appears.

“Yo, Suzune, I appreciate that you want to have a date with me, but it looks like you have a lot of extra people.”

It was Ryūen Kakeru, the man who pulled Katsuragi, once the leader of Class A, out of his own class.

“Even if I met with you alone, it would be difficult to have a constructive conversation.”

Despite his wry smile, Ryūen shows no sign of relaxing his keen observation of Horikita.

With the Kushida incident settled and the distractions removed, Horikita has regained her conventional composure, and since there has been little direct interaction since moving up to second grade, it is not surprising that he senses a change in Horikita even at this stage.

“I wonder if you were intentionally late and trying to take mental advantage?”

“I wonder, I wonder.”

Even before they came together, they have already begun to explore each other, to check each other, to fight each other.

I can only assume that Ryūen's side has not yet been told the reason why they were summoned here.

“You have something to tell us... let’s hear the details.”

“Can you have a seat? I wouldn’t bother to call you out if it was something that would take a minute or two.”

Ryūen gave me a quick glance, but sat down proudly on the sofa, grabbed the charging tablet and began to operate it, completing his order in a familiar manner, and then tossing it messily onto the table. Horikita, seeing this, reaches for the tablet and picks it up.

“Katsuragi-kun, what will you be having?”

“Can I have some oolong tea, please?”

After listening to his wishes and completing the order on the tablet, she carefully returned it to the charging position.

“I’ll tell you why I called you here...”

She was about to start, but Ryūen stopped her with a hand, as if to discourage her from starting.

“Before that, I wanted to ask you something. How does it feel to get class points for cutting off someone who is slowing you down? Does it feel good?”

He asks in a matter-of-fact way what might be damaging to us. It would also be a way of trying to gain the upper hand in a situation where he doesn’t even know what we are going to say yet. I have no doubt that Ryūen is using his underlings to get to the bottom of the situation.

It was a trick based on the assumption that the internal affairs problem had not been cleared up, but Horikita beside him was unmoved.

“It’s certainly true that the issue didn’t erupt. But too bad, it won’t turn out the way you want it to. Most of the big problems have already been resolved.”

That’s a lie. At least the wave regarding the Kushida issue has subsided, but it is uncertain when the bomb will explode.

“You’re pretty brazen for a liar, aren’t you?”

In the sense of playing coy, Ryūen also asserts that it is a lie, but Horikita does not care.

“If you think I’m lying, do what you want. You’re not the kind of person who easily believes anything I say in the first place, isn’t that right?”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe I trust you more than you think, huh?”

“It’s not funny, whether you mean it or whether you’re joking.”

Horikita dodges provocation.

Katsuragi slowly crosses his arms, looking at Horikita as if analyzing her.

“What was the matter with you? I thought you were going to expel someone.”

“Aren’t you worried about not having your friends around? Because you’re probably the only one who made the wrong choice.”

Three out of four classes protected their classmates.

He tries to create the impression that it was only Horikita who committed the atrocious, negligent mistake.

“It’s too bad we were the only ones who chose the right answer, because we did get a step ahead in the Class A competition.”

“That’s enough for the moment.”

As Katsuragi restrained Ryūen, there was a light knock at the door of the room. The waiter showed up and brought out the oolong tea and orange juice that Katsuragi had ordered. The drinks were placed in front of Ryūen. Horikita and Katsuragi’s gazes were caught by the discomfort of the combination. Incidentally, so did I. Ryūen and orange juice... don’t match each other.

What is the meaning of this call? While everyone was poking around in their minds, Katsuragi encouraged Horikita to start the conversation.

Horikita nodded, then began to speak, looking at Ryūen and Katsuragi respectively.

“In order to defeat Sakayanagi’s class, I propose a cooperative relationship at the next sports festival.”

Katsuragi reacts with a slight shoulder reaction, indicating surprise.

Immediately after, he returned to his usual demeanor and asked a question.

“What do you mean by... cooperative relationship?”

Cooperation, however, can vary greatly depending on how it is perceived.

It is only natural that he would want to hear the details, but he had no intention of denying the proposal carelessly. Ryūen, on the other hand, was not surprised, nor did he seem impressed. He was just observing with a smirk on his face.

“This special test has aspects of both competition among all students and by grade. I’m trying to make the most of a system that allows you to score equally if you win a group competition played by multiple people.”

“Why our class? Do you mind if I ask why?”

The class leader, Ryūen, is all ears, and isn’t making a move to interrupt at all.

“First of all, it goes without saying that Class A is out of the question. It’s not worth it if we’re giving points to the target class that we should be catching up with. The two choices that remain are Ichinose’s class or Ryūen-kun and Katsuragi-kun’s class. I would say that Ichinose-san is the most trustworthy, but it’s hard to say that many of her students have excellent physical abilities.

“So you’re saying you chose us by process of elimination.”

“If it were a simple process of elimination, I wouldn’t have teamed up with any class in the first place. The one person I don’t trust more than Sakayanagi is you, Ryūen-kun.”

It would certainly not be an easy partner to team up with.

As if sympathizing, Katsuragi also nodded deeply.

“Indeed. Even I, who has become a member of the class, think so. There is no one I am more afraid to entrust my back to. Then why did you take such a big risk to propose a cooperative relationship?”

“Of course it’s about winning; we can’t win without stopping Class A’s solo run.”

“But what’s the point if those expectations are subverted? This man will go to any lengths because that is the type of person he is. I know this because I’ve been there myself. I wouldn’t recommend it.”

He expresses harsh opinions about his classmates to the extent that he does not seem to be the chief strategist of Ryūen’s class. If we join forces improperly, we will be swallowed up by Ryūen’s class, rather than beating Class A.

He warns us of the dangers.

“In today’s discussion, I wasn’t going to cut to the chase straight away. The most important thing to remember is that you can’t trust someone who is late nonchalantly. However, I changed my mind when I saw Katsuragi-kun apologizing for being late. At least I can trust you.”

“You are very naive. Don’t you think this attitude of mine is also a ploy by Ryūen?”

“If I can’t seem to see past the trustworthiness, then sooner or later I’m just going to get swallowed up.”

This is probably the best bet for Horikita here.

If you put Ryūen and Katsuragi side by side, Katsuragi would appear to be a relatively sensible and good person.

But if Ryūen has already come here with a plan in mind, Katsuragi has no choice but to accept it.

“You look a little different from before, Horikita. You’re growing up.”

Katsuragi senses a change in Horikita, a growth, and is once again ready to resume the conversation.

“I understand your side of the story. Let me give you my personal view from here.”

Daring to add ‘personal,’ he states that Ryūen’s intentions and thoughts are not taken into account at all.

“I had also envisioned a plan to join forces with your class this time and take down Class A.”

“You want this too?”

“Yes. Your class has talented players beyond our grade level, such as Sudō and Kōenji, who are at the top of the physical ability and athletic depth in the four classes of the second year. There is no need to worry about them being dragged down by their peers. You’re not someone we can trust unconditionally, but we’re also not a class you can easily betray, which isn’t a bad factor either.”

Next to Katsuragi, Ryūen’s eyes turn to me, but his mouth remains closed.

Until now, Ryūen has always taken the lead in dialogue, as no one else was available to conduct negotiations. However, with the addition of Katsuragi, the need for this has diminished and the option to wait and see has been created. This is a very big positive factor.

It is eerie not knowing what Ryūen will think and what he will propose and when.

While it is easy to talk to Katsuragi, Horikita is probably becoming more aware of such concerns.

But it is a path that cannot be avoided if discussions are to be brought up regularly over the next 18 months.

“But in practice, it was 50/50 whether Ryūen would approach with a proposal for cooperation.”

It has been more than a week since the details of the sports festival were announced. If they were to move on the basis of cooperation, it would not be surprising if such talk had already reached the ears of Horikita. In other words, the other half of Katsuragi’s priority was not to join hands.

“When it comes to co-operation, we will naturally have to secure first and second place in our class. When that happens, inevitably the overall strength of the class is what decides the winner. If we just look at simple probabilities, we are willing to accept the possibility that Horikita’s class will come first and ours will come second.”

Outsmarting Sakayanagi and Ichinose classes by cooperating with each other is in effect creating a Horikita class versus Ryūen class scenario.

That is why Katsuragi answered that it was 50-50; because he could foresee it.

Even with the talkative Katsuragi, it doesn’t mean he’ll give his approval to a co-operative relationship in two words. Negotiations with Ryūen can only begin if the hurdles in front of us are overcome.

What will Horikita do?

“So our class is seen as a threat to you.”

“Of course, things are very different from a year ago. Unlike a year ago, when you were being ridiculed as a bunch of defectives, you are now in Class B. And that’s after once dropping to zero class points. Most recently, in addition to Kōenji’s solo victory in the deserted island test, you made the harsh choice to cut off one of your classmates in the unanimous special test and earned 100 points. There is no doubt that you are undeniably strong opponents.”

“It’s not my achievement, but I don’t feel bad that you rate me that way. But if we don’t co-operate and we go to the sports festival separately, the worst case scenario is that Sakayanagi-san’s class will win first place. The important thing is to defeat Sakayanagi-san’s class. Am I wrong?”

“Indeed. That is also true. Ryūen, what do you think?”

Here, for the first time, Katsuragi asked Ryūen for his opinion.

“If you want my help, you’ll give me something in return, yeah?”

“I wonder if you’ve misunderstood something. It is true that I was the one who suggested the idea, but that doesn’t mean I have to pay for it. Rather, you should understand that you are in a position where you can enter into a cooperative relationship with the class of first-place candidates.”

“Don’t make me laugh. I’m in a position where I could win without your help, but if you ask me to help you, I have no choice but to lend you a hand? If you don’t like it, you can leave.”

“Do you know how to get home? Go out that door, turn left and you’ll be heading the right way.”

Without needing to consider any kind of concession, Horikita urges Ryūen and Katsuragi to leave.

This attitude is the essence of bargaining, but at the same time, there is an atmosphere from Horikita that she is not betting everything on this strategy. In other words, negotiations will break down when Ryūen leaves the table. The proposal to defeat Sakayanagi together will stand.

The position is then reversed if Ryūen again says it is willing to join forces.

“You’ve got some balls for a bluff.”

“What are you saying? As Katsuragi-kun said, our class is a reasonably competent class in the sports festival. Do you think you can beat Sudō-kun and Kōenji-kun in a head-to-head competition?”

“Maybe if we faced it head-on and honestly you’d pull ahead. But there are so many ways to go about it, you know? You haven’t forgotten what happened last year, have you?”

The very trick of staging an accident, which we fear is exactly what will happen.

It is clear that the statement reeks of this.

“This year there will be a guest of honor, and the rules of the sports festival, by their very nature, will be closely monitored. Let’s see how sneaky you can be this time.”

“There are plenty of blind spots. And it isn’t only limited to during competitions.”

This means places that are unsupervised, such as changing rooms and toilets.

Undiscouraged, Horikita slammed the notebook shut.

“Ayanokōji-kun. Thank you for accompanying me today. It seems that this case is too risky for me to question your judgment. I think I’ll call it a night here.”

“If you’re okay with that, then there’s no problem.”

That’s where Horikita left it and started to put the notebook away.

Ryūen saw this and made no response, but Katsuragi made a move.

“Ryūen. Apparently, Horikita is even more different than we imagined so far. If we don’t get to the negotiating table properly, it’s us who will be cut off.”

Having calmly analyzed the situation, Katsuragi turns his gaze once again to Horikita.

“You didn’t approach me because you prioritized the disadvantages of joining forces, did you?”

“We never suggested it. But if Horikita had talked to us, the situation would have changed. Besides, I had a feeling that it would exceed my expectations.”

The updated data they attained has resulted in a slight increase in Horikita’s class’ evaluation.

In other words, the class was re-evaluated to one that was suitable for cooperation.

“I’m bluffing, but that’s all fake from my point of view. It’s natural to try to spin things to your advantage. I’ve become a bit more articulate, but the only reason it seems to be working is because Ayanokōji is by my side.”

After she said so, Ryūen picked up a glass filled to the brim with orange juice in front of him, and without hesitation, aimed it at me and splashed all of its contents. I immediately evaded the attack by sidestepping from my seated position and avoided being hit. A large yellow stain spreads and fragrances the place where I had been sitting until just before.

“You’ve noticed how crazy this guy is, haven’t you? I wonder if you could have dodged that one?”

“I don’t think... I could have.”

“Yeah. A normal person would be soaking wet before they could even react. Most people can’t avoid it, but this one just looks at you like he’s a normal person.”

“It’s a hell of a reflex, sure, but... what does that have to do with this discussion?”

“Don’t you get it? Ayanokōji is your potential spearhead. It’s no wonder you’ve got a big mouth when you’re showing off her gun to an unarmed opponent.

“Did you go out of your way to ask for orange juice to try that? Give me a break.”

I also thought it was odd, but he’s the guy who does the most outrageous things.

It was right to remain conscious of the untouched drink.

“Why did you dodge? If you had taken it all from the front, we could have silenced his retort.”

“Don’t say anything nonsensical. I don’t want to be covered in juice.”

It smells awful, it’s sticky and it doesn’t come off. It is a hassle to deal with.

If this had been oolong tea, I could have perhaps been tolerant.

Orange juice is probably one of the best drinks to spray on someone for harassment.

“If you want to negotiate straight, first remove Ayanokōji from the room. Then we can talk.”

Offer to continue negotiations on condition that I am removed from the scene.

“That sounds like something you’d say. But I’m going to have to decline. He’s my classmate. He has the right to be present and I asked him to be present. I don’t see what’s wrong with using the weapons you have to negotiate.”

“You’ve really got some nerve. Above all, you’re also coming up with ideas that you haven’t had before.”

Another thought was that Horikita has obtained information about Ryūen and I without our knowledge. Ryūen also sensed this.

The extent is unknown, but it would not be surprising if she heard about the rooftop incident involving Kei.

Horikita told me that she does not need to help and only needs me to be present from the beginning. I can’t complain because she is just using me while keeping her promise.

“My class, which is in an advantageous position, is offering to enter into a cooperation. If that doesn’t convince you, then you can pretend that this whole thing never really happened.”

Ryūen will never cooperate with Sakayanagi. Even if they approached Ichinose, it is unclear how much helpful power they would be able to obtain.

A wrong decision here will inevitably have an impact on the future for Ryūen. It is even possible, although unlikely, that a Horikita-Sakayanagi coalition could be formed.

This is because it is not a bad outcome if Horikita’s class comes first and Sakayanagi’s class comes second in the results.

But allowing this to happen would make it more difficult to pursue Sakayanagi.

“Depending on the discussion, I would be willing to join forces with your class. Now, may I hear your response, take it or leave it?”

The next response was left to the leader, Ryūen, rather than Katsuragi. After a few seconds of silence, Ryūen makes a decision.

“Fine, I’ll take you up on that offer.” He replied, but Ryūen’s words did not stop there. “But I will put a condition. Because the relationship between us should be stronger and more equal. If either my class or yours, in no particular order, achieves the goal of first or second place, there will be a 100-point difference in class points earned. To make up the difference, the one who takes first place will compensate the other with private points, which will be awarded by March 1, before graduation. Add that commitment.”

He is trying to do the same thing as last year’s uninhabited island test when Ryūen signed a contract with Katsuragi for private points.

If one side gets more class points, the difference should be made up with private points.

Ryūen must be aware that he is at a disadvantage. He knows this and is trying to emphasize it to get an added advantage, but Horikita also notices this.

“Surely those terms themselves are equal. But I refuse. It is a serious competition as to who will take first or second place. We will only settle it after a fair fight.”

If they were equal, with or without conditions, there would be no conditions as long as they were judged to have a good chance of winning.

“Kuku. I’m not going to let you suck me dry so easily, am I? But that doesn’t make it any better for us.”

“It is difficult to extract consensus from Horikita. I think we’re about to tie our hands on a firm deal.”

Katsuragi shows a flexible attitude toward Ryūen, who is not yet ready to formally sign a contract.

“That’s not enough. If you’re going to ask me to help you, you’re going to have to show me more sincerity.”

“Sincerity? Isn’t it the same for me? If the strategy brings us to the top of the table and brings Sakasakayanagi’s Class A to the bottom, it will be minus 150 points. There is plenty of room to consider this strategy of tying hands. But, we’re taking a risk here, too.”

As if to rebut, Horikita continues.

“The doubt that has been swirling around me all along. It’s whether or not I can trust you guys. If you focus your main forces on team competitions in order to form strong team, it is inevitable that the individual competitions will be neglected.”

It is quite possible that Ryūen will instruct his class to betray and cut corners in the competition, or even not show up for the promised competition in the first place.

It is doubtful that all the competitions will be monitored, as Horikita and other leaders will be at the mercy of the competitions on the day of the event.

They cannot bring in cell phones or other devices, so they cannot coordinate from afar.

“Trusting you, who is untrustworthy. Taking that risk is the maximum concession and cooperation we can offer. We will not concede a single millimeter more.”

This is all a bit of an earful for Ryūen.

Even if there is an attractive competitive force in the class, Ryūen cannot be trusted, and that is the basic premise of the project.

Horikita accepts that, so she tells them to shut up and cooperate.

“It’s a good argument. I didn’t trust you the way you did. I guess we’ll just have to accept it here.”

“I never wanted you to trust me.”

While laughing it off, Ryūen still relaxed his shoulders, as if he was convinced by Horikita’s words.

“Can you really trust me?”

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend. I’ll take your word for it, a handy phrase invented by our forefathers.”

It is difficult to be in your element if you form a coalition with doubt. In some cases, they will turn their attention more to their backs than to fighting their enemies.

“I don’t approve of everything you say, but one thing is for sure, it’s not a good idea to keep letting the Sakayanagi class take the lead.”

To Ryūen’s remark, both Katsuragi and Horikita agreed, nodding their heads without hesitation.

To let Class A win. That is an act that cannot be tolerated any longer, no matter what.

“Even though we have a direct confrontation with them coming up at the end of the school year, we won’t be able to overturn the class points with just one of those.”

In the meantime, they want to capture it within range. The idea seems believable.

“I’ve had you listen to me in silence, but it’s time for me to hear your opinion, Ayanokōji-kun.”

Horikita’s idea, its risk.

“Objectively, do you accept this strategy or not?”

“C-operation in interest is not a bad story. There will be some objections, but everyone understands that the target to defeat is Sakayanagi. I’m sure Yōsuke and Kei will follow up on this.”

Horikita is once again confident in her idea. But Ryūen waits for her.

“I’d like to make a contract, but it’s not ready yet.”

“Still? Do you think you can extract any more concessions?”

“Let me check one last thing. Was it you, Suzune, who brought up this proposal? Or was it Ayanokōji who was observing the situation with a clear face? Which is it?”

Cooperation with the Ryūen class. He strongly inquires which one is the initiator of this idea.

“If it was not initiated by Ayanokōji-kun, would you accept this talk? There seems to be a relationship between you and Ayanokōji-kun that you can’t let anyone else hear about.”

So Horikita says with implication.

“I know firsthand that we recognize each other’s abilities as enemies. And that I’m out of place.”

“Did I say one word about that? I’m just asking you to answer which is which.”

Ryūen, somewhat irritated, hurried his words to Horikita in the form of a glare.

“It’s me. I only asked Ayanokōji-kun to be present this time, and I didn’t even let him hear about it until we talked about it here.”

If he knew I was leading the charge, Ryūen might refuse.

When Horikita, embracing this resolve, speaks honestly, Ryūen laughs.

“I see. I’m relieved to hear that. If that’s the case, I’ll accept your proposal.”

That was the deciding factor, and Ryūen formally accepted to join forces.

“Why?”

“Why? I don’t know. You’ll have to figure out why yourself.” Then he brushed off the answer. “It would be better for both of us to have a proper contract in place, just in case. No, especially for you.”

“Of course I will. I’m going to have Chabashira-sensei, and Sakagami-sensei in between.”

The contract is based on the involvement of the faculty. It would naturally include consequences of breach of contract in it. Even if it is Ryūen, there is nothing that can be done if it is bound by rules that cannot be broken.

“Then, I will leave the preparation of the documents to Horikita. Is that alright with you?”

“Yes. Can I have you and I look it over together a few times, Katsuragi-kun?”

When Katsuragi checks Ryūen with a glance, he gets such a response as, “Do as you please”.

Katsuragi’s presence is really significant in Ryūen’s class, where trust is important. He is smart, trustworthy, and able to express his opinions to Ryūen without any hesitation.

The degree to which Ryūen entrusted Katsuragi with his job and the way he selected him, was nothing short of brilliant.

It was truly worth the large sum of money that was spent to bring him in.

“Okay. Let’s formally exchange a written agreement and then work together in the gymnasium.”

Thus, it was decided that Horikita’s class and Ryūen’s class would fight together in the gymnasium.

The top priority is the victory of the classes, and the aim is to work together within that context.

However, this was not the end of the story, and Katsuragi changed the subject.

“It is good that we have reached an agreement to cooperate with each other, but then there are some things we should think about. It is quite conceivable that Sakayanagi and Ichinose could join forces, but what do you intend to do about that?”

A coalition against a coalition. That development would be quite possible.

“No problem. Even if Ichinose cooperates with Sakayanagi in this gymnastic festival, our unity is better. Besides, Sakayanagi would have to give up even the third place. Just as you feared second place when you teamed up with Suzune, Ichinose would have the advantage if they teamed up as well. Sakayanagi’s class has 38 members due to the withdrawal of Yahiko and the transfer of Katsuragi. With Sakayanagi’s non-participation also confirmed, there are 37 members in the class. Ichinose’s class has 40 students, a surprisingly large difference of 3 students.”

The athletic ability values as a class are almost even. If this is the case, the difference in the number of three classmates may determine the winner.

“But it’s Sakayanagi, she’ll come up with a strategy to just cover the number of people.”

“Didn’t you see the rules this time? When you don’t participate in the festival, you’re on standby at your dormitory. And since you can’t even use your cell phone, that means your A-class head is completely nonfunctional.”

“Of course I read the rules. Yeah, it’s true Sakayanagi can’t exercise satisfactorily because physical condition. However, she can participate in the event and earn a total of 10 points, including five points for the five points

she has and five points for the participation prize. As long as she meets the minimum requirements, she will be able to stay outside and continue to send instructions.”

“I don’t want to see Sakayanagi acting like she’s hopeless.”

As long as she wishes to succeed, it is inevitable that Sakayanagi will stand out.

“It’s not that convenient. The right to abstain from competition is a given right. If you participate formally and abstain, you won’t be shamed.”

“Does this fall under a compelling reason? If you’re participating with an understanding of your own physical condition, you’re required to justify it. I have to finish the 100-meter race with a cane in my hand when everyone else has finished running. I don’t think she’d make such a spectacle of it.”

“Certainly, normally she would not participate because of her personality. However, if she knew that we had teamed up with each other, Sakasakayanagi would consider the risk of losing. I’m saying that it’s a problem to assume her absence will be a sure thing. I am saying this lightly, but I see a percentage chance that she will not participate. Give me a serious answer.”

“Ninety percent.”

“90% based on your unfounded and unfettered assessment. If that’s the case, the appropriate value is even lower. 70% to 80% at best.”

You should be happy with that number.”

I can’t do it. If I want to be sure, it needs to be 95%.

Forgetting about us, Ryūen and Katsuragi engaged in a debate.

“That’s nonsense. But if you want to be more sure, there is a way. I’ll thoroughly hang up Sakayagi before the gymnastic festival. If she participates, the whole class will expose her during the competition. That way we can reach the 95% you’re talking about.”

They should succumb to the threat of trampling on personal dignity, Ryūen says.

“That’s not an acceptable story from an ethical standpoint.”

“I agree. I don’t think the school will stand idly by and watch.”

But both Horikita and Katsuragi denied that they would accept the practice.

“If by any chance Sakayanagi joins in, I’m going to smash her to pieces, man.”

“Remember, we are sinking in the lower classes because it’s not easy to overthrow Sakayanagi-san.”

If Sakayanagi functions as a command center, it is certainly impossible to read what kind of moves they will come up with. Whether she participates or not will have a great deal to do with the victory or defeat of this athletic festival.

If we can ensure the absence of Sakayanagi, on the contrary, it means that victory is at hand.

“Horikita. Are you including my contribution to the class victory?”

“Basically, I try not to think about it. You’re the only one who remains in a special position.” She tells me.

“That’s convenient to hear. If the presence or absence of Sakayanagi’s participation is casting a shadow over this cooperation, I may be able to help.”

“What do you mean?”

Interested, Katsuragi stopped talking to Ryūen and turned around.

“If you leave it to me, I’ll make sure Sakayanagi doesn’t participate in the sports festival.”

“What.....?”

“Huh?”

Horikita shows surprise, and Ryūen is impressed. And Katsuragi listens in silence.

“However, for making sure Sakayanagi does not participate, I don’t want you to rely on a single point from me at the sports festival. Not just Horikita, but Ryūen too.”

“I didn’t include you in my calculations from the beginning. If you want to seal up Sakayanagi, it will save us a lot of trouble.”

“I can’t even imagine what kind of a move he will use, but if Ryūen and Horikita believe in what Ayanokōji has said and leave it to him, I have no intention of saying anything more about this matter. If Sakayanagi is not participating, it won’t be hard to sink Class A to the bottom of the list.”

“But can you really do that?”

“Oh. There’s a good chance you’ll get some rest without me doing anything, but you can leave it to me. And I’ve been thinking, it’s not every day that Horikita and Ryūen get together and cooperate with each other like this, is it? There’s something else I need to talk to you about, okay?”

I was thinking a little differently than the three of them during this discussion.

“I wonder.”

As I begin to utter my suggestions, Horikita and Katsuragi look at each other and Ryūen listens in silence.

As soon as I finished my explanation, the ice in Katsuragi’s glass melted and clinked.

“That’s an interesting idea, though...” Horikita looks at Ryūen, perplexed, unsure whether to accept that.

“It’s certainly not impossible according to the rules. But...”

“You don’t like my proposal?”

Even for the agreement related to the sports festival, if it had been a proposal from me, there is a possibility that they would have refused.

“Yeah, I don’t like it. I reject it.”

Ryūen had denied it, but Katsuragi interrupted.

“Your personal feelings can wait. It’s honestly not a bad idea. We may have to go over the details and the rules again, but no, it’s Ayanokōji’s plan. I’m sure he’s made sure of that.”

“There is no problem with the rules. We can make a more powerful development if we have students from Ryūen’s class cooperate with us rather than just our class. Don’t you agree?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Horikita herself is well aware of the problems we have at the moment.

If we can procure assistance from elsewhere, we can alleviate some of the anxiety.

“Take it on, Ryūen. We should now proceed with preparations for a direct confrontation with Sakayanagi.”

“Listen, Ayanokōji. After crushing Sakayanagi, you’re next.”

“If you reach that point, it’s inevitable.”

Perhaps those words were decisive, as Ryūen also accepted my proposal.

“Katsuragi, you should organize that as well.”

“That’s exactly what the Class A siege is all about.”

“First, however, the top priority is to keep Sakayanagi out of the gymnasium. Because neither the cooperation at the gymnasium nor the proposal from Ayanokōji can begin without clearing this preliminary step.”

“I know. Just leave it to me on that score.”

I have a strategy for containing Sakayanagi that neither Ryūen, Katsuragi, nor Horikita can do.

1

Just before 7 p.m Sakayanagi, Kamuro, and Hashimoto of the second-year Class A were gathered at a café in Keyaki Mall.

“I’m not surprised to be called out of the blue, but what can I do for you today, Princess?”

“I want to discuss the matters regarding the sports festival. What we should be doing.”

“I thought we had a policy?”

“The situation changes from moment to moment. And today, it means that another change is in the making.” Saying so, Sakayanagi continues.

“Ryūen’s class and Horikita’s class made contact.”

Hearing this, Hashimoto’s eyes change.

“Which one approached which one?”

“That is unknown. But either way, it is safe to assume that the two are connected.”

“Wait a minute. I don’t think it’s going to work out that easily. I don’t think Horikita will readily trust Ryūen. He’s not someone you can collude with.”

“You know what they say, ‘*The enemy of my enemy is my friend.*’ We are in a solid position to run alone. They don’t have to trust each other, but as long as they have the same goals, they work well together.”

The trickiness of the two classes joining forces is easily deduced by both of them.

The report was not a happy one, and the expressions on their faces hardened.

“We are in danger as it is.”

“We can’t beat them on our own?”

“If you assume that the three classes were going to compete separately, there was still a chance for any of them to take any of the places, but the connection came from an unexpected source.”

Sakayanagi makes it clear and looks at Hashimoto.

“I wouldn’t join forces with Ryūen. You never know when you might be stabbed in the back.”

“In fact, it would be more convenient if he did... Ryūen-kun’s class is in first place and Horikita-san’s class is in second place. If the result is that obvious, I welcome it, but if it’s the other way around, it’s a bit tricky.”“

Sakayanagi is more wary of Horikita’s class than Ryūen’s.

Sakayanagi’s comment, which could be taken as such, causes Hashimoto’s faint smile to disappear.

“And I’m pretty sure they’re on a roll right now. I thought it would be impossible for anyone other than Ryūen’s class to come in and grab 100 points, expelling the small fry. Has Horikita grown up or is Ayanokōji also working from the shadows?”

Emphasizing the name Ayanokōji, he turned to Sakayanagi. As if to confirm something.

Sakayanagi continues in a nonchalant manner.

“He’s really stepped up his game lately,” she said. “What’s going on?”

“I think he’s hiding more than just OAA. Well, Ayanokōji isn’t the only student like that.”

Hashimoto quickly backed down, as a battle of wits would have been bad for his position.

He decided that it was not a good idea to provoke her and draw attention.

“But what are you going to do? They say we’ll lose without you, but you’re not going to be there, are you?”

In other words, you’re throwing away the game? Kamuro asks.

Hashimoto, who had been smiling, seemed concerned about this point, and his expression hardened again. With only 150 points, even if Class A sinks to the bottom of the standings, it will not cause much damage.

However, the defeat is not something to be welcomed, as the situation has been built on the foundation of a continuous battle.

“There’s only one answer.”

Sakayanagi laughs and continues.

“I will also participate in the sports festival. Even if they really join hands, they are calculating that they can barely win combined with my non-participation. Let them know that is their false hope.”

“Seriously? Will you be okay?”

“It’s nice that you’re willing to do this, but... are you sure?”

The two are concerned by Sakayanagi’s announcement of participation.

“Being made a spectacle of? It means nothing to me.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll do fine. If you say you’ll go out, then it’s a quick turnaround.”

“However, that still doesn’t improve overall athletic performance. It can only pick up the competition that you might miss out on. In other words, it will be a tough fight for me to take first place.”

“I think it’s enough that I wouldn’t call it the bottom of the barrel.”

“It’s not so difficult to crack the glass relationship between Horikita-san and Ryūen-kun. Let’s sidetrack them on the day when they are desperately trying to work together.”

Hashimoto and Kamuro have confidence in Sakayanagi, who has absolute confidence in them.

They have produced high results time and again.

“I’m relieved, huh? Well, I’m surprised that you could pick up the information so quickly, Princess. You didn’t do it on your own feet, did you?”

For everyday information gathering, she often used Hashimoto and Kamuro.

But this time the two had never heard of it before, and Hashimoto asked curiously.

“I’m still the Class A representative, and I’m getting to know some of the first-year students.”

Without panicking, Sakayanagi smiled softly as if enjoying the unexpected question.

2

It was finally October, and the gymnastic festival was approaching. I was at Keyaki Mall after school.

I was there with Kei, as we were on a date. The oppressive stares from the third-year students were as usual, but Kei didn’t seem bothered by them despite being involved.

“I’m used to it by now,” she said.

Today, Kei had a few stores she wanted to visit, and we had come to an electronics store first.

“What are you planning to buy?”

“Huh? I don’t really want anything. Well, it’s not that I don’t want something, but I’m not here for myself today.”

Not for herself? It means that she came for someone else.

“Isn’t it Kiyotaka’s birthday soon? I thought about a surprise, but I thought it would be nice to give you something you want.”

Come to think of it, it is almost my birthday.

“I thought we could look around together and see what Kiyotaka wants.”

“I see.”

I recall that Kei had been repeatedly asking me about various things I liked and planned to buy recently. Since she had been saying random things without thinking too much about it, she decided to find out what I wanted directly and give it to me as a gift.

“That’s going to be an expenditure of private points, isn’t it?”

Especially for Kei, who doesn’t have a lot of money saved up.

“I know what you mean, but it’s at least your birthday. Don’t hesitate to tell me what you want.”

She seems to be ready to buy anything, but it’s not going to happen. That said, in this situation, I know it would be incorrect to answer that I don’t want anything, and it is obvious that she would not be convinced if I wanted something extremely inexpensive.

Choose something that is kind to Kei’s wallet. That’s the kind of answer that is required.

“I know what you’re thinking about right now~” She turns her cheeky, sticky eyes on me and forcefully crosses her arms in mine.

“I’ll buy whatever Kiyotaka wants! Okay?”

“If you say so...”

At least it means I won’t get something I don’t need. As we walk around with our arms crossed, Kei pulls her cheeks into my arm.

“Fufufu~ I’m on cloud nine.” Then she tightened her arms around me. “I have nothing more to hide from you. Kiyotaka knows everything about me. I never thought I would have someone more important than my own parents!” She blushes and squints her eyes, looking truly happy. “You can’t

hide anything from me either, right, Kiyotaka?”

“Ah.”

Hiding things. What does that mean?

My family.

About the white room.

What I’m trying to do at school.

Friendships, romantic feelings.

If any of these apply to her, then it’s probably nothing more than hiding something. In other words, I’m not telling Kei the truth about anything.

“Oh!”

As I was looking around the store, talking about the products, I bumped into Satō, who had come to the store alone.

As soon as we met, Satō’s eyes fell on mine and Kei’s crossed arms.

“Oh my god you two are so in love! I’m so sorry to bother you.”

“Hold on!

Kei tries to stop her, but Satō runs away from the scene at once.

“Well, shit.” Kei says, putting her hand on her own forehead.

“Are you still worried about Satō?”

“It’s not like that, but... I still don’t feel good about it.”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to refrain from crossing our arms outside from now on.”

“I don’t want to do that.” She feels bad for her friend, but is not going to give up that part of her life.

“Huh? Yo, Ayanokōji!”

While walking around the rice cooker and hot water pot section, I ran into Ishizaki and Albert.

I could feel a squeeze in my arm when they showed up.

“You’re on a date with Karuizawa? And you’re arm-in-arm... isn’t that cute?”

Ishizaki comes over to look at me enviously, but I am more conscious of Albert standing beside me. He is holding a large branded pot in his hand. It’s strange that it doesn’t look that big because Albert is so big.

“Oh, this? Ryuen-san’s birthday is on the 20th of this month. We were just choosing a present.”

“What? Is the 20th is the same birthday as...” Surprised, Kei comes looking up at me, somewhat alarmed.

“I’ve never heard of this before either.”

“Is it the same as someone’s birthday?”

When Ishizaki pointed his gaze toward Karuizawa, Kei glared at him and hid a little behind me.

“What the hell, you brought it up...”

At that moment, Albert lightly places his hand on Ishizaki’s shoulder.

It was there that he finally seemed to have an idea as to why Karuizawa was so wary.

“Oh... I get it.”

Even though it was Ryūen’s order, Ishizaki called Kei to the rooftop and took part in what can be called abuse.

It is only natural that Kei would not be pleased with such a man.

Ishizaki was angry at himself for being obtuse. He clicked his tongue and then lightly slapped himself on the head with his clenched fist.

“I should have said I’m sorry..... I was on the rooftop when you....”

“Don’t talk about it here.”

Ishizaki tried to apologize, but he still lacked delicacy.

This is the Keyaki Mall. It would not be surprising if someone he knew showed up at any moment. Kei would not be happy to have the incident on the rooftop brought up at such a time. I’m sure there will be more than a few opportunities to get involved with Ishizaki as long as the relationship between Kei and I continues.

“Shall we move somewhere else?”

There are a few blind spots even in the wayward of Keyaki Mall.

Kei, looking disgruntled, does not interrupt me and follows me with her arms still entwined around me.

Albert also returned the merchandise to the shelves and followed with Ishizaki. By the emergency exit, we can keep away from the store and at the same time keep the students out of sight but not out of earshot.

Even if someone you know shows up, you can stop the conversation there and it won’t be a problem.

“I’m so sorry! All the time, even before I was apologizing, really!”

“I don’t need an apology. In fact, it makes me even more angry.”

“What..?”

“You people were beaten to a pulp by Kiyotaka. You lost, so you’re just apologizing because you had no choice.”

“No, no, that’s not...”

“If Kiyotaka hadn’t saved me on the rooftop..... or if I had lost to you and Ryūen, you wouldn’t be apologizing to me like this. No? That’s why it’s annoying.”

Kei has a point when she says that it was annoying.

Now I have become friends with Ishizaki and Albert, but that was all after the rooftop incident. It is no wonder that there are “if’s” like Kei said.

“I know I’m to blame, but still,”

“I don’t blame you. It’s natural for the strongest to be the best. I’ve always hated being the underling, so I’ve always managed to stand on top and be overbearing to the underlings. Isn’t that right?”

Despite differences in degree, the essence of Kei and Ishizaki is the same. They have the same values, to understand their place.

“I understand what you mean. But now that I’ve come into contact with Ishizaki, I’ve learned a few things. He has definitely grown for the better since then.”

“What do you mean, ‘for the better’? It seems to me that nothing has changed.”

“This is just how I feel, but I don’t think Ishizaki would easily go along with what Ryūen did to Kei if he tried to do it to someone else now.”

“Yeah? It doesn’t look like you can rebel against Ryūen, though.”

The point must have been made right on the mark. Ishizaki chokes on his words. Unable to say anything back, his frustration overflows, and he hits his knee hard with the palm of his hand.

Kei, seeing this, sighed.

“That’s enough. You’re friends with Kiyotaka now, aren’t you? I don’t forgive you, but I’m done blaming you.”

“Are you sure?”

“That’s why I said so. It’s over, okay?”

“Ah, ah!” Ishizaki looked up happily.

“Let’s see.... So, that’s it. Whose birthday was it that you were talking about earlier?”

Ishizaki asked Kei again . Still in disbelief, Kei pointed her index finger at me.

“What? Seriously? Ayanokōji’s is also October 20?” Ishizaki was surprised, as if in disbelief.

“Maybe it’s fate!”

There are more than 400 students in the school, so it’s no wonder there are people with the same birthday.”

“But isn’t it amazing that it’s Ayanokōji and Ryūen-san?”

Rejoice in mere coincidence. As Kei said, it was nothing strange, but for some reason, Albert seemed a little bit happy too.

“Can we go back to the store?”

“Ah! Yes! Just a minute!”

Perhaps the loud voice was too loud, or maybe Kei was just annoyed, but she started plugging her ears with her fingers.

“I have a suggestion. How about we celebrate our birthdays together on the 20th? Ryūen-san and Ayanokōji’s birthday party, wouldn’t that be great?”

No, I didn’t think it would be great the moment I heard the idea. I try to imagine it, but I can’t visualize it well.

“If you say he’s going to apologize, that’s fine.”

“What?”

“I said I could accept it if Ryūen would bow down to me and apologize.”

That’s a good return for an excuse to refuse. Ishizaki opens his mouth wide, then realizes how difficult it is to do something like that, and his mouth turns into a pout.

“Ryūen won’t apologize to me, right?”

“Yeah, that’s never going to happen...”

It would be impossible for Ishizaki to even advise Ryuen to apologize. Ishizaki froze, but then, as if he had made up his mind, he opened his mouth once more.

“If the two of you say yes, I’ll make the proposal to him myself!”

“Will you ever give up?”

If he did so, Ishizaki might be met with an iron fist sanction. I know Ryūen very well at this point.

“I’ll do something about it! If I ever get an apology, it’ll be your birthday party!”

“Well, if... that really happens, I’ll think about it...”

Ishizaki is overflowing with enthusiasm, but his cheap shots may lead to his own downfall.

I should clearly reject this idea.

Certainly, Ishizaki has recently shown a stronger sense of self-will. It is also certain that some change in his thinking is beginning to appear in Ryūen, as he did not expel anyone from the school after the unanimous special examination. However, this should not be interpreted as instinct or true feelings.

People do not change easily even if they want to. Ryūen is not trying to change, but to evolve. A man who until now has fought only with evil as a weapon has only begun to use good.

He is beginning to freely control the two sides of the coin. If Ishizaki is misreading that...

“You shouldn’t do that.”

Kei stopped him, but Ishizaki’s resolve was unwavering.

“If Ryūen-san says he’s sorry, it’s okay, right?”

“But, you know...”

“Okay! Plus, let me apologize again. I’ll get you something more thoughtful than Ryūen’s gift, I promise!”

Kei reluctantly admits that she was defeated by Ishizaki’s high level of enthusiasm.

“Fine, whatever.”

“Ha, it’s decided! For now, let’s go pick out a birthday present for Ryūen-san!”

Albert nodded his head and Ishizaki went back to the mass merchandiser a step ahead of him. As expected, they seem to understand that they can’t go with the two of us.

“Why did you accept Ishizaki’s proposal? I thought you were going to say no.”

Although she heard his honest feelings and accepted his apology, I have to admit that I didn’t think she would choose to face Ishizaki regarding my birthday.

“Well, I’d prefer a birthday alone with Kiyotaka, too, but...”

“You bet on the possibility that Ryūen will apologize?”

“No, I doubt that’s possible. It’s just that that...”

Kei turns and looks behind her at Ishizaki, who is happily talking with Albert.

“I could feel that Ishizaki-kun likes you as a friend. I’m sure Kiyotaka needs friends too, you know.”

I knew immediately that she was referring to the disintegration of the Ayanokoji group. Kei, realizing what I had guessed, blushed and looked away.

“Besides, Ishizaki-kun wants to apologize to me again. I just thought it would be okay to accept it.”

The fact that she is not being honest is very Kei-like.

However, I still don’t think it will happen. It would be better to keep Ishizaki’s proposal as a half-baked idea.

And so the days leading up to the sports festival pass by.

3

Satō, who ran out of the electronics, catches her breath in front of the women’s restroom.

“Why... why did I run away?”

A dear friend of hers went out with someone she loves. There is nothing wrong with that.

Although she knew that, when Satō saw her arms around him she felt an unspeakable urge.

I don’t know how I would have behaved if I had stayed there.

So she abruptly ran away, but felt a strong sense of guilt about it.

Satō sat down on the spot and hugged her knees.

“I’ll have to try not to panic next time...”

“Kei-chan seems to hold back in the classroom but... I’m sure she would have liked to get even closer to him.”

Just as she stood up with this thought, a shadow fell on her.

“Excuse me for interrupting. You must be Maya Satō, a senpai, right?”

Sato was approached by an unfamiliar student and is momentarily puzzled.

“Yeah... but who are you? You’re a first year right?”

“Who I am isn’t important right now. Actually, I have something I need to tell Satō-senpai as soon as possible. Could you please give me a moment of your time?”

“What do you mean?”

She is confused when a junior she doesn’t know tells her that there is an urgent matter to be discussed.

Still unable to get the image of Ayanokōji and Karuizawa in close contact out of her mind, she was restless.

“It’s information about Ayanokōji-senpai.”

However, Sato’s movements stopped after those words.

“Ayanokōji-kun?”

“Yes. It’s about him and his girlfriend, Kei Karuizawa, another senpai.”

Sato couldn’t help but think about the two names that were just now dominating 99% of her mind. A bit of nervousness ran through Sato as the distance between the two drew closer.

“Can we talk somewhere where we can be alone after this?”

“Huh...?”

The first year used Satō’s light physical strength to get close enough to touch their lips to Sato’s ear.

“If Karuizawa-senpai withdraws from school - don’t you think that would give Satō-senpai a chance?”

Karuizawa is my closest friend, and Ayanokōji is my love.

The first year says that this is a chance to change the relationship between the two of them and her own position.



Various emotions start to overflow.

“What are you talking about?”

“I leave it to Satō-senpai’s judgment whether to listen or not. But if you don’t listen, you will surely regret it for a long time to come. If you’re interested, you can come to my dorm room.”

Satisfied after stating the room number, the first-year student turned away and left Satō.

Sato, who was left there, remained confused, unable to understand what was going on.

However, there was only one thing that stuck in her memory.

I will have a chance.

Those words suggest the possibility of dating Ayanokōji.

Satō’s chest tightens, and at the same time, feelings she doesn’t want to know about start crawling out from the darkest parts.

“I...”

4

While some issues remained, the class proceeded with careful preparations for the athletic festival.

Although some students objected to the idea of a joint fight with the Ryūen, once the lid was lifted and practice began, there were no major disputes, and practice for the team competitions went smoothly. Even the classmates who had been negative at first began to cooperate with each other in order to win, and they practiced and trained day and night.

Finally, the night before the athletic festival arrived. It was around 9:30 at night when I made a phone call to Horikita.

“It’s very late, isn’t it? I was about to go to bed.”

I could hear the sound of a hair dryer in the background.

“I have something important to tell you, something to do with the sports festival.”

“Important from you? I guess I better take this a little more seriously.”

As soon as she said that, she turned off the switch and my ears went quiet.

“Oh, I wanted to say something first too. Sakayanagi has been planning participating in the sports-festival right? I thought you said you could stop her.”

“It has to do with that matter as well. Tomorrow, I’m going to be absent.”

“Absent? Wait a minute, what do you mean?”

I could tell that Horikita was flustered by my sudden statement. I heard a loud bang and a light scream.

“Are you okay?”

“Excuse me, I dropped my hairdryer...”

I hear the sound of a cell phone being put down somewhere. She seems to be in a hurry to pick up the hair dryer.

“So, why the absence? It’s not like you’re sick, right?”

It is understandable that she is puzzled, as I sound seemingly healthy.

“Oh, I have no health problems. In fact, I’m even more pleasant than usual.”

“Then why? If you’re absent, you lose the 10 points you have. Even if we don’t count your wins, losing these 10 points hurts.”

With a class size of 38 students, I can understand the temptation to complain.

“I’m not saying 10 points is light. But this is the strategy I need.”

“Your strategy?”

It’s not everyday that your father’s assassins come mixed in with guests of honor.

I’m going to mention something here that I’ve kept quiet until now.

”It will lead to a clue regarding Sakayanagi’s strategy and aiming for Class A.”

“Sakayanagi-san strategy...?”

“I told you, there’s a way to keep Sakayanagi from participating in the gym festival.”

“I don’t know why your absence would lead to Sakayanagi-san’s attack.” Horikita was about to ask why, but quickly thought better of it.

“There’s no way I can understand what you’re thinking right now. Besides, even if I try to persuade you, you won’t change your mind about missing the sports festival, will you?”

“Ah. I’ll call the school first thing tomorrow morning to tell them I’m not feeling well.”

“Then it looks like I have no choice but to trust you here.”

Despite her dismay, Horikita admitted approvingly.

“In case you’re wondering, I was planning on getting at least three first places as a personal goal, but now I’m going to have to add another ten points to my total.”

“Take care of it.”

I ended the call and connected my phone to the charging cord. Horikita, who hadn’t gone to bed yet, was probably too lucid to recalculate her score and wouldn’t be able to sleep for a while.

It was a bit harsh, but I’ll let it slide as a necessary expense.

And there’s one more person I need to call.

Just to tell them what I’ll need and I’m all set.

Chapter Five: Second Sports Festival

IT WAS A sunny morning as I, Suzune Horikita, watched from the faculty side as all the students were gathered on the field. On the stage set up for the event, Miyabi Nagumo-senpai was giving the opening address. The guests invited from outside the school gazed at the students. There weren't that many, just a few dozen.

Even so, the students seemed uncomfortable at the sight of these unfamiliar outsiders. Everyone is about to give their best in this sports festival, and they're all ready to go.

The student council had told us in advance that guests had been invited, but the number of guests was more than I had imagined. They are from the political and other circles that are involved in the establishment of this school. There were no politicians that I had seen on TV, but I was sure that these people were closely related.

Everyone is dressed in suits and watching with hardened expressions on their faces. It was as if they were monitoring prisoners. Even in the midst of all this, Student Council President Nagumo continued to speak his words with dignity, unperturbed. He was elegantly fulfilling his role as well as the image of the student body, as well as my brother once had.

After Nagumo-senpai's speech was over and the students applauded, the baton passed over the teachers, who were once again informed of the precautions that would be taken at the sports festival.

Finally, the opening time arrived.

From this point on, the students were free to do as they pleased. As long as they abide by the rules, they may participate in the events they are currently entered in, or, although they need to earn points, if they see their opponents and judge them to be at a disadvantage, they are allowed to abstain and compete in another event on short notice.

Also, it's important to remember that students who have completed all the competitions or if they are not planning to participate are obligated to cheer in the designated area. If you are caught chatting, resting, or skipping around in unrelated areas, you will be disqualified from participation and stripped of your points.

In the team competition, students who are able to win are selected from each other's classes, and the number of students in the team competition is equalized.

The maximum number of students who could participate in a group competition was predetermined, no matter how good the students were. This was done in order not to prevent an advantage to outstanding talents such as Sudō-kun and Yamada-kun, who were contracted to lend a hand in up to three events per person in the team competitions. The above arrangement is limited to "events that can be entered in advance" and is also included in the contract.

It would be nonsense to have a dispute on the day of the sports festival, asking for cooperation in this or that. We don't have a rule that prevents us from working with other students, such as Ichinose-san or Sakayanagi-san's class. If there is a competition that needs teamwork to gain each party points, we are able to team up according to the situation.

Fortunately, I had already worked out a plan with Katsuragi-kun beforehand, and went over it many times to make sure it would not be a problem.

Although I am less worried about the opening of the competition because of the large number of participants in the competitions I have reserved, I need to remember to have a meeting with my classmates every hour to check for any problems that may arise, and make minor adjustments accordingly.

The first event I'll participate in is the 100-meter run. The start time is 15 minutes after the opening of the race, so there is no need to rush, but I wanted to arrive early to check on the participants.

"Hey hey, Horikita! It's game time!"

Immediately after the assembly was disbanded and were free to go, it was Ibuki-san who came running up to me at full speed.

She was breathless and glaring at me, as usual.

"Are you an idiot?"

"Huh! What is this all of a sudden? Are you afraid you're gonna lose? Is that what you mean?"

"No..." I immediately denied it so she would stop freaking out unnecessarily. "What is the competition you are going to do now? Catch your breath and then answer."

“The 100-meter run, of course. I made a deal with you, and I won’t forget it.”

“Yes, the 100 meter run. We both entered in the first race. That was the deal. That means I’ll be running right after this. If you know we’re going to race, why would you use up your energy now? Shouldn’t you wait in the line for me to come?”

“Oh shit...” I guess she understood the stupidity in her actions. “Whatever, it’s game time, let’s go!”

“Rest assured. You don’t need to tell me to go.”

Ibuki-san is not an easy opponent. Last year, she won the 100-meter run by a narrow margin. If it were possible, I would avoid competing with her, but I am greatly indebted to her. If not for Ibuki-san’s help, Kushida-san might not have come to school yet. Even then, I can’t lose to her. I know she doesn’t want that either, so I’m going to compete with her and win fair and square.

Ibuki-san didn’t seem to like walking side by side with me, so we put some distance between us and headed for the first entry together. A pleasant sense of tension is building up.

First up was the battle for the second-year girls only. Not much had changed from the prior reservations, and the only potential rival was Ibuki-san. But it would be shallow to consider that lucky. If I have an easy fight, it means that there are classmates who will have to fight stronger opponents in different competitions.

1

The 100-meter sprint was the first competition I took in the sports festival, and the first competition regarding the deal with Ibuki-san. The result was a difficult win for me.

Oddly enough, it was as close as last year. After we crossed the finish line, Ibuki-san kicked up the dirt in frustration and made a lot of excuses that she had run as fast as she could before the race.

My next battle with her was in the fourth event, the long jump. The two events in between we went into separate battles.

The second event was the steeplechase, in which I placed first, and the third was the team tug-of-war, in which I placed third.

So far, I personally accumulated 5 points at the start, 10 points for the two first places in the individual competition, 3 points for the tug-of-war for the third place in the team competition, and 3 points for the participation prize, for a total of 21 points. It was a good start.

Then, around 10:00 a.m., the second round of the long jump with Ibuki-san began. I had just finished the competition and the record I set was 5 meters, 79 centimeters.

Not bad. I think I almost set a personal best record in a situation where no mistakes were allowed.

Ibuki-san, who was three places behind me in the lineup, was looking at the record and regulating her breathing. There were three jumpers left. By jumping into provisional first place, she was much closer to scoring points in this event.

“Yo, Suzune! I found you!”

As I was watching the next long jumper, I heard a voice calling me from behind. I turned around to see Sudō-kun running up to me and Onodera walking behind him.

They are the pair that I have high hopes for as the point getters in this sports festival.

“From the looks of it, you seem to be in good shape.”

“Sudō-kun has won three in a row in the opening round. And he was totally comfortable.

“Well, yeah. But you also competed in two events and won first place in both. Right, Onodera?”

“I was a little lucky on my end though.”

Onodera, who has no equal when it came to swimming, also showed off her talent in track and field.

“When I first entered the school, I didn’t have the impression that you were that fast. Where did it come from?”

I was curious about this because I always see her in gym class.

“I don’t really like running, and I’m not interested in anything but swimming, so I’m just doing it at random, I guess.”

“You said you never do long distances.”

“It’s super tiring, and I can’t run that fast, and that’s not a good thing.”

They have been practicing together every day since they decided to pair up, and it seems to be a much more natural pairing than I had imagined.

“It’s true. Anyways I really wanted to fight with Kōenji if possible. He participated in three events and took first place in all of them, and it looks like he’s still going to extend his winning streak.”

“That’s no good. It’s not a good idea to crush each other as classmates. You know that, right?”

Both Sudō and Kōenji have the potential to take first place.

I understand their desire to compete in the same race, but they have to give priority to their class.

“I know, I know, I’m kidding.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“Right. The more I can leave Onodera-san in charge, the less I have to worry unnecessarily.”

“I guess I’m not trustworthy...” He seemed dissatisfied, but when I looked directly at him, he averted his gaze uncomfortably.

That’s a sign that he’s reflecting on how he’s behaved in the past.

“Sudō-kun and the others are going to participate in a series of pair competitions after this, aren’t they? Good luck.”

“Oh. I’m going to extend my winning streak all over the place.”

Those are encouraging words. And here the last runner stood at the starting line.

I stopped talking with them and turned my gaze toward Ibuki-san.

“Well, sorry to interrupt you. Let’s go scout the next competition.”

“You got it. See you later, Horikita-san.”

“Of course.”

I gave them a light sideways glance as my attention was on Ibuki-san, who had started to get ready for her turn.

I fully understand that her ability is close to mine. In other words, it is conceivable that she could surpass the record I set.

Two emotions were wavering: one is that I want her to fail, and the other is that I want to compete fairly with her at full strength. She should be under a lot of pressure, but her movements were agile and graceful.

She leapt, landed on the dirt and fell forward.

With dirt on her face, her eyes immediately turned to the record keeper: 5 meters, 81 centimeters. A mere two centimeters, but still two centimeters short, and my loss was confirmed.

“I did it!

Ibuki-san struck a gut-punching pose and was as excited as a child. She made a brilliant leap which barely passed my own mark.

“See! I won! You lose!”

I know she was happy to the point of persistence, but it’s a little irritating, as one might expect.

“I wonder if you had the advantage because of less air resistance...”

If there was no difference in our abilities, that is the only possible difference between us...

“Huh? Air resistance?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing.”

“Don’t be a weirdo and admit defeat honestly.”

“Don’t get carried away. Now we both have one win and one loss. We’re even again.”

Even though I warned her not to get carried away, Ibuki-san had a scowl on her face the whole time.

I guess I should regret missing first place on my part, but when she is so pleased with herself, I can’t help but feel that I have no choice besides beating her in the next round.

“I win! I win! I won and you lost!”

Sigh.

I think my mental stress has gone through the roof. Now I have one win and one loss. I’d like to go for the third match right now, but there are several high scoring team competitions coming up after this, so I’ll have to wait until the competition this afternoon to settle the score with her.

2

The sports festival began without Ayanokōji-kun. An electric bulletin board was set up on the ground so that one could always see which classes were doing well and how they were doing.

Ryūen-san's class started off at the top of the second-years, but soon after, our Class B took first place and has been holding onto that position. Ichinose-san's Class C is in third place, and Sakaynagi-san's Class A is in fourth place, an ideal ranking.

I hope things will continue to go on like this without any upheaval until the end of the event. I had a lot of time to kill before the next competition, so I moved to the cheering section.

"My my, I just wanted to congratulate you, Horikita-senpai!"

Yagami-kun, a first-year Class B student, approached me.

"It seems that Yagami-kun's class is also fighting quite well. You are now in second place by a narrow margin, aren't you?"

"It's more astonishing that my senpai is in first place. I can't believe you started in Class D last year."

"Is that a compliment? Or is there sarcasm mixed in?"

"Not in the slightest. I genuinely respect you. But not as much as the student council president, if I'm going to be painfully honest."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the very moment when Student Council President Nagumo broke through the finishing line tape.

"The third-year senpais were talking earlier, and they said this is his fifth consecutive first place finish."

As the girls cheered, the guests of honor turned their attention to the student council president. However, Student Council President Nagumo left the scene with a blank expression on his face and, without so much as responding to the girls who called out to him, told them that he would like to be alone and solemnly walked away.

"I'd want to go compliment him, but he doesn't look the least bit happy."

"Even if he wins or loses, it's not as if this competition matters to him in the slightest. His graduation from Class A was secured long ago. Perhaps he's just getting bored."

Certainly, for the student council president, who is in a solid position in terms of rankings, the results of the sports festival are meaningless; he is aiming for first place because he doesn't wish to look bad in front of the current students and guests, I suppose.

"I'm going to have a little talk with the president."

"I see. I have another competition, so I'll leave you now, senpai."

After exchanging a few words with Yagami-kun, I decided to approach the student council president. Beside Nagumo-senpai, another third-year girl called out to him.

Kiryūin-senpai, a third year Class B student. She is someone I have heard rumors about from time to time in my interactions with third-year students. I know that she is an exceptional student on the OAA.

Since I couldn't interrupt the conversation, I decided to stand by and wait.

"Congratulations on your fifth straight win, Nagumo."

"What do you want?"

"You don't have to be so rude. I'm just concerned that you don't look happy with your success. It seems there were more than one or two people giving you a cheer."

"I'm not really in the mood for jokes. How can you call me successful just because I won a simple competition?"

"You could have messed around with the rankings and competed against weaker students, but it doesn't seem like you cared too much with who you went up against." Kiryūin-senpai pointed out that he wasn't trying to cut corners. "I heard that Ayanokōji is absent, is that the reason for the unflattering look on your face?"

Ayanokōji-kun. Once again, his name popped up.

The student council president exhaled a quiet sigh without looking back at Kiryūin-senpai.

"I thought that guy would finally be able to give me a challenge. I guess I was wrong."

"You poor, poor thing. I'll be your opponent, then, shall I?"

At such provocative words, student council president Nagumo gave a sideways glance at Kiryūin-senpai, the first time he looked over. However, seeing the fearless smile on her face, he turned away again.

"That's a cheap lie. Even if I wanted to, I can't imagine you'd ever compete with me."

"Hmph. I guess I've been found out." Kiryūin-senpai says so as she stands next to Nagumo-senpai's shoulders. "One more event and I have fulfilled my minimum obligation. After that, I plan to relax and watch the games."

"I'm sure you will."

“You should no longer be concerned with juniors. At least you’ve dominated your grade level and secured Class A. You’re the student council president. That’s enough. I suggest you graduate quietly.”

Kiryūin-senpai admonished as if she was giving advice.

“Are you trying to be helpful? What’s gotten into you? I’ve talked to you more in the past six months than I did before Ayanokōji was involved.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Well, you don’t need to worry. I don’t need you to tell me that I should give up on playing with Ayanokōji. The kid bailed on me. There’s no point in going after him if I’ll just be set up like this again.”

“If he loses in a direct confrontation with the student council president, how would he be able to maintain the same status as before? Try to understand why he’s running away. He’s got a cute and cuddly side to him.”

Fighting the student council president? Perhaps that’s why he went to the student council room the other day, to talk about such matters? It also aligns with the message Nagumo-senpai entrusted me with.

Kiryūin-senpai lightly glanced at me, but walked away without leaving any particular words.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Suzune. What do you want?”

“Ah, well, I was going to ask you the same thing as Kiryūin-senpai. I saw student council president Nagumo-senpai take first place, but you didn’t look happy at all. Also... you seem to have promised Ayanokōji-kun that you would compete with him in the sports festival?”

“Clearly, it didn’t work out in the end. He seems to be absent. It is what it is.”

Ayanokōji-kun told me his absence was not due to illness, but rather a strategy involving Sakayanagi-san. It seems that Student Council President Nagumo doesn’t know that fact, and it would be better not to let him know.

“Hey, lunch is soon isn’t it? Come hang out with me.”

I couldn’t refuse the request, as it was coming from the student council president and agreed to do so.

A short time later, during the lunch break, I was looking at the lunches provided on the grounds. I could choose what I wanted from this array of meals. Sandwiches and other light meals. The lineup was diverse, ranging from a variety of dishes such as pork cutlet served on top of a bowl of rice to more stamina-and strength-enhancing dishes.

I was both impressed and appalled by the school's thoroughness and attention to detail. Moreover, the prerequisite is that the food must be consumed, and you can take more than one. Most of the students just picked one, but I observed that there were some boys who took more than one. I saw a large student who happily carried three or four of them on his chest. If so, you're either still underestimating this school or you're a very big boy.

"Yo, thanks for waiting."

I was just reaching for a light meal when I was approached by student council president, Nagumo-senpai.

"No problem, senpai. However, I have a meeting, so if you could make this quick, that would be great."

"Ah. Well then, I want to know something about Ayanokōji. I heard he's out sick, but how did he suddenly get sick?"

Although he didn't point it out earlier, apparently student council president Nagumo-senpai is suspicious of him.

"I only received a notice in the morning apologizing for his absence, because an absent student loses 10 points. If he is sick, I can't force him to show up."

I am the only one who knows he was absent for another reason. Naturally, I need to cover that.

"I deeply hope he's not feeling well."

"Pardon me, senpai?"

I don't think I gave it away from my attitude. I wonder if the student council president has another reason to think otherwise.

"You heard what Kiryūin said. Maybe he didn't want to be humiliated and decided to shut himself in."

"I suppose it's always a possibility."

I gave a safe response so as not to provoke him.

"Alright well... I guess that'll end up costing your year."

"What... Do you mean by that?"

"Well, the only way to make up for his absence, is to take it out on someone else, right?" He didn't directly answer my question, but mumbled to himself.

The student council president then raised his hand lightly to let me know he's leaving and walked away without picking up his lunch.

"Take it out on our year? What does he mean by cost...?"

It seems like Ayanokōji's reputation is really all over the place. I, too, was impressed with him again today at the sports festival. When he announced that he would be absent, I was nervous about what would happen, but when events progressed, it turned out that Sakayanagi-san was also absent today.

Without a doubt, Ayanokōji did something to contain Sakayanagi-san. And the results are evident in the current Class A scores and rankings. If suddenly your commander is unable to come out to the field, it is not surprising that the coordination is not up to snuff.

I feel a little sorry for them, but this is a serious game.

I'll make sure to accumulate wins wherever I can.

3

After a midday break, the sports festival proceeded into the second half of the day. More than half of the students had already completed the minimum number of five events, and those who showed confidence in their athletic abilities were moving on to the sixth and seventh events. The Class A students Matoba and Shimizu were struggling without their leader, as they were up against Horikita and Ichinose, who were assessing the participation and members of the competitions on a minute-by-minute basis.

"Next is doubles table tennis in the gym. Satonaka reported earlier that there were no strong rivals. There are two more seats available. There is a good chance we can win it."

"We've got to keep winning and try not to get last place."

Sakayanagi's non-participation cast a dark shadow over the second year Class A, and many students were discouraged, but on the other hand, there were many who were motivated by it.

Hearing that the ping-pong doubles tournament, which was to close in 10 minutes, was running low, the students abandoned the penalty shootout match they had planned to participate in and hurriedly began to move.

Ishizaki, who was walking from the direction in which the two students were proceeding, was looking slightly downcast and not looking ahead. Shimizu moved to the right to avoid the approaching Ishizaki, but Ishizaki also moved to the left at about the same time.

Shimizu tried to avoid him as quickly as he could, but he could not avoid him and their shoulders collided. The impact was twice as large as expected and could not have been an accidental collision.

Shimizu, judging that he had been forced to hit his shoulder, tried to raise his voice, but...

“What the hell are you doing man?!”

Ishizaki yelled and stepped up towards Shimizu.

“Huh? Why are you acting like the victim when you bumped into me!” Shimizu from Class A and Ishizaki from Class D glared at each other.

“You’re the one who wasn’t looking ahead!”

“Huh? You hit me on purpose!”

“What, no? You bumped into me on purpose, no matter how you look at it. Right?” Shimizu calls for help and asks Matoba to cover him.

“Ah. You weren’t looking straight ahead.”

“So I wasn’t looking at you and you took advantage of that? That’s nasty.”

“Nasty? It’s your fault.”

“Huh? Me? When you guys were too busy talking to watch?”

The shoving of blame continued, and time passed without any indication that Ishizaki was going to apologize. Convinced that they were right, the hasty Matoba urged Shimizu to calm down.

“Leave him alone.”

“I’m not convinced we should let him go like this.”

“I understand how you feel. I do, but we have priorities right now.”

“I guess so.”

While taking in Shimizu’s emotions, he nailed him to remember to participate in the competition and win. Reluctantly, Shimizu nodded his head, glared at Ishizaki, and walked away.

“You better be careful next time.”

“Ouch...”

“What?”

As he was about to walk past, Ishizaki suddenly held his left shoulder and mumbled, “I was caught up in the moment, I didn’t notice... I think I might have hurt myself just now.”

For a moment, the two could not understand what he was saying, but immediately after this, they realized everything.

They realized that this was a cheap trap set by Ishizaki.

The two looked at each other and laughed. However, the situation takes a sudden turn immediately after that.

“You’re making a lot of noise, aren’t you? What’s the matter, Ishizaki?”

“Ryūen-san! Please listen to me! They started messing with me!”

Just when things were starting to get tense, Ryūen appeared.

“So Ryūen is involved? What a troublesome guy. I didn’t expect him to use such obvious tricks.”

“What are you even talking about? I only came here because I heard the stupid commotion, okay?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. You two have a record, you know that.”

“I guess we do have a reputation. What about it?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Although, you know what? Even if we do have a track record, that’s completely irrelevant right now. If an exemplary student was bullied and hurt by a Class A student, I’m going to report it, okay?”

“What’s with the act? You’re the one who talked him into it, aren’t you? I’m calling the sensei’s for God’s sake!”

“Kuku. Of course, you call the teachers when you’re in trouble. That’s pretty funny considering we’re the victims here. I’ll explain it thoroughly, don’t worry. Isn’t that right, Ishizaki?”

“Yeah. I’m the victim.”

“What are you a victim of? You clearly aren’t even taking the sports festival seriously, so does it even matter to you? Go call sensei.”

Matoba decides that it is unavoidable and gives an earful to Shimizu, and sends him running somewhere.

Soon after, Shimizu, who had gone to call the teacher, came back with an unflattering expression on his face.

“What’s wrong? Where’s the teacher?”

“I didn’t…”

Shimizu didn’t bring back a teacher but Hashimoto Masayoshi, who was in the same class.

“I saw Shimizu running all panicked so I asked him about it. If he called the teacher, the commotion would get bigger. If you decide to turn it into a situation, you might not be able to participate in the competition.”

“But-”

“I know. Don’t forget that’s what Ryūen wants, to make a big commotion. Don’t play into his hands.”

Instructing him to relax, Hashimoto placed his hand on Shimizu’s shoulder.

“I’ll talk to him for now.”

“I understand. Deal with him swiftly please.”

Matoba, who had no choice but to leave the situation to Hashimoto, watches from a short distance away.

“Please take it down a notch, Ryūen.”

Hashimoto, who heard the story, approaches with calm steps amid the commotion.

“The hell do you mean? It was you guys who set us up. We’re just buying a fight that was sold to us.”

“Sure. But if you don’t back off, we’ll both be in trouble. We’re the breadwinners of the sports festival, and we’re still holding back the main force. I’m sorry to say this, but Ishizaki can only go so far, right?” Hashimoto exploits this point and tries to hold Ryūen back so that he cannot come on too strong.

“Don’t be arrogant. Ishizaki has been working hard for this day. To show that he has the potential to compete on equal terms with the breadwinners you speak of. Isn’t that right?”

“Geez.” Hashimoto, who had seen Ishizaki playing around on a regular basis many times, could not help but be stunned. “Damn. You always push things to the edge.” Hashimoto knew that he could not compete in a proper debate, but he couldn’t resist scratching his head. “But this makes it clear. You’re really going to try to crush us in this sports festival, and that’s why the elite first-years are sticking around like freaks, right?”

It was noticed early on that the physically gifted first-year students were being followed around to match the competitions in which the talented students of the second-year Class A were competing. However, there was no way to stop the entries once they were noticed, and so far they have only achieved less than expected.

“Because of the princess’ absence on the day of the competition, we’re pretty desperate to avoid the bottom of the standings. If we make an enemy of you too, we won’t stand a chance. Let’s just call this a painful split.”

“Painful split?” Ryūen’s attitude, which had been relatively friendly until now, changed drastically, and his smile disappeared. “I don’t know what’s going on in Class A. I’m in Class D. I’m doing everything I can to crawl up from the bottom. You’re making a big mistake if you think you can just interfere with that and get rid of me easily.”

Hashimoto’s expression, which had been smiling thinly, froze for a moment at the spirit that seemed to be attacking him

“Then what should I do? Am I supposed to apologize unilaterally to you?”

“You know that’s what I’m talking about. I’m not trying to get money from you. I just want a sincere apology. Right, Ishizaki?”

“Sure. The pain in my arm has subsided a bit, so that’s good enough for me.”

What hurts more than anything is the loss of more time. After confirming that no special money or other demands would be made, Hashimoto decided to swallow the idea.

“Give me some time to persuade Shimizu.”

“Hurry up. We have another competition coming up.”

More than five minutes have already passed since the altercation began. It’s almost too late to apologize now and run to the gym in time.

“You heard me. I know you’re not convinced, but you should apologize honestly here.”

“Don’t be silly. You said you would take care of it, so I kept my mouth shut and listened. I’m not going to go along with it.”

“So it’s okay if we don’t win? You might be able to protect your pride by being stubborn and sticking up for yourself here. But will this convince you when you lose by five or ten points?”

“Well, that’s...”

“What matters now is that the class wins. Right? You stepped into some shit, so apologize and get over it.”

One word of apology and you can head right back to the competition. Hashimoto urged him to do so.

“Damn! Why do I...”

Shimizu, who showed great irritation, finally cooled down and reluctantly agreed and stepped forward to apologize to Ishizaki.

“Wait, Shimizu. Matoba is just as guilty as you. Claiming I was looking away and all that.”

“Matoba...”

“Okay...”

The two students have no choice but to stand side by side and bow to Ishizaki, albeit only slightly.

“We’re sorry... Is this okay?”

They quickly raised their lowered heads and were about to leave, but Ishizaki quickly stopped them.

“Ryūen-san, are you seeing this? What the hell is this?”

“It’s like they’re spitting on you. I don’t feel like he’s received a full apology. You don’t have enough sincerity.”

“Are you insane, Ryūen? I won’t back down any further.”

Previously, Hashimoto had tried to negotiate for Shimizu’s sake, but at this moment he had also decided that this was as far as he could go. Deciding that there was no other way but for the teacher to intervene, Hashimoto jogged over to the teacher.

Within a minute or so, he returns to the scene with a teacher.

“What in the world is the matter here?”

“Actually...”

“I accept your apology.”

Hashimoto was about to tell the teacher what happened, but just before he did, Ishizaki declared that the apology was accepted.

“I’m sorry, Ryūen-san. You stood up for me, but I wasn’t mature enough to say that it’s just a tiny bump on my shoulder. So, I think I’ll make it up to you later since these two apologized to me just now. Is that okay?”

“If you’re okay with that, it’s none of my business.”

As soon as the teacher had arrived, Ryūen and Ishizaki cut the conversations short. Hashimoto, who had brought the teacher along because he knew Ryūen could not turn his back on the teacher, was also confused.

The teacher, seeing only this situation, came to a conclusion.

“You two bumped into Ishizaki and apologized. And he accepted it. Is that correct?”

“That’s not it-” Shimizu tries to speak up as the problem seems to have been solved, but Hashimoto stops him.

“Apparently so. It has been resolved.”

“Good then. Avoid further trouble during the festival, okay?”

Hashimoto pushes the two, who seem to be about to explode in anger, away from the scene.

“Go quickly while the teacher is watching.”

They turned around several times to glare at Ishizaki and Ryūen, but eventually they blended in with the crowd walking towards the gymnasium.

Ryūen and the others also dispersed at the same time.

When no one was left around Hashimoto, he lamented deeply.

“Man... you’d do something like that in a huge crowd? You’re not someone... I’d want to make enemies with, at all.”

Hashimoto was chilled to the bone, but even as he said this, he laughed alone with joy.

4

3:00 p.m. With less than an hour left, the sports festival is finally coming to a close.

We enter the final phase of the competition still in first place, with only 17 points separating us from the second year Class D, who are closing in while in second place. The team’s perseverance was beyond our imagination, and we had to assume that Ryūen-kun’s strategy was working. Still, there was no trouble among us second-year students, and we were functioning well as an alliance.

However, if we don’t score more points in the last hour, there’s a good chance of an upset. Standing in a corner of the gymnasium, I stared at the remaining competitions, their rules and schedules. Then Ibuki-san, not even bothering to hide her annoyance, approached me.

“It’s a stupid game!”

“That’s a very funny thing to say; I won by two wins and one loss, isn’t that how it turned out?”

“I didn’t participate!”

“I don’t care. It’s your fault for not showing up at the prescribed time, isn’t it?”

“I just got the time wrong...”

It was the third round of our competition, and it closed for entries at 1:20 p.m.

Ibuki-san could not participate in the competition because she did not make it to the entry in time. Of course, I was not left out, and although I missed first place, I was able to finish second and earn three points.

“I know you’re not happy about it, but in the real world, that’s called a no-show.”

“One win, one loss! It’s not settled yet!” She continues to fuss in my ear, and she has no intention of backing down.

“I participated in a total of nine competitions. One more event is available...”

“That’s it! Tell me what you’re participating in.”

“If you want to ask me to play, you’ll have to show me the right attitude.”

“Ugh!”

“Do you want me to play or not?”

“Oh, please... can... you... fight... me!?” Ibuki-san asks, trembling with anger as if she is about to spit out flames from her mouth. “Are you satisfied?”

“Yes, I am. I guess you made me feel a little better.”

The situation is changing by the minute and the competition slots are filling up. Should I go with the original plan or aim for an even higher score?

“Now, answer me, what are you going to participate in?”

“Could you please be quiet for a minute?”

“I can’t take this!” Ibuki-san yells as she provocatively lifts up a certain finger in my face. I didn’t want to deal with it, but ignoring it would only make it louder.

“I was planning on joining the shuttle run after this.”

“Is the shuttle run the one where you go back and forth endlessly until you drop out?”

“Yes, that’s right. It’s also called a round-trip endurance run.”

“I remember doing this in middle school. It’s good for the final battle.” She nodded her head in satisfaction and tried to run out to the entry.

“Why aren’t you coming?”

“If you want to join, go ahead.”

“No, you’re in it too, right? It doesn’t make sense if we’re not in the same group.”

“We’re just considering it. I haven’t finalized it yet.”

“What?”

“To be honest, right now the last competition I want to compete in is volleyball.”

“Volleyball? Volleyball has six participants, right? From the looks of it there’s no way you’re going to get six people together now.”

One of the competitions announced on the day of the event, a separate competition for men and women with participation from all grades. We decided to forgo the event in our class, judging that the need for six competent members would be a bottleneck, but the teams participating in the current volleyball tournament seemed unexpectedly weak, as if the other classes were thinking the same thing.

“With 10 minutes left to enter, we have a spot left to enter. The teams participating don’t seem to have many strong opponents from what I’ve seen.

If we can win this competition, it will be worth it to throw away the shuttle run. In a team competition, where teams have to improvise, a lot depends on the abilities of the outstanding students. If we can get one or two more students who are confident in their skills, we’ll have a better chance of winning.”

“So what about that one I asked for so desperately earlier?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to give up.”

Ibuki-san was astonished. I thought she was going to get angry again, but it turned into disappointment and resignation. It all started from the fact that she had misunderstood the receptionist’s hours.

“All right. Then I guess the game is over here...”

“You’re not joining me in volleyball?”

“We need four people. There’s no way I can gather them. I’ll pass.”

“So, you don’t have friends.”

“Neither do you.”

“I think I at least have classmates who would be willing to help if I called on them.”

“Whatever, I wanted to settle it, but we’ll have to save it for another time.”

For the record, I had won, but whatever.

“Are you going to join us for the shuttle run?”

“All I’m interested in is settling this with you. I’m not going to go out of my way to contribute to Ryūen.”

“That’s convenient. The less points you score, the closer your class is to winning.”

I think it would be better to let this go on without provoking her. That’s what I thought, but for some reason, Ibuki-san didn’t want to leave.

“Is there anything else?”

“If you don’t have enough people for volleyball, aren’t you going to join the shuttle run?”

The deadline for the volleyball is 2:20. The shuttle run deadline is 2:25. Ibuki-san noticed the part I didn’t dare mention.

“Looks like I said something unnecessary. I didn’t realize you had a brain to use.”

“Shut up. So, I’m going to stick with you for a while longer.”

The worst-case scenario is that if volleyball does not have enough people, Ibuki-san and I will have to settle for a shuttle run.

Well, that might not be so bad. I look to the girls in my class in the cheering section for available talent. However, there was no way I could find such convenient students right away, and time passed by without much thought.

I noticed that Ibuki-san, who was sitting beside me, was yawning.

“You should just give up and play the shuttle run,” she said.

“My my~ Isn’t that Horikita-senpai and Ibuki-senpai? I want to congratulate you both for your hard work, senpais!”

As we waited for a possible member to invite, first-year student Ichika Amasawa-san called out to us.

At that moment, Ibuki-san, who was sitting down, stood up and glared at her.

“Oh dear, you look a bit frightening today, senpai. Maybe having a bad hair day?” Amasawa-san teases. But half the words didn’t seem to reach Ibuki-san.

“If there are still slots available for you to participate, I’ll give you a shot.” Spat out Ibuki-san.

“I haven’t won much today. We don’t have a lot of opportunities to play when we’re in different grades, so it’s no use. I think it’s better not to play. You’ll lose anyways, senpai.”

“You should be thankful you didn’t get paired with me.”

“You’re still so bullish, aren’t you? By the way, what are you two doing here? If you’re not going to participate in the competition, you might as well be cheering them on.”

“How about you shut up and join the shuttle run? Then we can compete.”

“Oh, were you senpais planning to do the shuttle run? I’m-”

“I finally found you.”

As we were talking, Kushida-san showed up. I wondered if she wanted something from me, but she didn’t even look at me, just at Amasawa-san.

“I thought someone was following me, but it was Kushida-senpai, wasn’t it? What do you need? If it’s okay with you and Horikita-senpai, I’ll listen to what you have to say.”

“Horikita-san? What are you...”

It seemed that she was so focused on Amasawa-san that she was unaware of our presence.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Kushida-senpai. It looks like my friends are all here, so I should get going.”

In the direction she was pointing, I could see Nanase-san, another first-year student, and four unfamiliar girls.

“I came to the gym to join the volleyball thingy. It’s my first experience with volleyball~”

Apparently, Amasawa-san plans to participate in the volleyball tournament.

I guess the first-year students have moved on after all, seeing the situation of the participating teams, which are short-handed.

“See you later. Good luck with the shuttle run~”

After coming over on her own accord and talking as much as she wanted, Amasawa-san joined up with the group.

“So she’s joining the volleyball competition.” Ibuki-san said, glaring at her back.

“Seems so.”

“Then I’ll join too. You wouldn’t be able to get five members without me anyways.”

“What?”

“I said I’m going to be there. I know it’s aggravating to work with you, but it’s a chance for me to beat that cocky little freshman.”

If Ibuki-san is willing to help us, she’s a perfect asset to the force.

“Don’t decide on your own. I haven’t said I’ll take you on the team yet.”

“Huh? You haven’t even gotten a single student so far. What choice do you have?”

“Team competitions are equally assigned points. It is natural to want to fill in the gaps with students from your own class, rather than with students from other classes, isn’t it?”

Even if I had scored more points, Ibuki-san was in the second place class.

In other words, the point difference would not open up at all.

“I don’t care about that. I’m fine as long as I can see that brat’s sad face.”

“Anyway, it depends on the other members. Our class must make up a high percentage of the total.”

“Then why don’t you let me join you?”

Kushida-san, who had been watching Amasawa-san’s back as well, utters this without changing her gaze.

“What do you think you’re doing, Kushida-san? I don’t think you’ve changed your mind and are now willing to cooperate with us.”

I spoke my mind frankly, and Kushida-san didn’t deny it. However, it bothered me that her eyes were strongly directed toward Amasawa-san, not me.

“I have something against Amasawa-san.”

“You too?”

“I’m not going to tell you why, but I’d be happy to lend you a hand to settle the score.”

“If that’s what you’re after, I’m fine with it. You’re a perfect asset.”

It is often said that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Allies roll in unexpectedly.

“But she will definitely be a formidable opponent.”

“I’m sure she will.”

Ibuki-san had already started warming up and getting into the swing of things.

Amasawa-san watched her from afar and giggled. Ibuki-san and I experienced firsthand how amazing Amasawa-san was, but I don’t know the details of the other students. I don’t remember the names of the students who got an A on the OAA, though I’m sure I can remember the names of the students who got close to an A, so I’m sure they were just below a B at the highest estimate.

More problematic is that we are still three students short. It’s a bit of a catch to analyze our opponents when we haven’t even met the requirements for participation.

“What are the requirements for the remaining three? You want to avoid Ryūen’s class, right?”

Kushida asked about the selection of people.

“Yes, that’s right. Of course, I’m inclined to stick to my classmates as much as possible. But the priority is the match and the strength of the opposing team.”

“Okay. Then wait a minute.”

With that, Kushida-san left our side and started to walk away.

“Okay, but what is she going to do? We can’t find help easily.”

Ibuki-san and I followed her as she went to Rokaku-san, who is in Class A. After talking with her for a while, the four of us went on to meet Fukuyama-san, who was also in the same class. Finally, we went to the gymnasium to see the students who were cheering for the other competitors.

“That girl over there is Himeno-san from Ichinose-san’s class right?”

The four of us talked for a few dozen seconds until Kushida-san returned with Himeno-san in tow.

“She’s going to join us in volleyball. Himeno-san isn’t a good volleyball player, but she agreed to join the five of us. Just leave the competition to us, and we’ll take care of it, okay?”

Kushida-san speaks in a kind tone to Himeno-san. She’s seemingly turned on her charm mode once again.

I can’t hide my surprise that the two Class A students in particular lent a hand so honestly.

“We’re also in a hurry because we’re about to lose, and even if we don’t win at worst, we want to leave a record that we contributed.”

The two look at each other and nod. They want credit because they are in Class A, which is largely in last place.

While seeing through that psychology, Kushida-san instantly recognized them as capable students. Even though I could not remember their specific grades at OAA, as a friend of Fukuyama-san and Rokaku-san, she had a firm grasp of how physically capable they were.

“This is a trick you will never be able to do, Ibuki-san.”

“Shut up. You couldn’t find anyone either.”

There were five or six students in the gym that I could still talk to. “Anyways, I think this is probably the best group we can make right now.” At any rate, the six members of the volleyball team, who had been in doubt about their ability to participate, were all here.

The difference in the number of members from Ryūen’s class is only one person. However, winning the championship and gaining 10 points would be far more rewarding than competing in the shuttle run and only gaining 2 or 3 points. The fact that even if we lose, the gap between us and them will never close is also an advantage for us.

The top two teams consisted of me and Ibuki-san, and the other students who were available, such as Himeno-san, Rokkaku-san, and Fukuyama-san.

Although there is a slight loss due to Himeno-san’s lack of skill, we have enough strength to make up for it.

5

We won the first round without any problems and I noticed a few things watching Amasawa-san’s team. Nanase-san took the lead in the match, dominating both offensively and defensively.

“Nanase was on point, but the brat isn’t as big of a deal as I thought?”

“I certainly don’t feel like she’s as good as I had thought. I assumed the lack of volleyball experience was a joke, but...”

It's possible that she's cutting corners on purpose, but from what I've seen, she doesn't seem to be. She's better than the students who can't move at all offensively or defensively, but they don't seem to be a threat. However, as the game passed the halfway point, the situation began to change little by little.

Ibuki-san's eyes, which had been somewhat languid, began to turn serious. In less than ten minutes of game time, Amasawa-san was visibly improving. Just as Amasawa-san was beginning to show glimpses of her ability, Nanase-san spiked the ball to end the match.

"The next time we play, she might be even better."

"Yeah but they can't get so much experience in just a few shitty games. We... we can still win."

Too much optimism was dangerous, but with Nanase-san in tow, Amasawa-san was able to have an upper hand on us without touching the ball too much.

We went on to win, and at around 3:40, the final arrived.

At a sports festival, there are many differences from the normal rules of competition. Volleyball was no exception. There is no rotation in the serve, but any player can serve, and the team with the first 10 points or the most points within 10 minutes wins. If time runs out and the score is tied, the team that is ahead will have the right to serve and the game will go into overtime.

"So I guess it's time to see your losing side." Ibuki-san yelled out to Amasawa-san from the our side of the court.

"Can you be satisfied with just winning and losing in volleyball? Ibuki-senpai."

"First, I'll beat you in volleyball. Then, I'll win the fight as well."

"Fufufu~ I don't mind that kind of thinking."

Amasawa-san's presence was eerie, but Nanase-san was the one to watch out for.

"Just like the last game, I'll be the attacker. I'm going to pound everything into their court."

Ibuki-san declares, even more fired up than before.

Although her control is a little difficult, I can't argue with the destructive power of her spikes. At the start of the final, Ibuki-san took the lead with her serve.

We thought we had the momentum, but Nanase-san spiked a point right back. I thought it would be a close game, but it turned out to be a little more in our favor as we finished the first half with a 4-2 lead. As expected, Nanase-san was able to compete with me and Ibuki-san, but other than that, we seemed to have a slight advantage.

The situation changed midway through the game. The time remaining was less than five minutes. After three steps, Ibuki-san jumped up and fired a spike. Amasawa-san, who had scored many points in the past, came out from the other side of the net and prevented the blow. No, she kept his momentum and slammed the ball right down.

The ball slammed into our court, giving the first-year team one point.

“Awww... that’s too bad~ Ibuki-senpai! Nanase-chan, what do you call this kind of play?”

“Doshut or something. I don’t know much about it, though.”

“Whatever. Anyways, I’ve already seen through your attack pattern, so you can’t take one over me from here on out.”

“No! I’ll definitely block it next time!”

“Calm down. You just happened to get stopped once.”

“Damn it. You’ll have to pass the ball to me next time.”

Then, when the score was 5-3, I started to serve. It would have been easier if it had been decided, but... Because of the rule that if the ball goes out, the opponent is awarded a point immediately, I couldn’t aim at an absurd course. If you hit the ball to a solid spot, of course it will be returned. But I’m going to defend well and pass the ball to Ibuki-san.

“This time... sink it!”

She changed her rhythm, took two steps, soared high, and launched the best spike of the day. The two first-year students who jumped to block it couldn’t touch it, and the ball fell in a straight line to the court floor.

Amasawa-san blocked it, and as if she knew it was coming, she killed the momentum with a clean receive and sent the ball flying through the air. As her golden hair flowed, Nanase-san jumped up high and shot a spike towards Himeno-san. Kushida-san forced her way in front of Himeno-san, who was stiff and unable to move, and tried to receive the ball, but she could not control the momentum of the ball.

The first-year team began to catch up, and in the final minutes of the game, our two teams were finally level.

With only about two minutes left in the game, we could very well run out the clock at this pace.

“I’ll do it again next time!”

Ibuki-san, who was twice prevented from scoring by Amasawa-san, was determined to do it next time. I instructed my teammates to pass the ball around, and the game resumed. As they exchanged receive, Amasawa-san was ready to spike the ball for the first time.

“No way you’re getting past this time!”

Ibuki-san jumps up on the block, but then Nanase-san comes into view from behind Amasawa-san.

“Whoopsies...”

The smiling Amasawa-san was a decoy. It was Nanase-san’s plan to spike the ball from the beginning.

Caught off guard, Ibuki-san reached out, but was unable to touch the ball. The ball was aimed at the court floor at an acute angle - and Kushida-san slid in to make a great receive.

“Ibuki-san!”

Everyone’s attention turned to Ibuki-san, and the freshmen rushed into a defensive stance.

Amasawa-san was waiting for an attack from Ibuki-san with a relaxed expression.

“Shit!”

Even though the situation was tough, she tried to force a spike, but couldn’t find a way. Although Ibuki-san wanted to spike it, she gritted her teeth and switched to a toss.

I understood Ibuki-san’s determination and released the energy I had been saving. I ducked under Amasawa-san’s block and unleashed a spike that went straight to Nanase-san who was waiting for me.

Nanase-san, who was tired, was unable to scoop up the ball and went off course. If she had been in better shape, she might have been able to volley it in.

It was 7-6, and we had a one-point lead as time was running out. At the end of the game, which would end in about a minute whether I cried or laughed, we had the right to serve.

“Well, I guess it’s time to get serious, huh?” Amasawa-san said, as if she hadn’t been serious until now.

Nanase-san was wise enough to catch up and prevent Ibuki-san’s serve. The ball, having lost its momentum, flew high into the air, and we all stared at it in awe.

“The target is...!”

The released volleyball came at me at a furious speed as it swelled up. Even though I was concentrating on my nerves, my reaction was delayed, and the moment I tried to reach for it, the distance between me and the ball was too wide to reach. The sound of the ball being hit violently echoed.

“Out!”

The unfortunate thing was that I was too late in reacting and could not touch the ball. The ball was half a ball out of the white line that marked the inside of the court.

“Aw shoot. Sorry, Nanase-chan, it seems like you missed. It’s pretty hard to have perfect control, isn’t it?”

“Thanks for the help anyways, Amasawa-san.”

The whistle blew, and Nanase-san, who had lifted the toss, looked up with a startled expression. Amasawa-san, who was about to hit the ball towards us, landed on the floor without swinging her hand down.

“Oh, time’s up. It was just starting to get interesting...”

Amasawa-san, who had not the slightest regret and was enjoying playing volleyball, praised the good match.

After a quick chat with Nanase-san, we left the court.

Although they lost, the girls also got points for taking second place in volleyball. And we, of course, managed to get a large number of points as first place.

“I’m not convinced... I don’t feel like I won.”

“We were pushed pretty hard at the end. I’d be horrified if it wasn’t timed.”

We were supposed to win and feel better, but we were left with a half-hearted feeling of bewilderment. Still, the win was huge, and it was a fierce battle worthy of ending the sports festival. I noticed that there were quite a few people in the gallery, and they were applauding, albeit sparsely.

6

The sports festival is now in its final stages. The gymnasium is filled with an odd excitement as the final team competitions have commenced.

“It’s almost time for the games, isn’t it, Sudō-kun? Are you ready?”

Sudō and Onodera, who had participated in many pair competitions as a duo during this sports festival, had advanced to the finals of the tennis mixed gender doubles as their tenth event.

“Yeah, sure.”

Onodera continues, feeling somewhat uncomfortable with the somewhat absentminded reply.

“But still, don’t you think we make a great duo? So far, we’ve won four out of four matches in the pairs competition. I’m sure everyone in the class will be surprised.”

In the two matches up to this point, there was one matchup between students in the same grade and one matchup between third-year students, but the Sudō/Onodera pair won without being pinned down, and they have now won five straight group matches. Moreover, Sudō has won nine straight matches, including individual competitions, and is on the verge of a 10-match winning streak.

Onodera, on the other hand, did not finish first in all nine rounds, but she also kept her high ranking.

While Onodera’s words continued with friendly chatter, Sudō’s gaze was on something else.

“Are you worried about that first-year student? You’ve been watching him for a long time, haven’t you?”

“Huh?”

“Hō...sen right? I can’t believe that guy is a freshman, he’s massive and has a terrifying vibe. Yeah, but, it feels like that’s not all Sudō-kun is paying attention to. What’s up?”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry.”

The Hōsen pair that was playing the game in front of them won with ease, and their opponents for the final were decided. Sudō was staring at Hōsen while talking with Onodera, who was in a happy mood.

Onodera looked up as she was talking and started staring at Sudō's profile.

Up until now, she had faced the competition without thinking about it, but her heart was clearly in turmoil. They had been working together most of the time, not only today, but also during the preparation for this sports festival. From practice to lunch to the morning commute to school, they had many meetings and practices.

That is why she had acquired the ability to recognize changes in Sudō's facial expressions. Even his athleticism has a few shortcomings. He has a very rough and tumble personality, and is quick to get carried away. He also has a tendency to lose his temper.

This has sometimes led to him dragging both of them down when they work together.

"You will now play the final game. Please get ready."

As they were sitting down to rest their tired bodies, one of the staff members approached them

"Well then, let's quickly decide on a winner and get some momentum going."

Pretending to be calm, Onodera emptied her mind as Sudō called out to her.

Even if there is something going on regarding that first-year, it shouldn't be a problem. As long as it doesn't turn into something troublesome, that's all that matters.

"Let's do this." Sudō grabbed his racket and threw one over to Onodera.

One by one, their classmates begin to show up at the gymnasium to cheer on Sudō and Onodera. Perhaps because adults also have a strong interest in the finals, people would stop in their tracks to observe the competition.

"It's kind of a tournament atmosphere, isn't it?"

"For real. It's a comfortable tension though I'd say."

There is no need to worry about atrophy for the two, who are strong on the big stage, including in club competitions.

At that moment, a roar of laughter erupted from the other side of the court.

“Aha! I ain’t ever thought I’d be playing you in the finals, Sudō-paisen!”

“Hōsen!” The air changes as Sudō speaks to Hōsen across the net. “You don’t think you can beat me at tennis, do ya? I’m going to destroy you, so look forward to it!”

Doubles begins, with limited match time: a four-point, one-game, two-games-at-a-time, three-game match. The right to serve will not be rotated from one game to the next, but will go to the side that loses the point. There is no need for a change of serve within a team, and any team member can repeat a game.

The match started with an onslaught by Hōsen. His strong serve easily hit into the court. Meanwhile, Sudō’s serve was very lackluster and was returned one after the other, and when he hit the ball in, they were driven back to 3 (40) to 0 (love) in less than a minute.

“What the... ugh! That guy is too fast! I didn’t think he had experience?”

It was no wonder that Onodera panicked, as Hōsen’s ball struck the court at a speed that made her feel fear.

“What’s the matter, Sudō? You ain’t no match for me, don’t hurt yourself.”

“Shit!” His fist clenching his racket forcefully, he swung up and tried to slam it into the ground.

“Sudō-kun, no.”

“Ah!”

“Don’t you know that you always fail when you get upset?”

“Yeah, but still!”

With no one left to vent his frustration on, Sudō was suddenly stressed out.

Hōsen, who was watching the scene from across the net, snickered.

“I can’t believe you’re so damn easy. What was all this high talk about ya? Your movements are way shittier compared to the last matches.”

It was a fact that Sudō had been thrown off due to being too preoccupied with Hōsen.

“I can’t trust Sudōu-kun to serve now.” With the ball in hand, Onodera instructs Sudō to defend and releases her serve.

She hits the ball with a sharpness that makes it hard to believe that she is a girl and has no experience in tennis, but Hōsen quickly closes the distance and shows beautiful technique, handling the racket like a hand finger.

Sudō stretched out his arm, but he could only hit the edge of the racket, and the first-year team took the first game without surrendering a single point.

“You don’t really look like a player, man. You look like a loser.”

Compared to Hōsen, who was really enjoying the game, the girl who was paired with him couldn’t hide her frightened expressions. Hōsen handled almost all of the game by himself, and it was practically a two-on-one battle.

In the second game, Hōsen’s one-sided onslaught was expected to continue, but it took a surprising turn.

Hōsen’s swings were not as strong as before, and Onodera adapted and came forward to hit back.

Just when they thought he might be getting tired. Hōsen’s arm swung wide. The smash that came out was as fast and powerful as a bullet. The ball rushed straight at Onodera, who was guarding the front, as if she were a target. Onodera looked in pain as the ball grazed her cheek.

Surprised and terrified, Onodera unintentionally dropped her racket to the floor.

“You’re not doing that on purpose, are you?!”

“What’chu on about? Ain’t it natural to aim close to the opponent’s body in tennis? If you drop it too far, they’ll hit you back with the same point. Don’tcha know anythin’ about that? You’re arguing with me over just one ball... stop pissing ya panties.”

“Damn it!”

Hōsen proudly asserted his legitimacy while Onodera hurriedly picked up her racket.

“Don’t worry about it. It was just a little graze... Besides, like he said, isn’t tennis supposed to be about aiming close to your opponent and returning?”

“That’s something you can say to a guy who plays pro-tennis. This is a sports festival event, remember?” Sudō complains irritably.

The serve goes to Sudō again, but the first time it goes off course.

The second time, he saved and tried to go in, and was easily returned by Hōsen. The momentum wasn't as strong, and Onodera, who had caught up, hit back cleanly with her racket.

Two or three rallies followed, and that was when Onodera came to the fore again and hit back.

Hōsen, who had closed the distance, swung his arm down and the ball bounced back.

"Kya!" Onodera stiffened, unable to swing her racket at the hard fastball that had scared her just beforehand. The ball zoomed past her but Sudō was able to bite back and hit the ball back into the opponent's court, but then Hōsen's relentless volleys targeted only the area around Onodera. Hōsen seemed to be playing competitively.

The game came down to 3 (40) points for Sudō and 2 (30) points for Hōsen.

Onodera was struggling to get out of the way, but she was so upset that the ball came near her face again that she twisted her left leg and fell down on the spot.

"Onodera!"

As if to cover for Onodera, who could not stand up, Sudō bit down and returned the ball to Hōsen. Sudō's ball landed just short of the court, and Sudō's team took the second set. But that didn't make him happy, as Sudō became more agitated.

"That's enough! You can't even play fair!"

"How many times do I have to tell ya, you damn monkey brain? It's your lousy girl's fault, isn't it? Don't give me bullshit."

"Please, Sudōu-kun, you're repeating yourself." Onodera couldn't get up and shushed Sudōu as he slumped down on the spot.

"I know that, but come on! You can't allow this to happen!"

"Sure, the judges are suspicious. But Sudōu-kun's aggressiveness is also interfering with that, you know?"

It was clear that Hōsen had already won the tennis match and had changed his policy to torment Sudōu rather than win.

The aim was to instill fear in Onodera and even induce injury with a single mistake.

"Anyway, keep calm, Sudōu-kun." Onodera admonished him gently but forcefully, even though she was in pain.

Sudō, his head still burning, glared at Hōsen unbearably, but when he saw Onodera frowning in pain, he remembered what his priority should be. Hastily, medical attention was provided for Onodera's injured ankle.

"Hey, why don't you guys take it easy, don't go through hell anymore, aite? That sucks man. They up and lost the damn game, this shit is so boring." Hōsen yawned and looked at them briefly before addressing his partner, a first year.

"That bastard played with us on purpose with the intention of tormenting us to the very last minute..."

Sudō calls out in concern as he looks at Onodera's left leg.

"Are you okay?"

"Well, sort of. But I'm so pathetic. I'm so afraid of the ball that I avoid it, and as a result, I fell and injured my foot." She laughed to herself and lightly tapped her taped foot.

"No wonder, man. He's annoying to death, but he's got great athleticism."

Sudō was also terrified of the high-powered volleys that he could deliver with his superior body. Unless you're an experienced tennis player or a club member, you'll be overcome with fear.

"You know, I've always held a pretty good opinion of Sudō-kun ever since you entered the school."

"Oh? What the hell are you on about suddenly? Why don't you just rest and get some medical attention?"

"That's fine. It's a good thing I got hurt. It means you've been given a little bit of time to cool down."

"You have a strong heart, I mean, I didn't know you used to think highly of me."

"Yeah, but you were the number one person I didn't want to deal with, given your brazen attitude."

"Oh..."

"People around me scold me for my bad behaviour and inability to study, but I always make sure to support people who work hard in club activities."

"What are you on about?"

“I understand you, Sudō-kun. When I’m going home after a late night of club activities, I sometimes pass by the gym. Whenever I peek in to see if there’s anyone left, Sudō-kun is always the only one left practicing until the end. He cleans up properly, and he’s taking it seriously.”

“What the heck, you were watching that?”

“But... as I thought, Sudō-kun will never be truly appreciated if things continue as they are now.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were angry for me. It’s not that I don’t like that fact, but it still doesn’t change the fact that you have a tendency to lose your temper. If you keep that up, one day you’ll be in more trouble than ever before.”

“Yeah, but-”

“You’d better get over your habit of losing your temper.”

“I know, I know.”

“Even in sports, don’t you make more mistakes when you’re frustrated?”

“Well, yeah. Your shooting success rate, for example, might drop drastically...”

“Me too. When I’m frustrated, I desperately try to improve my time, but I end up going slower than usual, and that doesn’t do me much good.”

“Yeah that’s exactly what I mean.”

“I’ll tell you a story. One time, when I lost an important game once, I was so frustrated and disappointed that I went to change in the lockers and went wild. I injured my hand and it was very hard to recover.” She stuck her tongue out a little as if she was nostalgic and ashamed of her old self. “I realized then that nothing good comes from being angry, it just comes back to haunt you.”

“How did you manage to overcome not getting angry?”

“It’s because my senpai taught me magic.”

“Magic?”

“Yes. I’ll teach it to Sudō-kun. A magic trick that can suppress anger.”

“Well, how do you do that?”

“The peak of anger is actually surprisingly short, a few seconds at most. So when I feel like yelling, I yell once in my mind, then take a deep breath and count to ten.”

“So you’re saying to get angry after ten seconds? That’s it?”

“Yes. I think that’s enough to change things, you should try it.”

“I see.”

Despite his scepticism, Sudō memorized what she had just said so that he could engrave it in his mind.

“I wanted to team up with you because I appreciate your passion for sports. Don’t betray that expectation.”

“Onodera...”

With her wounds tended to, Onodera stood up to check on her condition.

“I’m fine. Whether we cry or laugh, this one game will decide the outcome. If we lose, we lose. But if we try our best, we can still win. I know it.”

“For sure.”

The third game begins. Hōsen continues to relentlessly target Onodera, whose movements have slowed down due to her injured left leg. Even when he went too far and lost a point himself, he made no move to stop.

The Sudō team leads by 3 (40) to 1 (15).

Hōsen, who would have ended the match if he dropped the ball, fired another hard fastball at Onodera.

This time, she couldn’t avoid it and the ball hit her right arm. Onodera crouched there in pain.

“This isn’t how the game works, you fucking freak!”

Sudō then remembers the magic words Onodera taught him earlier, even though he is extremely angry to the point where his blood boils. He glares at Hōsen, who repeatedly continues to provoke him, but raises his voice of anger in his own mind.

Ten seconds of anger. Just hold it in for only ten seconds.

He counts the numbers one, two, three, and takes a deep breath to calm his emotions. Eight, nine, ten. The abusive words that he had intended to use against Hōsen receded into the back of his throat.

Of course, not all the frustration has disappeared, but he succeed in looking at the situation calmly and objectively. The suspicious eyes of the judges. Onodera’s gaze. A game that must be won. Time remaining. If he lunged at Hōsen again here, he would naturally be stopped.

“Onodera, do you believe in my power?”

“Of course. I believe in you, that’s why we’re playing a match together.”

After catching his breath, Sudō threw the ball into the air and made the best serve of the day. Hōsen, who had no time to lose, returned the ball as if to catch up, and from that point on, Sudō and Hōsen began to battle it out in a rally. Both of them did not back down and continued to return strong blows, but Sudō, who did not miss the sweet return of Hōsen, was losing his patience, and smashed the ball into the opponent’s court.

“Haaaaaa!” Gripping his racket, Sudō lets out a yell that echoes throughout the gym.

“Shit, shit!”

Despite his overwhelming advantage, Hōsen, who had been licking Sudō’s chops until the end of the game, became annoyed that he had lost the game and slammed his racket into the court, snapping it in half.

“We won, Onodera! Thanks to you!” Sudō ran over to Onodera in excitement and hugged her vigorously, sharing his excitement.

“Ah-ah-ah!” Onodera panics, unsure of what just happened for a moment. “Wait, it hurts, it hurts, Sudōu-kun!”

Sudō regains his composure as his thick arms tighten around her and she lets out a painful sound.

“Woah, calm down there!”

Happy that he was able to control his anger in addition to his victory, Sudōu smiled his best smile of the day.



“Congratulations on all your wins, Sudōu-kun.”

“Thanks Onodera, if it wasn’t for your magic trick, I would have definitely lost this game.”

“That’s not true. In fact, I dragged you down-”

“Shut up. It’s not a good thing to get hurt, but I think I lost when I got hurt and lost my temper. And you brought it back up.”

“I see. Then we’re.... good partners, I guess.”

“Yeah. It was very easy to work with you, and I could rely on you. It’s really great, Onodera. Oh, I hope Suzune saw what we’re doing somewhere.”

There were so many guests and students that it was hard to find Horikita right away.

“Suzune, is that you?”

“Um? Who are you?”

“Oh no, uh, sorry, wrong person.”

“Well maybe she’s outside.”

“Let’s go out for dinner sometime after club activities, Sudō-kun.”

“What? Yeah, that’s fine. But I need your help to find Suzune. Where’s Suzune?”

“Aha. Absolutely not.”

“Yo, bitch. Don’t you get carried away just ‘cause ya won this one game. You know you woulda lost if I had taken ya seriously, right?” Despite the fact that the match was over, Hōsen approached him with a nasty look on his face. “I wanna take you ‘round back for a playdate. Come so I can rearrange your face.”

“Listen here...”

Sudō quietly restrained Onodera, who was about to confront the entangled Hōsen.

“There was a mess with this guy a while ago. I can’t blame him for trying to get me involved like that.”

“Yes, but...”

Sudō laughed, understanding Onodera’s feelings as he tried to protect her from getting into trouble. Then he turned to Hōsen.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not going to fold to your cheap disses.”

“Fuck are you talking ‘bout? You’re my bitch boy from now on.”

“That’s why I ain’t gonna do it.

As soon as Sudō refused, Hōsen pressed his shoulder into Sudō, pretending to walk past and let out a powerful clenched fist into his abdomen. The force was so powerful that Sudō fell to his knees, even though Hōsen hadn't swung.

“Sudōu-kun!”

Sudō stopped Onodera with his hand and slowly stood up.

The teacher comes running up to him, but Sudō replies that nothing has been done to him and the teacher walks away with nothing more than a suspicious look in his eye.

“You know what? I’ve already figured out that you’re a strong fighter, and I ain’t gonna complain because last time was my fault too. But if you want to go further, I’ll have the teacher come in.”

“You’re fucking lame. I’m not even as strong as I was then, I swear I’ve gotten weaker. Come and I’ll show you.”

“Maybe. Onodera, let’s go.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You boring son of a bitch, don’t ever bother tryna mess around with me again.”

Sudō felt rather relieved when he was told not to get involved. As long as he didn’t go at it himself, he wouldn’t spread any more trouble. He knew that if he just didn’t let his anger get the better of him, things would turn out much better.

“I guess I should also thank Hōsen for that. Seeing him like that, I realized how lame I really was. It’s hard to put it into words, but when I tried the method you taught me, something just fell into place. I thought, why was I so angry before? I guess it’s like a curse was lifted off of me.”

Sudō was grateful for the 10 consecutive victories that he had been able to pick up, but he was equally grateful for this sports festival, and to have Onodera as his partner.

Chapter Six: The Visitor

IT WAS AROUND 11:00 a.m., and I could faintly hear the cheers coming from outside the closed window. The sports festival seems to have been quite a success. Not everything went smoothly, but the class still put in a lot of effort to win.

We can compete well with other classes and grades. It was because of this that I was able to choose not to attend the sports festival without hesitation.

I've already made all the arrangements, so I'll leave the rest to Chairman Sakayanagi.

Although I don't necessarily have full trust in him, I don't have a choice since it's practically impossible for me to stay in this school if he betrays me. The only thing that remains to be seen is what kind of battle the second year students will have at the sports festival, and what results they will leave behind. I wondered how Sakayanagi's participation or non-participation would affect the outcome of the event.

I looked at the entrance to my dorm once.

"I've tried to contain her, but I'll see the effect now..."

There are a lot of things that are bothering me, but I guess I'll just have to wait and see what happens at the festival.

It's time to start preparing for lunch. Just as I was beginning to think that, the doorbell finally rang.

I wondered if I should welcome this visitor or not.

I couldn't tell until I answered the door.

"Hello, Ayanokōji-kun."

As I kept my distance from the doorway, I heard a voice calling my name.

I lowered my guard slightly and put my hand on the door. I tried to think of various situations, but once I saw who it was, I relaxed.

On the other side of the door, there was only Arisu Sakayanagi in plain clothes, smiling up at me.

“If you don’t mind, may I interrupt you for a moment? Even though I’m only forbidden to leave the dormitory, visiting a man’s room during a sports festival is a bit of a problem.”

“Going inside is even more of a problem, though.”

Despite saying that, I decided to welcome Sakayanagi in without turning her away.

“I’m sorry to disturb you.” Sakayanagi, who is physically disabled, slowly takes off her shoes and walks into the room.

“Come to think of it, this is the first time you’ve been in my room.”

“I don’t usually get to visit you, you know. Have you eaten lunch?”

“I was just about to get ready.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear that. Here, it’s a souvenir.” She said, handing me a small plastic bag.

“I bought it at a convenience store early this morning. It seems to be a new product, and since it’s a good opportunity, I wanted to share it with you.”

I looked into the plastic bag from above and saw two small Mont Blancs in it.

If it’s Mont Blanc, I’d better make some coffee.

“A bed would be better than sitting on the floor. You can sit on it if you like.”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

After getting Sakayanagi to sit on the bed, I stood in the kitchen and twisted the faucet to start pouring water into the pot.

“You don’t seem to have come to visit me on a moment’s notice, do you?”

She had an innocent look on her face, but Sakayanagi gave a small chuckle of amusement.

“Normally, I don’t really visit dormitories, and as the leader of Class A, I can’t really be seen visiting Ayanokōji-kun’s room alone.”

No matter who you are, if you see Sakayanagi like that, you will be surprised and have a hunch.

That’s why Sakayanagi never usually came in contact with me in the dorm.

Until this moment.

“You’re a really bad person, Ayanokōji-kun...this is Ayanokōji-kun’s strategy, isn’t it?”

“Strategy? What do you mean?”

“Huh, no need for small talk. Let it be known that I knew Ayanokōji-kun knew that I would be here today, and that I’d skip the festival. You were sure of it, weren’t you?”

As far as Sakayanagi was concerned, she could see that it was a trap without having to think about it.

“In this sports festival, we, Class A, with our small number of students, are at a disadvantage at the starting line. Furthermore, there are students like Kitō-kun and Hashimoto-kun who show promise, but their average is not enough to reach Horikita-san’s class. If that’s the case, what you need to do in order to win is to determine who will be participating in which competitions, as well as the participation of your rivals in the show, and manage your schedule periodically.”

I turned on the pot and quietly began to boil the water. I grabbed a jar of coffee powder from the cupboard and prepared a cup and filter.

“Then again, you never know how things will turn out if I join in, you know.”

“You still have a high self-esteem, don’t you?”

“The best way to ensure that the other classes beat Class A is to not have me participate in the sports festival.”

The sports festival must proceed under a precise schedule, because Sakayanagi is capable of placing and directing the assembly personnel in the right places in her mind. Besides, she would be able to coordinate the participants of the competition using students from other grades.

“Last night, my father told me that he asked Ayanokōji-kun to be absent. He said he was assigning security to the dormitory to prevent any contact with the people being sent from the White Room as guests.”

“It’s true that I was asked by Chairman Sakayanagi not to participate in the sports festival, but I didn’t expect him to tell his daughter about it as well.”

“I dearly hope you don’t take me as a fool, Ayanokōji-kun. It was you who instructed my father to tell me what I just said, wasn’t it?”

Have you read through our moves as a matter of course? No matter how much he loves her, Chairman Sakayanagi would never do something like mixing public and private affairs. That's why I asked Chairman Sakayanagi to let her know what was really going on, instead of telling her myself.

I asked him to explain the situation beforehand in case Sakayanagi, who might be absent from the sports festival due to physical reasons, gets an idea to get into trouble with me and the White Room.

Sakayanagi was willing to participate as the leader of Class A, but I don't think the chairman knew about it. Even if he did know, it would be safer to tell her that she could take a sudden leave of absence on the day of the sports festival. If it was his own daughter, he would have known that there was a risk of her getting involved.

However, there was something that Chairman Sakayanagi could not fully understand. Sakayanagi's instincts and curiosity are not something that can be easily suppressed. And if I'm not going to be there, it's not surprising that she thinks it's a good opportunity to talk to me without being disturbed.

In fact, this is how she showed up at my room, one of the most dangerous places in the school at the moment, without any fear.

"Did you choose to come before noon just to make me feel uneasy?"

"I was trying to be a little mean. I wanted to make you think that maybe I was ignoring Ayanokōji-kun's strategy and participating in the sports festival."

"So that's how it is."

"By the way, everyone is present today except for myself and Ayanokōji-kun."

With the information network that Sakayanagi possessed, it seemed that someone had confirmed the participants of each class and reported the details via cell phone before the sports festival. They're not slacking on that front either.

"I was a little mean, but I was actually planning to visit you a little earlier."

Sakayanagi said, just as the water in the pot started to boil and make a gurgling sound.

"I just went down to the lobby to check on the situation outside."

As I was ostensibly on sick leave, it was strictly forbidden for me to go outside my room. Sakayanagi, on the other hand, is also not allowed to leave the dormitory, but she is not absent in the form of sick leave. Even if she is warned for going out, it does not violate the reason for her absence.

“So, how did things go downstairs?”

“There were three people who seemed to be security guards with me. They seem to be stationed throughout the school, not just in this dormitory, so it shouldn’t look particularly unnatural.”

While including the purpose of protecting me, the people in the guard are only there to protect government officials.

“The Distinguished Service Award for this sports festival wasn’t Horikita-san, who offered cooperation to Ryūen-kun, nor Ryūen-kun, who accepted it. It was Ayanokōji-kun’s single word that made me become an absentee. That was the only thing that decided the winner, so it is as expected.”

“You still don’t know how it will be settled, do you?”

“It’s true that there are always upsets, but they are unlikely. By now, Class A is probably at the mercy of Horikita-san’s class, who is fighting head-on, and Ryūen-kun’s class, who is doing everything they can think of. Even if you have excellent arms and legs, you can’t do anything without a brain. That’s the class I’m building, you know.”

Something similar could be said about Ryūen, but that’s the problem with too much power at the top. The fact that the leader solves all of the problems means, on the flip side, that nothing can be solved without the leader.

“Well, that’s okay. Because this time, I will enjoy my time with Ayanokōji-kun instead of claiming 150 points.” She didn’t seem as if she cared about the damage that Class A would suffer.

“You’re not afraid of losing class points, are you?”

“This school system is an extension of play for me. As long as I can maintain my Class A status to some extent, I don’t have any problems.”

I took the Mont Blanc out of the pack and transferred it to a plate, and placed two of them on the table. Then I poured hot water from the pot into the filter with the coffee grounds.

“You’re pretty good at this, aren’t you?”

“It’s no big deal. At least this much.”

“Is each of these preparations fresh and fun for Ayanokōji-kun?”

Sakayanagi could tell that this was something I would never do in the White Room.

“It’s like everything else in school. I just wanted to do something normal, that’s all.”

Still, Sakayanagi’s words from earlier bothered me.

“You have a sense of purpose to keep Class A. Is that Sakayanagi’s pride?” I ask her about that as I place the milk and sugar stick on the table.

“At first, I didn’t have any commitment to Class A. But when I found out that Ayanokōji-kun was in this school, it turned into a goal. When Ayanokōji-kun eventually leads the class up to Class B, we might be able to fight for real.”

To put it simply, she’ll wait on the throne.

“In the first semester of the first year, Class D gave up all of their class points. However, after a certain point, they began to increase their class points and eventually rose to Class B. The reason for this was, of course, the dark presence of Ayanokōji-kun.” She speaks eloquently and happily as if she were bragging about herself. Picking up a plate from the table, Sakayanagi placed the Mont Blanc on her lap. “Let’s eat together, Ayanokōji-kun.”

She asked me to sit next to her, so I sat down on the bed without complaint. She stabbed the Mont Blanc with her fork and scooped it up, then held it out to me.

“Here you go, say aaaah.”

“What are you doing?”

“Can’t you see it? Please eat it.”

“No, I can see it, but...”

“It’s just me and Ayanokōji-kun now, and no one will bother us.”

I wondered if there was something behind this, but that didn’t seem to be the case. I bite down on the fork into my mouth and the sweet aroma spreads. Surprisingly, it was the first time I had ever eaten Mont Blanc.

“Is it good?”

To be honest, I don’t really like the taste that much. Personally, I thought a simple shortcake had a more agreeable taste. But I don’t want to be stingy with my souvenirs.

“Of course.”

Sakayanagi smiles lightly as I simply tell her it’s delicious.

“Then I’ll have some, too.”

Without caring about the fork that I used to eat, she scooped up her own portion and put it in her mouth.

“It’s not as good as the ones at the café, but as a convenience store sweet, it’s passable.” She nodded in satisfaction and held out her fork to me again.

We easily finished the first Mont Blanc, as we both ate one cake at a time.

“I’ll bring you another cake next time.”

“Huh?”

“Since Ayanokōji-kun’s reaction was that it didn’t seem to suit his palate very well.”

“I thought I responded with a normal, delicious response.”

“I’m proud to say that I still have excellent insight into this. Especially when it comes to Ayanokōji-kun.”

I didn’t expect her to be able to see through what I was feeling iffy about.

“You never show any gaps when you’re really playing with your thoughts, but in this kind of private life, you’re surprisingly hard to see past.”

“Maybe it’s because I’m not used to it after all.”

“Huh. I like that part of you, too.” I can’t tell if she’s serious or joking, so Sakayanagi continues. “Please let me have my revenge next time. If I find a good cake, I’ll bring it to you.”

“I wish there was a time when I could reliably avoid the public eye like this.”

Regardless of weekdays and holidays, it’s nearly impossible unless it’s when people are out of the dorm. Or there’s also the line of early mornings and late nights, but that also brings up its own issues.

“But what’s strange is Ayanokōji-kun’s change of heart. How is it that you not only occasionally help others in their school life when you were supposed to be quiet, but also started to aim for Class A in earnest?”

“I guess there are some things you don’t understand.”

“I’m not a goddess. And because I know Ayanokōji-kun’s situation, there are parts of it that I don’t understand and my thinking hasn’t been able to keep up. Could you please tell me about it?”

The genius, driven by the quest for the unknown, wants an answer. The main reason why Sakayanagi is not interested in the Class A or Dranks is probably because she won't benefit from them after graduation. As the daughter of the school's chairman and a talented student herself, most things are within reach for Sakayanagi.

She doesn't care because she doesn't have to use her Class A privileges to do anything. I'm sure I'll be back in the White Room after graduation, but I know that Class A privileges don't mean anything to me.

"It may seem strange."

"It's not so that you can play around with a lot of private points like Kōenji-kun, is it?"

"Surely he's in a similar position to the rest of us, right?"

He is the type of person who grabs and holds on to his parents' power and his own talent alone. Kōenji, such as he is, occasionally contributes to the class on a whim for class points.

"I suppose you at least have the right to ask why I decided to contribute to the class. You took advantage of an obvious trap and gave up half of your winnings in the festival."

If she risked losing 150 points and gained nothing, there was no way she would help going forward. However, if I give her a sprinkling of bait here, I can leave a chance for her to get on board if we follow the same strategy again.

"If I get an answer to my question, I'll come back here the next time it happens."

"Don't say what I was just thinking."

"Fufufu."

"Basically, Sakayanagi, it's exactly what you're trying to do. You're trying to answer the question of what it means to be a genius by defeating me. I'm trying to prove in my own way that White Room education is not perfect."

I can't sense surprise from Sakayanagi. It was evident that she had been expecting that line of thinking, even if it wasn't confirmed.

"Are you saying that Ayanokōji-kun is trying to create the strongest class with his own hands?"

Nodding in the affirmative, Sakayanagi puts her index finger to her lips.

“It’s not that I haven’t thought about it, but... there are a few questions that remain.”

“Go on.”

“This sports festival. Despite the circumstances, Ayanokōji-kun could have forced himself to participate. Wouldn’t it have been better to fly instructions directly to the scene to make the victory rate higher and more solid? And I’m sure he wasn’t afraid of my participation.”

“I spent this sports festival based on one theme.”

“Interesting story. What is the theme?”

“Stillness. I decided it would be a good opportunity to see how well they could compete on their own, without interfering directly in the festival. Your absence was a byproduct of that, I suppose.”

“It’s just that I came to see Ayanokōji-kun for being quiet, and he didn’t do anything directly regarding the content of the sports festival. I see.”

As we were talking, Sakayanagi arrived at the conclusion one step ahead of what someone else in her position would.

“In other words-”

I lightly pushed Sakayanagi, who was about to give her answer. No, it’s not as if I’m exaggerating when I say I pushed her. I just lightly grabbed both of her shoulders and pushed her backwards, causing the weak Sakayanagi to fall backwards onto the bed unbearably.

The sound from the mattress and the faint creaking of metal. Even Sakayanagi, who prides herself on being a genius, would not have thought of this action at all.

I looked down at Sakayanagi as if she was covering me before I could catch up with her understanding.

“Oh, my...?”

Sakayanagi, who was always so strong and relaxed, wasn’t keeping up with the changes in the situation.

“I’m living my school life under my plan. The fact that you came here today, that you were interested in the plan, that there was a possibility, a route, to get to the answer...”

Sakayanagi, who has never been handled by a man before, clears her throat from impatience and nervousness.

“If you tell anyone else about this now, it will interfere with my plans.”

“You think I’m going to tell anyone about...?”

“The chances of that are probably not zero at the moment. If you threaten me with a match with the conditional I don’t want to be exposed, I can’t choose any other option but to accept.”



“I see, that’s certainly true. But if you’re willing to force a match with that kind of talk, can’t you talk about the White Room stuff?”

“No, that won’t work. Even if I make the existence of such a facility known, it’s not something that other people can understand. It’s also not a risk I’m willing to take personally.”

Kiyotaka Ayanokōji was raised in a White Room institution.

Most people would probably just nod their heads and shrug if they heard such a story. It’s not something you can search up on the Internet.

It would create some confusion in Sakayanagi’s case, but of course it would do nothing for me.

“I’m not at the stage where I want people to know what I’m planning to do. I can’t let you use that as an excuse to extort me.”

I closed the distance to Sakayanagi a little, and the light from the ceiling combined to create a deep shadow.

“Well, now I have come to know. What do you want me to do about...?”

“A secret for a secret. A threat for a threat. The only people left in this dormitory right now are you and me. That means that no matter what happens here, no one will come to our aid. Even if you shout out loud, at best it will only be audible in the hallway.”

“Are you going to commit a crime to protect your plan?”

“Crime? You and I have an agreement to share our secrets.”

She pulls out her phone and activates the camera.

“Do you think you can escape?”

Sakayanagi is a cripple. No, even if both of her legs were fine, there was no way for Sakayanagi to get out.

How could she answer in this hopeless situation?

“Do you think you can beat me?”

“Can I win?”

“I mean, if things were to go as Ayanokōji-kun envisioned here, would you really have the upper hand...?”

“I’m sorry, but you don’t stand a chance.”

“A slight difference in experience, for example, can be caught up with and overtaken by one way of learning. In fact, you might even learn that you’ve been studying the wrong way, right?”

Even though she was in a tight spot, Sakayanagi continued to think as calmly as possible. She must be in a hurry, but it's impressive that she's been able to keep it under control so far.

I throw the phone down the bed and slowly move my hand closer to Sakayanagi. I grab her by the shoulders and bring her to the collar of my neck.

Even so, Sakayanagi only averted her gaze.

"Shall we begin our special lesson?"

Smiling wryly, Sakayanagi closed her eyes quietly without resisting.

1

"You really are a mean person, aren't you?"

"Maybe so."

It had been about an hour since Sakayanagi had come to my room.

"So now there's a secret between me and Ayanokōji-kun that I can't tell anyone~"

"That's a wordy way of putting it."

"The one who first caused the misuse of the word is none other than Ayanokōji-kun, isn't it?"

"Indeed."

"Then again, this is the first time I've ever been in a man's bed."

"You were out in ten seconds, it doesn't even matter."

"That's taking the girl's memorial lightly, isn't it?"

I show Sakayanagi the screen of my phone as I select and dispose of the necessary items. Perhaps because I slid it too far forward in the process, a picture of me and Kei was shown.

It was a picture of the two of us at the Keyaki Mall.

"It seems that your relationship with Kei Karuizawa-san is going well."

"Well, I guess so."

Sakayanagi continued, looking at the picture of Kei smiling happily.

"Ayanokōji-kun was attracted to her either by her appearance, voice, or personality. That's what I would normally think, but there are some things that don't quite add up."

After that, Sakayanagi looked up at me and her eyes were sharp, as if she was fighting me.

“I’ve looked into her as much as I can. From how she spends her time after school to how she spends her days off. And now Ayanokōji-kun is in a situation where he can easily follow her.”

As long as the entire third year was monitoring me, I couldn’t pay attention to every single thing. If Sakayanagi’s secret agent was mixed in, it would be difficult to distinguish them.

Even if it was Hashimoto, who had noticed the tail before, or someone else, there was no way to identify them.

“I have not been able to find out the truth about why Ayanokōji-kun chose to go out with her, but I have been able to see some things. The strong trust and love she has for him can be described as delusional. Is he going to use her to conduct some kind of experiment, or is he trying to save her? I guessed it was something like that.”

I don’t remember giving them any unnecessary information. I don’t think she knows the details, such as Kei or Ryūen. I don’t know how she could have guessed so close to the truth in that situation.

“That’s what your special lesson for me is about, isn’t it?”

“I’m getting tired of using the word special, but you’re right.”

Unlike Kei, Sakayanagi and I are able to communicate without words.

Ding dong.

A dumb, tension-free chime sounded suddenly in the room.

It was around half past twelve, and the students would be finishing their meals by now.

There was no one left in the dormitory, but suddenly a visitor appeared. Sakayanagi and I looked at each other and then at the front door at the same time. There were supposed to be three bodyguards waiting in the lobby, but did they force their way in? No, even if they had used their great skills to subdue him by force, the problem didn’t stop there. They would not take their time to ring the doorbell, they would at least try to break in.

The doorbell rang once more.

Since I was supposed to be resting in my room, it would be strange to ignore it any longer. It is possible, though unlikely, that it is someone from the school.

“Who is it?” I call out to the visitor, not moving from my position on the bed.

“Stay where you are and listen.”

The man replied, as if he could tell from his voice that I was sitting far away from the entrance.

A young voice. Not an adult, but the same age.

“That voice sounds familiar.”

But a figure did not come to mind. It sounded like a student, and even though I didn’t recognize him, the voice was distinctly familiar. Of course, when you live in a school, you hear many unspecified voices.

However, I immediately recognize the owner of this voice.

“You called me once, didn’t you?”

I ask back, and the figure on the other side of the doorway remains silent for a bit.

“That’s great, you remember my voice after hearing it only once.”

The fact that it was after my father had visited this school was also impressive.

“You didn’t say what you wanted then.”

“It was a good thing I didn’t, but something inconvenient happened soon after. I haven’t been in touch with you since then, but if you’re wondering, it doesn’t matter who I am. Because I’m neither your friend nor your enemy.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“You just need to get rid of Tsukishiro and then the White Room students, and peace will return. I came here to advise you because I thought you might have made that mistake.”

“Oh my. That sounds like a very fun adventure. Would you be willing to let me join you?”

“Arisu Sakayanagi, huh?”

The man on the other side of the door showed no sign of being upset by Sakayanagi’s unexpected response. Rather, he immediately guessed who it was just by hearing her voice. Perhaps he had narrowed down the list of absentees for the day, or perhaps he knew Sakayanagi and recognized her voice.

“Anyway, be on the lookout if you want to stay in school until graduation.”

“For a neutral, you’ve got a lot on your shoulders, don’t you?”

“Your presence is having a negative impact. I’m just trying to prevent more of it...” He replied as his voice trailed off. Apparently, he didn’t intend to stay long, and it could be assumed that he had left.

“That voice, I’ve heard it somewhere...”

“Do you have any idea who the voice is?”

“I can’t answer that as clearly as Ayanokōji-kun. But I think I vaguely remembered the presence that came through the door.”

So it’s something different from what I remembered from the voice.

“It’s not a recent memory, it’s a reasonably old memory, five, ten years anyway.”

“If you’re sure about that, then the possibility of a White Room student seems infinitesimally small.”

“Yes. If I’ve ever come face-to-face with one when I was little, then yes.”

His reaction to learning of Sakayanagi’s existence was somewhat affirming. In addition to the fact that he wasn’t surprised, he reacted like he would to someone he was acquainted with. But whether it’s Amasawa or the other one, it’s not something I care about.

As long as there was no harm done to me at the moment, I couldn’t do anything about it.

2

The sports festival, in which I was not present, ended in an almost ideal way. The class was excited by the final result, which was unthinkable in the past year and a half.

The gap between Horikita’s class and Class A had narrowed, and Horikita’s class had been able to increase their class points through the desert island exam, the unanimous special exam, and the sports festival, which was undoubtedly a great asset.

A few days later, it was the middle of October.

The ranking of the sports festival was Horikita’s class in first place, Ryūen’s class in second place, Ichinose’s class in third place, and Sakayanagi’s class in fourth place. Of course, this was not due to any one person, but to the will and power of the entire class. In the individual competition, the pair of Sudō and Onodera took first place respectively.

Kōenji also achieved first place in all ten events, but because they were all individual competitions, he ended up in second place.

That seemed to be good enough for him, and he never had any problems.

Sudō and Onodera were then given the right to move to a different class, but he chose private points without hesitation. Although Sudō was unsteady, he was making his way up the ladder to Class A.

Kei, who seemed to have an appointment with a friend, decided to drop by the Keyaki Mall on her way home.

As she was about to head home alone, I was approached by Horikita.

“I’d like to talk to you for a minute, if that’s okay.”

“If you don’t mind, we can talk on the way back.”

“That’s fine.”

I guess it’s not something that can be overheard by a lot of people since she approached me when I was leaving.

“I’ve learned a great deal from the last unanimous special exam.”

“Let’s hear it, shall we?”

The sports festival was over, but not all of the problems had been solved, and the class was starting to move forward, although it still left a precarious situation, one that Horikita was still struggling with and learning from.

“I wasn’t wrong. I made the choice to keep Kushida-san, and I was able to recognize once again that the decision was the right one.”

In the face of the demand for results, Kushida also contributed to the sports festival by increasing her points.

In her daily school life, she has once again returned to being a serious honor student, and although her social contribution in OAA was lowered at the beginning of October, it is probably only a matter of time before she regains it from here.

If you want to make an unrelenting comparison, she has contributed far more as a classmate than Airi. Of course, it’s not all merit.

“I know, I know. I’m leaving a few uncertainties behind. Especially with Hasebe-san, I honestly don’t know what to do yet. But if there’s another special exam like that, I think I’ll be able to get around it better next time.”

“What’s your rationale for that?”

“In that exam, I made an ill-advised promise to get unanimous approval. I said I would expel the traitor, and then I reneged on that. It was an easy shortcut to get unanimity, but I didn’t understand the magnitude of the risk. I knew that Kushida-san was a traitor. And that I had made that decision while I hadn’t even had the courage to let her leave the school. That was a mistake.”

“If there was a possibility of leaving, then surely an ill-advised promise would only hurt you later on.”

It was a painful decision to make as time was running out, but if we had been able to make it unanimous at that stage, leaving open the possibility that there would be a footnote from Airi or someone who didn’t have similar abilities, it would be true that the aftereffects would not have been as bad as they are now.

What will we give up and what will we take?

“We gained class points. But I also lost many things. That special exam has taught me a lot. You’ve shown me both sides of success and failure.”

“It’s better not to fail, though.”

Horikita closes her eyes, exhales in a huff, then opens them again.

“I’m only a sophomore in high school. I’m a kid. It’s okay to make mistakes.”

“You’ve reopened your mind.”

“It’s not like me to dwell on it. I’m going to - I’m going to be me. I may not be able to do as well as the other leaders. But I have Hirata-kun, Karuizawa-san, Sudōu-kun, Onodera-san, Kushida-san and Kōenji-kun. With the support of these people, I am moving forward. Class A is waiting for me after that, that’s what I’ve decided to think.”

“I see.”

“Of course, you’re one of them. I don’t know what you’re thinking, and you’re uncooperative in many ways, but... you’re indispensable to the class and to me.”

I’m like training wheels on a bicycle.

At first, it’s indispensable, but then it comes off, falls down, and shakes repeatedly, and eventually you learn to ride it without difficulty. There is no single person who can support your back as you pedal your bike.

Your classmates will support you.

And after watching you grow for a little while longer...

I'm leaving your class.

I'm not going to say why yet, but I'm sure Horikita will find out why sooner or later.

And then...

That there will come a time when the class you thought invincible will meet a reality you can't beat.

I will teach you that.

For myself, and no one else.

I'm fine as long as I'm winning.

If I decide to be the enemy and defeat Horikita, that's a done deal.

But I'm leaving because I want to be defeated.

There is a future that I hope is uncertain.

The answer is already there, but there is a contradiction within me that I deeply want the answer to be different.

Chapter Seven: Autumn Is Coming

HASEBE CALLED OUT to Miyake, who was waiting for him at the door, and lightly tapped his shoulder, “What are you waiting for?”

“No, I’m not really waiting for much. I’m bored.”

Hasebe missed a week of school, but has been showing up every day since then.

“Are you glad you quit the archery club?”

“It’s not like I was coasting to begin with.”

“It’s my fault, right?”

“It wasn’t. I only quit because I wanted to. That’s not the point, I’m glad you started coming to school.”

At the sports festival, he only participated in the minimum five events.

She didn’t get any results, but at least she contributed to the class.

However, she rarely speaks to anyone other than Miyake, and is a bit distant from Yukimura, who agreed to expel Sakura from school. Assuming that this was unavoidable for now, Miyake continued to stand by her side without saying a word.

“At first, I was going to destroy everything. I thought I should get back at all my classmates for abandoning Airi, not just Kiyopon. I’m a bad guy, I know.”

“No, I know how you feel.”

“Someone had to drop out of school in that exam. But it had to be Kushida-san. That was the first promise we made, and it’s the right one. Isn’t that right?”

“I guess.”

“I will not forgive Kiyopon. I won’t forgive my classmates. But I thought it’s not like I’m going to keep dragging you down and make you suffer forever.” She confesses all her thoughts to Miyake with a penetrating and silent goal. “Hey Miyachi. Will you help me... with my revenge?”

Her eyes are not smiling, and Miyake doesn’t have the courage to ask her back if she’s serious.

“Haruka...”

“What a joke.” Laughing and fooling around, Haruka walks away. “I’ll take my revenge alone.”

“I’m not...”

Hasebe’s hand is held out, then withdrawn. She turns her back and walks away. While showing his hesitation, Miyake silently began to walk after her.



Afterword

Long-time no see, or nice to meet you. I'm Shōgō Kinusaga.

This is a serious postcard.

I hope you have already noticed this but after 5 years, YouZitsu sequel anime has been produced and will be broadcasted.

Although the story is almost impossible to put it into words, I can say a lot of hard work and suffering that went into the making of this announcement.

More than once, I almost stopped writing. I thought I might not be able to turn it into an anime again. I was anxious like that. However, the reason why I have been able to continue writing this book without stopping until today is because many readers have supported me, even after the anime finished airing in 2017.

Without this long and significant achievement, the re-animation would never have been realized.

As an author, I have never been so happy and grateful for a sequel decision.

Thank you very, very, very much.

And let me say this strongly.

I have been waiting for YouZitsu's sequel to be made into an anime more than anyone else for a long, long time.

It was roughly two years ago that we started to talk about this.

I was so excited! But it was a short time before the global virus took its toll on us.

Anyway, I would like to rejoice that the announcement has been successfully made.

We will do our best to connect the anime to the story.

There is still more to tell, but this is the end of this postcard.

It's been a long time coming, but I'm looking forward to seeing the growth of Ayanokōji and the others again. Can't you just run the anime until it's finished? Woo! Woo!

That's it for now... YEAHHHHHH!!!! YAY!!!! Thank you all for your continued support!!!!

RoyalMTL Afterword

Yo, Prince here, and I'd like to extend my thanks from the entire team at RoyalMTL's for reading and supporting our translation. We all put our best efforts into this volume, and hope you enjoy reading the volume as much as we did. We look forward to continue providing the highest quality translations in the shortest time, and we plan to see you all in four months. Until June!

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Sr_Alex^_^#2029: Sponsor – [Spanish TL](#)

Thank you, Shōgo 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.

See you in four months!

- RoyalMTL Team

Bookmark/Favourite our website to keep updated on *Classroom of The Elite* translations!

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