

ようこそ
力の教室へ

Welcome to the Classroom of the Second-year
至上主義の教室へ

生生編

笠原 勝
KINUGASA SYOUGO
トモセシユンサク
TOMOSESHUNSAKU



9

ようこそ実力至上主義の教室へ 2年生編 衣笠彰梧 ×
トモセシュンサク
Welcome to the Classroom of the Second-year



When I arrived at the location a little before the appointed time,
Ichinose was already waiting, holding an umbrella behind her.

"Oh, Good morning Ayanokoji-kun."

ANIME ANYWAY
FAN TRANSLATION

An anime-style illustration of two characters. On the left, a young woman with long, flowing pink hair and blue eyes is wearing a red blazer over a white shirt. She is leaning forward, her right hand touching the cheek of a boy on the right. The boy has short brown hair and yellow eyes; he is wearing a purple blazer over a white shirt and a blue tie. He looks slightly surprised or taken aback by her touch.

"Hey, Ayanokoji-kun, is it okay if I touch your face?"

When I jokingly said so, Ichinose gently laughed and nodded. Then, she reached out with her right hand and touched my cheek.

A rain that won't stop. Ichinose Honami and Ryuuen Kakeru.



ANIME ANYWAY
FAN TRANSLATION

9



ようこそ実力至上主義の教室へ 2年生編⁶

Welcome to the Classroom of the Second-year

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2 VOLUME 9

**A Fan Translation
by Anime Anyway**

Translator's Note

This is a Fan Translation of Year 2 Volume 9 of Classroom of the Elite. This is fully translated by a Human Translator and we made sure that it's accurate to the original version. Thank you, the reader, for choosing to read this. Also, I want to give thanks to the Author - Kinugasa Shougo and Illustrator - Tomose Shunsaku for this Volume.

All Credits go to the original publishers for the Series. If you can, then please go and buy the official version to support the Author. This is just an extra effort towards the Classroom of the Elite community. I hope you Enjoy, Personally, I really Enjoyed this Novel, So I hope you also have a good time. Also, If you'd like, you can Support us [Here](#).

Have Fun !

Index

Prologue	11
The Monologue of Miyabi Nagumo	11
Chapter 1	14
A Sign of Things to Come	14
Intro	14
Part 1	17
Part 2	29
Part 3	67
Chapter 2	69
The New Student Council Members	69
Intro	69
Part 1	83
Part 2	91
Part 3	107
Part 4	112
Chapter 3	123
Spending time with Ichinose's classmates	123
Intro	123
Part 1	127
Part 2	159
Part 3	165
Part 4	170
Part 5	177
Chapter 4	184
How to Spend Your Day Off	184
Intro	184
Part 1	193
Part 2	206
Part 3	217
Chapter 5	221
The Approaching Special Test	221
Intro	221
Part 1	225

Part 2	231
Part 3	238
Part 4	248
Part 5	256
Part 6	262
Chapter 6	275
The Expected and the Beyond Expectations	275
Intro	275
Part 1	279
Part 2	303
Part 3	308
Epilogue	315
A Touch of Anxiety	315
Intro	315
Part 1	332
Afterword	343
Thanks...	344

Classroom of the Elite

Year 2 Volume 9

Fan Translation by Anime Anyway

Prologue

The Monologue of Miyabi Nagumo

Before long, I was the best both in academics and sports.

Before long, I was surrounded by people trying to take advantage of me.

It's not like I worked that hard.

Even though we learned the same things at the same time, I had the ability to learn much better than the others.

Surprisingly, that's almost a necessary condition to becoming popular here.

Popularity is a talent.

Ever since I was a child, I had the talent to become popular.

Of course, I do know that not everyone likes me.

I'm sure the guys who consider me their rival especially hate me.

I don't care, though.

Leaving good and evil aside, I was happy as long as people saw me as a popular person.

Such is my life as a popular person, unchanged all through primary and middle school, a dazzling road.

Still, I have been unable to shake off the strange sense of discomfort I feel from time to time.

A sense of discomfort with no answer.

In a life without even the slightest discomfort, that feeling alone always remained in my head.

A sense of discomfort that remains even after being accepted by and controlling everyone.

I decided not to care about it, though.

As long as I can continue being popular, this feeling of discomfort or whatever it is doesn't matter.

That's what I thought.

However, things completely changed when I enrolled in high school.

I could no longer ignore this feeling of discomfort swelling up in me.

Horikita Manabu.

That man a year above me had the respect of all those around him.

He was much more dazzling and intelligent than me, and had a certain conviction on top of that.

Then, another man who had a different type of talent than Horikita Manabu showed up under me.

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.

He is very different and has a cocky attitude, but his ability is undeniable.

My accomplishments aren't inferior to theirs.

Along with the feeling of discomfort, sometimes, I think about it.

Is my ability truly the real thing?

Or, am I a *naked emperor*¹ who was simply not ever blessed with a good opponent?

[¹TL Note 1 : *Naked emperor* - The phrase here is a reference to another story. You can have a look at it [here](#).]

I can't stop thinking about that.

That is the true form of my feeling of discomfort.

So, I have to bring things to a conclusion and get rid of this feeling.

I have to defeat Ayanokoji, and prove that I am the most talented.

If I don't——

Chapter 1

A Sign of Things to Come

Intro

The 2nd term is finally coming to an end.

The school trip passed away like a fading dream, but it's soon the winter vacation for the second years.

Winter is the end of the year, the season of farewells.

The lowest temperature today is 1°C, so it's been quite cold.

The students running through the road are also chatting about the cold while blowing out their white breaths.

Every morning, I watch this uneventful daily scene and carve it into my memory.

This may be pointless for someone who only lives in the now.

However, what about the ones who know this time is limited?

What would happen if they knew that they could only look at this scene for one more year?

I think that they would see this daily life as a glittering gem.

While waiting for someone to come and gazing at the scenery of daily life, a message arrived.

“Come to the student council room after school today.”

The forceful text that didn't let me say yes or no came from Nagumo.

"The student council room?"

I'm not very interested, but, thinking about the future, I can't refuse him so easily.

Besides, even if we had a conflict of interest, we cooperated in the culture festival.

I gave a short reply only saying "okay", and turned the screen off.

As I returned to gazing at the students and the scenery, Kushida entered my line of sight.

She smiled and waved, not really giving me a proper greeting. So I raised my hand up in response, but — just before she passed, she glared right at me.

"What are you doing...? Since the morning."

I waved at her because she waved at me, but why do I have to be glared at? I think she wanted to confirm no one else saw her face, but I don't know what I did.

I understand if this is because she simply hates me because of our history but...

I feel like she just did a hit and run on me.

"Sorry Kiyotaka! I'm here!"

Just then, she came running from the direction of the dormitory and called out to me.

"You're only a few minutes late, don't worry about it so much."

"But...! Anyway, isn't it too cold to wait out here?"

We were supposed to meet in the dormitory's lobby, so she showed me a suspicious expression.

“I’m fine. More importantly, you missed a part.”

Kei must have been in quite a hurry, as it is unlike her to make a mistake like this.

“No way!”

She covered her face in shame. Then, she used her fingers as a comb to try and fix it.

However, no matter how many times she tried, it jumped back up.

“Uaah, what should I do..!?”

“I don’t think you need to worry that much. Hondou and Ike come to class with way worse bed-hair.”

“Don’t compare me with boys!! Ugh, I’ll go to the toilet when we get to school...”

Kei started walking while hiding her bed-hair with embarrassment.

Well, there’s nothing wrong with caring about the way you look.

Part 1

Reaching the classroom first by myself, I sat down on my seat.

“Good morning, Kiyotaka-kun.”

“Yeah, good morning.”

Surrounded by girls, Yousuke called out to me.

I'm happy that he greeted me, but I don't like that all the girls are staring at me as if saying “give me back my Hirata-kun”.

“This may be necessary, but please tell me if I can help you out with anything.”

I was wondering what he'd say, but it's this again?

“Haven't you been saying that every day recently?”

Yousuke looks concerned about the group of 3 looking over here from a distance.

I used to be a member of that group, so I guess they are concerned after I left.

Yousuke really hasn't been himself since the school trip ended.

Yousuke also worries about people even if they say he shouldn't.

“I'll let you know if that time comes, thanks. It'll be a lot of help if you could keep quiet and watch over me.”

So, I made sure that I conveyed the fact that I can see his good will.

I guess Yousuke will keep speaking out to me on a regular basis until our relationship is restored.

“I'm really no good. I just can't stand to see the instability in the class, so...”

He seems to dislike the fact that he can't stop himself from putting his feelings into words.

Yousuke always blames himself, even if he hasn't done anything wrong.

"Anyway, the girls are waiting for you. That's what I'm worried about."

The envious looks that say "How long are you going to monopolize Yousuke?" have grown more intense.

As Kei entered the class, Yousuke returned to the girls.

With the bell ringing and Chabashira-sensei entering the class, a new school day started.

"I'm sure the lack of warning won't surprise you any more, but you will be taking the 2nd term's special test right before winter break."

My classmates had gotten used to the special exams, but they were quite shaken, as everyone thought things would remain the same until winter break.

"Oops. Looks like I surprised you a little this time."

There were also a lot of big events going on like the culture festival and the school trip, so.

For a school like this, all that stuff and the special exam are different matters, though.

However, there's only a little more than two weeks left to conduct the special exam.

I suppose long term preparations and measures weren't needed, so I wonder what it'll be about?

"I understand why you're nervous, but there's no need for that. In the first place, it isn't the kind of special exam that has a risk of causing dropouts."

It looks like the most important factor, which is expulsions, will not be relevant this time.

“Of course, there is no avoiding the change of class points. Since you’re aiming for the A Class, I’m sure this isn’t something you can afford to lose.”

We can’t catch up and overtake them by just winning one or two times. So, we have to be prepared to win all of our battles from now on.

“For this special exam, there aren’t any complicated rules that have to be beaten into your heads. It will be a one versus one of academic ability with the other classes.”

A duel of academic ability.

It’s not a surprising test for this school, or this school’s students.

Rather, it’s the standard.

We compete with each other even in the midterms or the finals.

However, needless to say, when it’s a special exam, there are always some special rules that affect the outcome.

“The winner will receive 50 class points from the loser. You get 50 class points for winning, and lose 50 class points if you lose.”

I can’t say that it’s a big number, it would be a rather low fluctuation.

“If it’s a class-based competition, then wouldn’t it be a bad idea to fight Class A !?”

“Rejoice, Ike, because you will be fighting Class A.”

It seems that our opponent was already decided, so we were confronted with a cruel reality by Chabashira-sensei.

“The 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th place classes with the highest average scores in the recently held final test will be competing in a straightforward fashion. There are some special rules, but the fact that the lower ranked classes and A Class are competing against each other will also have a significant impact on the outcome.”

As of December, the class points are 1250 for Sakayanagi's A class and 985 for Horikita's B Class.

If we win the head-to-head match up, we will be close to 165 points after deducting 100 class points.

We will also be on our way to surpassing the 1000 class points mark for the first time since our enrollment.

On the other hand, Ryuuen's C Class has 684, and Ichinose's D Class has 655. If Ichinose wins, she will reach C class again, and if she loses, there will be one more step between her and A Class. It's a tough development.

However, even if it's an easy fight, they haven't won even once with academic ability up until now. One could say they are 1st and 2nd place, but the difference in their academic ability still isn't small.

"The questions are from all permanent subjects on the midterm and final exams. From the easiest to the most difficult questions, it will be the same as the regular written tests, no, perhaps more difficult."

Although the academic level of this class is growing at a rate that is head and shoulders above the others, the possibility of turning things around is low, even if my classmates study to death for the next two weeks.

"Now, let's talk about how you guys can win."

The detailed contents of the special test appeared on the screen.

Second Term Final Special Exam - Cooperative Comprehensive Written Test

Summary:

The class will solve 100 questions in total.

Rules:

The students will solve the questions in a determined order.

Each student can solve 5 questions at most, but everyone has to solve at least 2 questions, correctly or not.

Regardless of if it's correct or incorrect, a student's solution cannot be changed by another student.

Each student will be given a maximum of 10 minutes, including time to enter and exit the room.

All students except those challenging the test must wait in a separate room.

The next student must wait for their turn behind the door.

If a student goes over the time limit, he will fail and gain no points.

Leaving a written or verbal hint is a violation of the rules.

If a violation is found, the test will be forcibly terminated and a score of zero will be given.

There will be a special bonus added on according to the remaining time.

Leaving more than an hour.... 10 points

Leaving more than 30 minutes... 5 points

Leaving more than 10 minutes... 2 points

All problems are scored according to the solver's ability (see below), regardless of difficulty.

(The solver's abilities are based on the OAA Academic Ability on December the 1st.)

Academic Ability A....1 point

Academic Ability B....2 points

Academic Ability C....3 points

Academic Ability D....4 points

Academic Ability E....5 points

A test in which the number of points obtained increases or decreases according to the student's ability, regardless of difficulty.

It seems out of the norm, but it is a very fitting rule for a special exam.

There is also A + for academic ability in the OAA and there seem to be 5 categories, so the students with A + may have a slight advantage.

"These are the written test's rules. It may seem advantageous for the A Class who has a lot of members with high academic ability, but there is a high percentage of students in the OAA with Academic Ability B or above. In other words, they will earn less points for solving problems. Do you understand what that means?"

While there are many students in the Horikita's Class who have made remarkable academic progress, there are also some students like Kei, Satou, Ike, and Shinohara, who are still stuck at the bottom.

Although they won't be able to solve many questions, this means that they can get 4 or 5 points by just managing to solve one question.

This certainly can't be said to be a purely academic contest, and I can't say that this is disadvantageous for the A Class.

Rather, it can be said that the developments and the outcomes will be beyond the scope of our imaginations.

There is a point bonus for the remaining time, but I'm not sure if this is that realistic.

Including the time you enter the room, the count-down starts from the moment you put your hand on the door handle.

There are 38 people in the Horikita Class.

If they can't manage to solve the questions in one or two minutes each, then it's impossible to leave at least an hour remaining. There is also a risk of the students with low academic ability making mistakes because of the time limit

. This addition from remaining time is more of a consideration for the side that is winning in the Academic Ability OAA.

No, paying too much attention to the time loss is also a danger.

"We have plenty chance of winning - that's the kind of special exam this is."

It looks like Horikita also understands the winning chance that the rules give us.

"That's right. Of course, the students in A Class are well rounded academically from the top to the bottom. I'm sure they'll score well. Even though we have many Academic ability D or below students here with a potential for high scores, if they don't answer the questions correctly, they'll still receive 0 points."

Still this is much better than facing them head on.

"I would also like to add something about the acts of cheating stated in the rules. Conversations are forbidden while in the waiting classroom or with students who have finished their tests. There will be a few students waiting in each classroom, but please refrain from needless conversations. I recommend you don't throw away the test with one simple mistake."

I'm sure the students will already take the fact that we will be strongly observed into consideration.

"Umm, if someone is absent on the test day... What happens then?"

"If one person is absent, two questions will be unanswerable. If two people are absent, four questions will be unanswerable and they'll get 0 points. The time limit will remain the same. Further, the questions that will be unanswerable are decided at random before the test starts. Also, it's unlikely, but if there is a tie, there will be no change in class points."

Which means that intentionally making someone absent would be a useless strategy.

Classes with a lot of students like the Ichinose and Ryuumen classes have the advantage of being given more time, but I can say that this has no effect on the points they can earn by solving questions.

As it is the most efficient and ideal thing for an unexpected student with a low OAA rating to solve five questions and get a score, the number of students only has a minimal impact.

Well, we each coincidentally have the same number of people anyhow, so this talk is in itself meaningless.

"You gotta talk among each other and think about what is your best chance to win against A Class."

Chabashira-sensei said these words, like a mother watching over her children.

"About the date for the special exam, we decided to give you some time until right before the winter break. The test subjects are very numerous, so we decided some time was necessary. This will be difficult, but if you succeed, you will get closer to A Class. That's all."

It looks like the scope of the test will be announced tomorrow, so this is the end of the discussion here.

Schedule

December 22....The Special Test

December 23.... Announcement of the special test's results, 2nd term closing ceremony

So it's right before the 2nd term ends.

Still, there's only 3 weeks remaining until the test.

While the students with high academic ability usually have a different attitude towards their studies and wouldn't mind this time restraint, the key to victory lies with the students who are below average in academic ability.

"I looked at each class's academic ability on the OAA and investigated the situation. As we have a lot of students with D or E academic ability here in B Class, our points will be increased. In other words, in the most ideal situation, we have a 100% chance of winning."

As the students with lower academic ability in the OAA can gain more points, no matter how much they study, the points that A Class can gain are limited.

Well, this is just in theory. The probability is as thin as a sheet of paper.

With almost 40 students participating, a perfect score is almost impossible.

Taking Chabashira-sensei's comments and the rules of the special test into account, I can expect that there will be a high percentage of difficult questions.

If the questions could be solved by students with E or D in academic ability, that would be rather unbalanced.

It would be an absurd test that gave a disadvantage to the classes with higher academic ability.

We need something like a study group, but I doubt that alone will lead to victory.

“It’s also important who solves how many problems before passing the baton on to the next person.”

Yousuke asked so to Horikita in a calm tone of voice.

“Yes. The simplest way would be to put the students with low academic ability in front and have them solve as many problems as they can, but...”

The time limit is 10 minutes.

The ability to read through and understand the problems will also vary depending on the student.

It can be challenging to quickly find the easy problems out of the 100 problems on the test.

If the students with high academic ability get through the difficult questions first, it will take the lower students less time to find the right problems and they will be able to be more calm and focused.

Who can solve which problems?

Understanding that and directing the students accordingly is also a winning strategy.

I’m sure there are several other ways to do this. In the end, the important thing is to decide the strategy early on and get the class moving.

“Chabashira-sensei said there’s a chance we can win, but... We’re still in an unfavourable position.”

"If they score well, we probably won't win. Our opponent is the A Class, so."

My classmates began talking.

Up until now, A Class has never been below the others in total score in a pure written test.

Even with the special rules, there's no changing the fact that they are a formidable foe.

"We're up against A Class this time, but we're actually competing with ourselves. It doesn't matter what strategy they come up with. There's no need to get too worked up just because our opponent is Sakayanagi-san."

She emphasized that we should be facing inside, and not outside.

"I will think as much as I can about a strategy. In the meantime, I would like you all to study as much as you can, even one second counts."

Up until now, no, until a few weeks ago to be precise, the students were studying for the final test. Even though it's a student's job to study, I'm sure everyone will get sick of it after having to study again in such a short period of time.

Still, I can't even see one student expressing their dissatisfaction.

"We'll back you up as much as we can."

Yousuke replied so to Horikita, and the students like Yousuke and Mii-chan who do the teaching part in the study groups took the initiative and started moving.

"Alright! I'm getting excited! Personally, I have mixed feelings about my OAA going up, but I'm going to contribute as much as I can!"

Sudou, who had received a grade of E in academic ability, is up to C+ now.

The score he can earn now is lower than before, but he's made a big leap in his ability.

If he was still E in academic ability, he would have a hard time even solving the problems.

Part 2

After school, I slipped out of the class as they started their discussion and arrived at my destination pretty much right on time.

I almost knocked right away, but I heard people talking inside the room.

However, I can't hear what they're talking about through the thick door.

I might be able to hear some things clearly if I keep listening for a while, but my appointment was just a moment away, so I quickly discarded the option of eavesdropping.

“...Hi.”

I entered the student council room right at the instructed time.

Two boys were already sitting in the student council room, and one of them quickly stood up.

“Sorry for calling you out here, Ayanokoji.”

“I don’t mind, but I’m a little nervous seeing the student council president and vice president standing ready like this.”

I said something that an average student would say.

“Sorry, but you don’t look so nervous to me.”

Nagumo crossed his legs and pointed at me after he spoke, signalling me to approach him.

Kiriyama moved to a position slightly behind Nagumo where he could still be seen.



Then, he looked at the screen of his phone after taking it out of his pocket.

However, in less than a second, he turned it off and returned it to his pocket.

The one who spoke after that wasn't student council president Nagumo, but vice president Kiriyama.

"After this, I also called in student council members Horikita and Ichinose."

"Horikita and Ichinose?"

Assuming this combination is not a coincidence, they're both second-year students who are in the student council.

"There's no need to rush things, Kiriyama. Don't you think Ayanokoji wants to chat with us for a bit too?"

"Sorry, but it doesn't look like it. I can see from his face that he wants to keep this short."

I felt gratitude in my heart for Vice President Kiriyama's accurate judgement.

"Still, there's a lot of things I want to prepare for the next special test too."

"The special test? Us year-threes aren't going to have another special test in the second term, are we? Besides, it doesn't matter if you've already decided that you'll be the winner, right?"

Not understanding why he said this, Nagumo gave a suspicious side-ways glance at Kiriyama.

"Still. I want to be prepared for any unexpected situation. Many more year-three students than you think are aiming for victory. What if a student who can catch me off guard shows up?"

"Those fools are already all expelled. There's no one else left for you to call an enemy."

"I hope so."

The year-three students don't have much time left.

With Nagumo holding all the authority, they have to somehow get the ticket for 20,000,000 points, so they're still fighting over that.

It's no wonder that Nagumo is so optimistic that he has no enemies. Since Nagumo holds all the necessary tickets, no one can defy him. If someone doesn't comply with him, including Kiriyama, they might be stripped of their ticket to advance to the finals.

On the other hand, however, those who have not been given a ticket are not bound by it.

It's a grandiose idea, but one could expel Nagumo and accumulate private points from there. ...No, I doubt that would be profitable for them, though.

If Nagumo is expelled, his huge amount of private points will probably return to the school. Because without such a contract, he would not be able to protect himself.

In other words, Nagumo's existence also includes the funds for their own rise to power. Except for Nagumo's private points, the private points collected in the 3rd term would only be enough to save one or two students.

"Is there something in your mind? Kiriyama. You've been flaring up at me all day since this morning today."

"It doesn't matter if there's something in my mind or not, does it? Even if I say something now, you're not going to stop in your tracks on "this matter", right?"

"Am I wrong?" Nagumo nodded at the strong verification and laughed.

"Sorry, Kiriyama. This is a personal decision that I have to settle while I'm still in this school."

"In that case, please take into account my desire to quickly get it over with."

It seemed like there was a bit of an argument going on before I entered the room too.

It's certain that "this matter" Kiriyama has been pestering Nagumo about all day isn't something that Kiriyama likes. No, it's probably not something I'd like either.

"Fine, fine. I'll make our chat quick. Okay?"

I suppose there is no choice but to have this chat, so Nagumo got confirmation from Kiriyama.

"There will be another matter about a different student council issue, so please keep it short."

In the end, Kiriyama agreed, and Nagumo began what he judged to be a necessary chat or whatever.

"You year-two students seem to be in an unusually tight race."

"Looks like it."

"In our generation, and in Horikita-senpai's generation, A Class always had a big lead by the middle of the second year. I'm a little envious that you get to enjoy it until this time of the year."

In the past, the war between classes was usually settled by the end of the first year to the middle of the second year when the difference in class points became too large.

The class that started as A Class detached from B Class and below and graduated as A Class.

There were rare cases such as Student Council President Nagumo's B Class turning into A class, but in any case, one class always had the lead by the middle of the second year.

On the other hand, in our year, the point difference is so tight that even the D Class still has a chance of turning around.

"It looks like all four classes have a chance for now, but I'm sure that'll end by the final test."

“I think so too. There’ll be two classes… at most three classes competing for the seat of A Class.”

Nagumo and Kiriyma both made that judgement without hesitation.

“The final test for the year-two students is going to be intense, huh?”

“Yeah. The contents of the test are of course different, but the results will mostly be a tragedy. Last year, I had all of the year-two students under my control at the time of the final test, and was in a position to control the test itself. I kept the damage to a minimum, but three students still dropped out.”

Nagumo tried to prevent it from happening, but there were inevitable casualties.

“There was a way to reduce the number of expulsions to zero, but there was nothing I could do when I weighed the decrease in class points and private points I could gain.”

This story may be true, but whether it’s helpful or not is another matter.

It is unlikely that the final test we’ll take and the final test Nagumo and the generation above experienced are the same in content.

However, the scale will mostly be the same. Anyone can easily see that if they’ve been spending their lives in this school all this time.

“I think that’s enough idle talk. Please enter the main subject, Nagumo.”

Quietly urged so by Kiriyma, Nagumo shrugged and showed his white teeth.

“In the first place, I’m about to finish my role as Student Council President. Which means that we have to decide the next Student Council President.”

“You’ve already had a longer term in office than the previous presidents, right?”

From Horikita Manabu to Nagumo Miyabi.

The baton of the Student Council President should have been passed earlier.

I also remember that Nagumo himself said that he would extend his term in office.

“That was my intent, but the school approached me many times, you see. Apparently, I would be depriving my juniors of gaining experience if I put it off any longer. Well, there is some truth to that.”

“Except me and Nagumo, all of the year-three students have finished their duties in the Student Council.”

The next Student Council President will be decided, and these two will be relieved of their posts.

But, I see.

So, Nagumo decided to give up his position as Student Council President.

That would explain why they are calling in the names they mentioned earlier.

“Suzune or Honami? I have to decide which of the two is more suitable to be the next Student Council President.”

“You have the power to appoint someone, don’t you, President Nagumo?”

“Yeah. I do have that authority.”

“Then, shouldn’t you be talking with Horikita or Ichinose instead of me?”

I said something very obvious, but I can see from his lack of surprise that he is already aware of this.

“But it’s a waste to just pick one myself, right?”

“Considering the fact that you called me here... Well, I can guess.”

“You and I are going to decide who the next Student Council President will be.”

“You want more than just support from me, right?”

“I’ve been thinking about various methods of competing with you, and this should be a good way to do it. Horikita and Ichinose are both second-years like you. They probably have as much information as we do.”

It’s not surprising that Nagumo wants to settle this as soon as possible, seeing as he does not have a lot of time left.

I don’t think Nagumo would believe this is the ideal way to fight.

Still, he must have decided that this was better than nothing at all.

“There is still the option of postponing it. Taking last year as an example, I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a special test where we team up and compete with each other like in the training camp.”

“Well, if that time comes, we can call this matter the warm-up match.”

Not wanting to delay it any further, Nagumo wants to surround me so that I can’t flee.

“I agreed to have a duel, but I won’t agree to have a second one.”

I am interested in Nagumo, but I can’t keep wasting my time on him forever. There are things I want to do for the future too.

“Are you saying you have the right to refuse?”

“I just don’t want to turn this into a senseless game. If you really want this battle of deciding the Student Council President, then I’d like you to consider this our real duel.”

“That’s fine with me, but it’ll be a fight where you have a high chance of losing. You know that, right?”

“As long as the current students are given a right to vote, all of the year-threes will vote as you want them to. In other words, one-third of the votes have already been cast. That’s what you’re saying, right?”

“Yeah. You can barely make things equal even if you gather all the year-twos together. Well, that may be impossible, though.”

Since our opponent Ichinose is in the same year, the votes of the year-two students will inevitably be split.

“If you could do me one favour, I think it’ll be a good match.”

“Very interesting. Try me.”

“I only want you to make the voting anonymous. If it’s only the school who knows who voted for whom, I can think that we’re even.”

“I don’t get it. Do you think that the year-threes won’t vote for my candidate then?”

“Well, I can at least imagine the possibility of that increasing.”

If anonymity is ensured, there will be no need to follow the rules.

Even if there was the promise of a reward like private points, it’s impossible to prove unless the Nagumo side gets close to zero votes.

“Still, do you really think that half the people in year three will become your allies? That’s ridiculous.”

“I can’t know until I try.”

Kiriyama is watching quietly as Nagumo and I talk.

“So, with only that condition added in, you accept the duel?”

“Yes. I do.”

“You’re strangely confident, as usual. Well, whatever. If you believe that it will be an equal duel then, I have no complaints either. But, before determining this affair, you should know that I want something to bet on the duel.”

Of course. If there are no bets, it won’t hurt or itch to lose.

I'm sure Nagumo doesn't want to cut any corners with me.

So, it's inevitable that there will be a bet where I'll have no choice but to win.

"Are you ready to bet everything? Ayanokoji."

"May I return those words right back to you? We can even bet over dropping out."

"That's fine. That's what I'd like to say, but that's a bit difficult."

"I'm sure. You have not just your own fate, but the fate of all the year-three students in your hands. No one would accept the risk of dropping out in that situation. I am willing to bet on dropping out, but in that case, please let me demand a corresponding reward."

"A corresponding reward?"

"If I win, I want to receive your private points. Enough points. Enough to buy a ticket to move to another class, if possible. Even under the Special Test's rules, I need that many private points to prevent expulsion. It shouldn't be too much to ask."

"Well, betting over expulsion itself has that much value, so."

With both of our interests aligned, we came to an agreement on the duel's direction.

However, it was Kiriyma listening from the side, who called a halt to this.

"I knew that you'd be dueling with Ayanokoji, but I can't agree on the contents of the bet. I can't let you gamble such a large amount of money on a game."

"Wait, Kiriyma. Do you think I'll lose with these rules? Ayanokoji said we'd be even just with the votes being anonymous, but he's way off the mark."

"I don't think you'll lose, but the possibility still isn't zero. It also depends on whether you will support Horikita or Ichinose. Most of all, 20,000,000 points is too many. If you can pay that much to Ayanokoji, use that money to save one of the year-three students instead."

It's no surprise that Kiriyama is objecting, but Nagumo shows no signs of backing down.

"I can spend the money I acquired through my ability however I want. It's always been that way."

"...No matter what?"

"No matter what. I'm going to win this fight and get Ayanokoji expelled."

"I don't get it. Why do you care about a year-two? I can't agree with this method."

Kiriyama kept opposing him, but Nagumo doesn't look like he intends to listen.

"I'll accept your wish, Ayanokoji. If you beat me, you'll definitely be in A Class."

"Thank you."

"Are you really sure? We could end this with you simply going down on your knees with a small bet, but with 20,000,000 points, I'm going to adhere to the term of expulsion no matter what. If you want to lessen the bet, now is the time."

"Is that what you want?"

"Hah. I thought this threat would scare you a little, but you don't seem upset."

"I've already factored in the risks to get this large amount of money."

"I'll prepare the contract. It's one of two things: expulsion or 20,000,000 points."

All that's left is for us to decide who to support, and the match is on.

"I get the game you're going to play. But whether it will work or not is up to..."

Just as Kiriyama was about to make his last opposition to stop the match, in which a huge amount of points will be at stake, we heard a knock on the student council room's door.

"Nagumo-senpai, it's Ichinose. Horikita-san is with me too."

A clear voice. It seems that both candidates have arrived.

"...Nagumo, if possible, don't talk to them about the match, and don't talk to them about the bet either, of course."

Kiriyama has a point, as this is probably not something that Horikita and Ichinose should be told about.

I doubt they would feel good about the fact that they are the object of a match or bet.

"You have no objection to that proposal, do you, Ayanokoji?"

"I'm okay with it."

"But... Are you really sure? If we call those two in here, that means the match has already started."

Kiriyama looked at me and stopped me, signaling that there is no turning back after this.

"There's no need to risk dropping out to go along with Nagumo's games."

"Getting a ticket to A Class isn't easy though, is it? So, it's only natural that there is a corresponding risk to it."

"You're really not hiding your true colours anymore either, are you?"

Passing into bewilderment from anger, Kiriyama took out his phone and looked at the screen for a second time.

"Fine. You two can do as you please. Come in, you two."

Kiriyama approached the door and urged the two to enter as he opened it.

Nagumo always acts on his own accord, so Kiriyama must have a really hard time as the Vice President.

In that sense too, moving forward with this matter of changing the Student Council President isn't a bad idea.

As soon as they entered the room, they noticed my presence.

It's obviously not normal for me to be here, so I have no need of a special mention.

"Please sit next to Ayanokoji."

"Excuse me."

Horikita sat next to me, and Ichinose next to her.

For a moment, I could see Horikita saying "are you getting wrapped up in something weird again?" with her eyes.

With the exception of Kiriyama who returned behind Nagumo, the conversation resumed when everyone sat down.

"I decided to have you conduct the election for the next Student Council President."

"Election, is it?"

"Wasn't this common in middle school too? The candidates will give speeches, and the students will vote for who is the most suitable for the post of Student Council President. Whoever gets the most votes is the next Student Council Body President."

"I see. I don't remember an election like that happening last year, though."

"Yeah. Normally, the current Student Council President, like me, would decide the next president. If the person I pick accepts it, they become the Student Council President. Of course, I would not name someone who hasn't achieved the results that would convince the people around them."

The Student Council President is decided not at random, but on a proper foundation.

Nagumo made sure that we would remember that point.

"However, the situation is a little different for you year-two students. We've always had at least two, or ideally three names from the same year as Student Council Members, but only Honami served on the Student Council last year, and Suzune who joined in year-two hasn't been a member for even a year."

"I can understand that there were no students who joined at the same time, but I think it would be fine to pick Ichinose-san as the Student Council President. I don't think she has any weak points."

Horikita stated that she wants to give up the seat to her opponent Ichinose without hesitation.

It's not like she entered the Student Council to become the Student Council President in the first place.

"You don't want to become Student Council President?"

"No, that's not it. I'm feeling positive at the moment, including in the sense of following in my brother's footsteps. If the current students want me to run for election, I'd be happy to do so, but at the same time I think that there are no problems with the president being Ichinose-san either."

"Honami certainly has no weak points. She's a good choice. However, there are other things to be concerned about."

Ichinose reacted by slightly shrugging.

"Currently, the possibility of Honami's class graduating as A Class is extremely low. This is a problem. Historically, all of the Student Council Presidents have graduated in A Class. This isn't a tradition or any such thing, but it is something of a silent understanding. I will be among them, of course."

It is true that her position quickly becomes dangerous when you cut out the part of whether Ichinose can graduate in A Class or not.

Horikita on the other hand is in B Class and going for A Class, so the probability of her fulfilling that silent understanding or whatever is higher.

"Honami has a lot of achievements, but Suzune who has less is closer to A Class. After taking a lot of things into account, I decided that you two are currently almost evenly matched. That is why I decided to hold an election."

As long as Nagumo has the authority to decide the Student Council President, even if it is on a far-fetched basis, no one can object to his instructions.

The only thing left is the decision of the persons in question.

"I understand. In that case, I will be running."

"It's decided, then."

So the duel between Horikita and Ichinose to become the Student Council President begins.

"Ayanokoji, I'll let you pick who to support."

"Are you sure?"

"I can do that much."

Horikita or Ichinose? Honestly, it doesn't matter to me, but... If he is letting me decide, then I have to think about who would be the more beneficial choice for me in the future.

However, Horikita stood up quicker than I could name her.

"Please wait a bit, Student Council President. Why is Ayanokoji here?"

"We're going to have a match to see who can become Student Council President, you or Honami."

I thought we weren't going to talk about that to these two.

Kiriyama seems to be holding his forehead, but I guess there was no way Nagumo was going to listen to him.

“...You’re really doing this..?”

“No, it wasn’t me who suggested it, so?”

“Even so, don’t you think there are any problems with how things got here?”

She’s insightful. That’s something I can’t deny.

Perhaps Nagumo has a conscience too, as he isn’t mentioning the bet.

“Come on, pick whoever you’d like.”

“Then...”

I had made up my mind and was about to say out loud the name I picked, but I was stopped again.

“Wait. This is an unprecedeted experiment. I think I should add a few more words.”

Kiriyama, who had been listening up until now, interrupted us.

“What is it? Are you still dissatisfied with where this conversation is going?”

“This is a Student Council election. It will be a big psychological load on both sides. I want to confirm whether or not they really want to run, and that they have the qualifications to become president.”

“We’ve already confirmed that, haven’t we?”

“No, we haven’t. We got an answer from Horikita, but I haven’t heard anything from Ichinose yet.”

“Do we really need to ask?”

“Of course.”

As Kiriyama turned his gaze to Ichinose, the door suddenly opened.

“I’m gonna bother you guys a bit, Nagumo.”

It was Kiryuuin who suddenly entered the room without permission as if simply visiting a friend.

We haven’t met face to face like this since summer, but she looked to be in a bad mood and her usual smile was lacking.

“What an unexpected guest. Didn’t you think to knock once, at least?”

I’m sure Nagumo doesn’t welcome this guest, as he wanted to finish the discussion about the election.

“We’re busy now. Let’s do this later.”

Nagumo tried to chase Kiryuuin out, but she didn’t look to be listening.

“I already asked Kiriyama to make some time for me. Are you trying to put me off?”

While looking gloomy because of Kiryuuin, Nagumo looked at Kiriyama for confirmation.

“I’m sorry Nagumo, but what she’s saying is mostly true. I made a mistake with the time coordination.”

“That was a very careless mistake for you.”

“There’s no excuse for it. She’s involved in another matter that I wanted to have you solve today.”

I don’t know the details, but that was the exchange between Nagumo and Kiriyama.

“You heard him. So, won’t you listen to me, Nagumo?”

“I understand the situation, but I’m talking about something very important relating to the Student Council with these guys right now.”

“I can see that you’re busy, but I don’t have that much time either. I got an appointment for this time, so I think you should respect that.”

There’s certainly no reason for Kiryuuin to back down. It’s Kiriyama’s responsibility for having made a mistake with the appointment’s timing.

“My priority is to talk with Suzune and Honami right now. If you really are in that much of a rush, you can quietly sit and wait there.”

It seems that Kiriyama is currently the only one who knows the reason for Kiryuuin showing up here, so Nagumo tried to handle it as he could.

However, it’s obvious Kiryuuin is very annoyed.

“I refuse.”

After saying so with a slightly raised voice, she put her foot up on an empty chair.

“What are you doing?”

“First of all, I’ll be the one asking you a question. Depending on the answer, this chair may become the victim.”

Is she going to kick it off, or break it?

It’s obvious that the fate of the chair that Kiryuuin is putting her foot on depends on what’s about to happen.

Kiryama looked at Kiryuuin, who was showing no signs of leaving, and apologized again to Nagumo.

“She’s Kiryuuin, so it might be counterproductive to clumsily chase her out. It would be better to stop this discussion for a moment and hear her out.”

Even though Horikita and Ichinose are the priority, if Nagumo says to wait, then I’m sure they will do so.

Kiryuuin on the other hand looks very grumpy, so it’s clear she wouldn’t wait.

If we can't chase her out or make her wait, the quickest thing is to talk to her first.

"Please do not worry about us and talk with Kiryuuin-senpai first. You are fine with that, right, Horikita-san?"

"Yes, I think that would be best."

As both parties came to that conclusion without waiting for a direct confirmation, Nagumo seems to have no choice but to decide to deal with Kiryuuin.

"Good grief... Fine, I'll listen. Why did you come here?"

"Didn't you tell Nagumo about it, Kiriyama? You really are bad at arranging things."

"I understand how you feel, but I'm very busy too. I also thought it would be best if you talk to him directly about something this ridiculous."

It seems he deliberately didn't inform Nagumo of the reason she came visiting. Kiryuuin kept glaring at Kiriyama with cold eyes, but it seemed like there was no choice but to clear things up.

"Let's get to the main subject, then. I wanted to talk to you first before making a decision. So, I'll ask you. Who is the one that asked a third party to harass me?"

"Harassment? That doesn't really tell me much."

"I'll be more concrete, then. This underhanded, dirty plan of setting me up to look like a shoplifter - was it you who put it in motion?"

Shoplifter, an unexpected word.

Ichinose reacted more quickly than anyone else.

She tried to stay calm, but it was clear that she was nervous on the inside.

Even if it is for the sake of her family, she does have a history of dirtying her hands with crime.

“Shoplifter? I really can’t see what you’re talking about.”

“Let me supplement, Nagumo. It looks like Kiryuuin was framed as a shoplifter in Keyaki Mall the other day. She says that while shopping in a cosmetics store, Yamanaka, a year three D Class student, tried to hide lipstick and other goods in her bag. When Kiryuuin noticed this and confronted her, she told Kiryuuin that you ordered her to do this.”

Kiriyama delivered Kiryuuin’s accusations in simple words.

“I see. So that’s why she came over here like this.”

“The reason I didn’t convey this directly to you is that I know you wouldn’t have ordered something like that. Right?”

Kiriyama implicitly conveyed that he trusts Nagumo on this point.

Nagumo is showing a neutral attitude both to Kiryuuin and Kiriyama’s questions.

“Can you state definitely that you weren’t involved?”

It looks like Kiryuuin clearly accuses Nagumo of setting her up.

“Well, I don’t know. It looks like you’ve already made up your mind.”

“Yamanaka said so herself when I caught her on the act. Is that not enough?”

“Maybe she just used me as a convenient excuse?”

Kiryuuin lightly shook her head in response.

“Yamanaka would know it’s a bad idea to give your name if you’re unrelated. In fact, there would be a lot less trouble later if she gave the name of another student. Am I wrong?”

It’s true that Kiryuuin’s words and thoughts make sense.

Most of the year-threes are controlled by Nagumo.

It doesn't matter if they have a ticket to Class A or not.

I can't think of a merit to lying about being ordered by Nagumo while under his control.

If she got in trouble with Nagumo for this, it would be a great hindrance to the student named Yamanaka.

That's precisely why after Nagumo's name came out, it can't be helped that Kiryuuin thinks it was by his order.

If I were in the same situation, I would be blaming Nagumo too.

"Still, are you really so angry about shoplifting? This isn't like you."

"You don't know me well enough to say that it isn't like me. Unfortunately, I already hate acts like shoplifting. I'd hate to hurt someone else for my own sake just because there won't be a problem if it doesn't get revealed."

From the way she's talking, I don't think Kiryuuin knows about Ichinose's past.

As Kiryuuin is clearly expressing her disgust about the subject matter, Ichinose's expression is rapidly darkening.

Nagumo noticed the change in Ichinose's attitude, and knowing the circumstances, he interrupted.

"Fine, I understand what you're trying to say."

It looked like Nagumo was making light of the subject of shoplifting on purpose in front of Ichinose, but it seems to have had the opposite effect.

"Do you admit it? That you tried to frame me."

"That's a different issue."

Nagumo didn't look to be admitting it, and Kiryuuin continued as if she was expecting this.

"Don't worry. If you admit your crime here, I promise I'll overlook it this time."

If Nagumo gave the instruction, then he is a criminal instigator.

In a case like this, he would receive an even heavier punishment than the person who actually carried out the crime.

It's clear that Kiryuuin has no plans of making a big deal out of it even if it was Nagumo, the leader of the year-threes who was involved in this scandal.

"And what if I don't apologize? Will you be satisfied with breaking the chair?"

"I haven't thought that far."

"I see. Then..."

Nagumo turned his gaze away from Kiryuuin, and looked at me.

"This is the end of my chat with you. Can I ask you to leave, Kiryuuin?"

Let alone apologize, Nagumo tried to end the talk without even confirming if it was him or not.

"You weren't expecting that, huh?"

Nagumo coldly said so to Kiryuuin who was utterly amazed.

"You said you got Yamanaka to confess, but how reliable can a confession under duress be? Do you think the school will take this seriously even if you skip the Student Council and go directly to them?"

"At the very least, there's a high possibility that Yamanaka's movements as she was trying to frame me were caught on camera in the shop. It's not something that can just be ignored."

"Pull up that footage, then. But that's the end of it. It's pointless if there's nothing connecting me and Yamanaka."

Only Yamanaka will be punished.

There won't be any proof of Nagumo's involvement. Nagumo is confident of that.

The school will do their best to investigate if they hear Kiryuuin's accusation, but there's a limit to what they can do.

Yamanaka lied to cause the downfall of Nagumo, the Student Council president and the leader of the year-three students.

If no conclusive evidence emerges, it's obvious that such an outcome will be the result.

"We were interrupted, but let's return to our talk. You don't have any objections about the election, right?"

Completely ignoring Kiryuuin, Nagumo began to take the final confirmation.

"Yes. I'm fine with it."

Horikita agreed, while still worrying about Kiryuuin who had her foot on a chair.

I thought Kiryuuin might kick the chair away now, but she continued observing, as if trying to see through Nagumo's mind.

Then, Nagumo quickly moved onto Ichinose.

It looks like they're both going to consent if things go well, but...

Perhaps because of the word "shoplifter", Ichinose still has a dark expression.

"Honami, you're going to run for election too, right?"

"...Umm, about that... May I have a word, Nagumo-senpai?"

"What is it?"

"I... I do not want to run in this Student Council election."

I didn't expect her to say that after coming this far.

"You don't want to become the Student Council President?"

"I think the problem is before that. Up until now, I always believed that being in the Student Council and becoming the Student Council President was for my own good, and for the good of those around me. But I can see now that I was being arrogant. As you said, Nagumo-senpai, the fact that my class is so far from A Class is also proof of that."

So she wants to decline this because of the disappointing position of her class.

"Besides, someone like me would not be a good Student Council President. I am a criminal, so..."

It seems Kiryuuin unintentionally created a big shadow in Ichinose with her words.

"A criminal?"

Not knowing the circumstances, Kiryuuin muttered so, but this isn't the place to explain what happened.

"That's a different matter. That doesn't have anything to do with you now, right?"

"I don't think so. No matter how much time passes, my past crimes won't disappear."

After replying so, Ichinose continued speaking what was on her mind.

"Rather than run for election, I wanted to quit the Student Council today."

"Wait a bit, Ichinose-san. That might be a hasty decision. You have nothing to..."

"N-no. It's not about today. I've been thinking about it since before the school trip."

Ichinose bitterly laughed and confessed that she didn't come to this decision today.

"I think you know already, but the Student Council isn't just a burden for a student. There are some tedious chores, but it's definitely a plus to be in the Student Council in this school. You've benefited from it too, even if you can't see it."

Nagumo is right, it's not a bad thing to be a member of the Student Council.

One would already know this after spending time living in this school, but being a member of the student council contributes to your class points, even if only slightly.

It's like throwing away a weapon for the Ichinose class, which is in a big predicament.

"I am sorry, but I am not going to change my mind."

Not only does she not want to run for Student Council President, but she wants to quit the Student Council.

Kiriyama must be surprised after hearing that.

"It looks like you're serious, Ichinose."

"I know you helped me out a lot, Vice President Kiriyama... I am sorry that I could not be more dependable."

"No, continuing or not is of course your decision. I have no right to stop you, but..."

As Kiryuuin also seems to have gathered from the flow of the conversation, it would be a rather unreasonable idea to say that Ichinose should not be connected with shoplifting.

All we can do now is regret the fact that this subject came up at such a bad time.

No, I think she would have quit even if it wasn't for the shoplifting matter.

"I apologize for not being able to live up to your expectations."

Ichinose stood up and deeply bowed to Nagumo and Kiriyama.

"I think you would make a wonderful Student Council President, Horikita-san. I'll be supporting you."

"Ichinose-san..."

Ichinose, who was supposed to be the rival in this election, said so with a smile and encouraged Horikita.

"I'm feeling a little unwell, so I will be taking my leave. If there are any documents that need to be filled out, please send them to me at a later date. See you later, Ayanokoji-kun."

After saying so and lightly waving, Ichinose left the Student Council Room.

The shoplifting affair definitely put her morale down, but Ichinose showed no signs of changing her mind on quitting, and she didn't show any signs of regret.

I think she was being serious when she said she was already thinking about it before.

It wasn't only Nagumo and me who felt that this was an unexpected development.

Horikita, who expressed that she would be running for presidency also felt the same way.

"Ichinose-san has resigned from the Student Council, so what should I do now?"

It seems like Ichinose's departure from the Student Council will carry this fight away with her.

I'm sure that even Nagumo won't have any other choice now.

“It’s also impossible to come up with a replacement for Honami this late.”

I don’t know the rules of other schools, but in this school, a student who has not done some voluntary service in the Student Council may not be qualified to become Student Council President.

“I don’t like how this went, but I’m going to have you become the Student Council President, Suzune.”

The most important thing to avoid would be the absence of a Student Council President.

Suddenly selecting an inexperienced year-two is also quite unreasonable.

“I thought there would be an election so I am a little disappointed, but… I understand.”

With this uncontested victory, Horikita is going to become the Student Council.

“Before that though, I have one job for you.”

“What would that be?”

“Fill in the hole left by Ichinose as soon as possible. Call at least one person from year two to join the Student Council.”

Indeed, after Ichinose’s departure, Horikita is the only year-two student in the Student Council.

If something unforeseen was to happen, the Student Council could become dysfunctional.

“Are there any conditions for who can join?”

“Only one. They need to be someone that is thought to be fitting for the Student Council by those around them.”

“I see, that is very reasonable.”

I'm sorry to use him as a reference, but I think he means that he won't let anyone with a bad reputation like Ryuuen enter the Student Council.

I can see that there are no restrictions on whether she can pick from her class or the other classes, but...

"So, as long as they meet that condition, I can move to acquire anyone I want?"

"Saying it simply, you're free to bring in anyone from your own class. Even Horikita-senpai had people from his own class in the Student Council, right?"

"That's right, I understand."

"One more thing. You need to pick a member from year one too. There was a vacancy created when Yagami unexpectedly dropped out."

Horikita's expression became stiff as she was handed down this difficult order from Nagumo.

"Recruiting two people is the same as recruiting one. I will do my best."

Not being in a position to refuse, Horikita honestly answered so.

"Looks like you've reached an agreement."

Kiryuuin, who had been watching over us, called out to Nagumo once again.

She may have thought that she couldn't talk freely with a year two student in the room.

Horikita, who had been given a new duty, read the atmosphere in the room and stood up.

"Excuse me, then. I will report back to you after deciding on the two names."

"Yeah. After that, I'll officially hand you the seat of the Student Council President."

Horikita also slightly bowed to Kiryuuin who had been watching over the situation, and left the Student Council room.

With the Student Council President election gone, the battle between me and Nagumo also went along with it.

If I'm going to leave, this would be the best time.

"I'm sorry, but I should be going too."

"Wait a bit, Ayanokoji. I'm not done talking with you yet."

Nagumo wasn't going to let me leave so easily, so he strongly stopped me.

"Don't keep forcing this. The conversation with Ayanokoji ended with Ichinose's refusal. It's okay to back down here, you should be handling the affair with Kiryuuin instead."

Kiryuuin agreed with Kiriyma's thinking that they should not be leaving the problem unaddressed.

"You're pretty useless, but I appreciate that remark. Please make a wise decision, Nagumo."

"Tsch..."

Nagumo clicked his tongue in frustration, but he had no choice but to agree.

However, he made sure at the end that I know he doesn't like the idea of letting me go like this.

"You're a student in Suzune's class. Help her out with gathering members for the Student Council."

"Me?"

"There are no other Student Council members in year two. Further, the Student Council President will be from year two B Class without any conditions. I'm not gonna let you off without any work²."

[²TL Note 2 : 甘い汁を吸う、*Amai Shiru wo Suu*, expression. Literally “sipping the sweet soup”. Means profiting without doing any work.]

I think that's true for everyone in my class, though.

First of all, there's nothing for me to help out with that.

This seems completely arbitrary, but it's pointless to oppose him here.

“Well, I am not sure how much I can help, but I'll try my best, then. Probably.”

Nagumo won't let go of this point that leaves me an escape route.

“I'll make sure that Suzune knows you'll help her out. Don't slack off, okay?”

I was considering acting innocently and not going along with him, but he beat me to the punch.

“I understand, I will help her out. Are we good now?”

At this point, Nagumo finally showed his understanding and his opposition to letting me go disappeared.

“That's right. Here, a present for you.”

I took out one of the few extra Hokkaido souvenirs I bought and handed Nagumo a bag.

“This is a pretty strange timing to be so conscientious.”

“I'm here meeting with the Student Council President, after all. I thought I should give you a present.”

It was a failure to hand this over at the last moment instead of at a better time, though.

“Isn't there one for me?”

“I didn't know you were going to be here, so you can share with Student Council President Nagumo if you want.”

I handed a souvenir to Kiriyama, and Nagumo started muttering as if he remembered something.

“Since the school trip has ended... The next special test should be announced around now, right?”

Ignoring Kiryuuin, Nagumo started talking to me again.

“It was announced just today.”

“Yeah, it looks like it’s the custom to announce the special test after a school trip. So, your opponent class will be Sakayanagi and the A Class, right?”

“You’re quite good at predicting things.”

From the way Nagumo speaks, it looks like the top classes and the bottom classes compete with each other every year.

“It was your class and Student Council Vice President Kiriyama’s class facing each other last year, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

“What was the result?”

“Your class was the winner, right, Kiriyama?”

“...Yeah.”

Kirayama calmly replied so without much joy.

Kiryuuin from the same class doesn’t seem to have much to think about here, so she’s quietly ignoring this matter.

“Normally, it would be really difficult to win against A Class, but you should have a pretty good chance with this test, right?”

“I think it depends on your viewpoint, but you may be right.”

“I think the special tests they conduct around this time are usually advantageous for the bottom classes in order to make for a better competition between the classes. So they set things up in a way where it’s easier to win for a class starting from the bottom.”

Indeed, the classes that hold the key in this special test are the Horikita Class and the Ryuuuen Class. Both bottom classes.

In other words, Nagumo allowed Kiriyama’s B Class to catch up to them.

“I think you’d be able to win in any situation, Student Council President Nagumo.”

“Don’t say that. It doesn’t matter if I win if it’s not going to have concrete effects.”

Nagumo’s class is already running solo at the top, so I think he’s saying that an insignificant victory isn’t worth the effort.

“Just as usual, A Class got ahead of the others from the start in Horikita Senpai’s time too. I was in B Class, but I quickly rose up to A Class and we got far ahead of the others. As a result, the difference between A and the classes below was massive at this time. But it’s different for you guys. A Class is certainly in the lead, but it’s not in an absolute safe zone like in the past.”

That’s very true, as the reason that the Horikita Class’ motivation is so high right now is because of the fact that they are still in reach of A Class.

I wonder how things would be if the difference between A class and B class was around 1000 points at this time. It wouldn’t have mattered who won.

“Well, good luck.”

“Yes. I will contact you again.”

I was finally allowed to leave after saying that, so I left the room.

“Phew... I’m finally free.”

After what happened with Ichinose resigning from the election, the matter with 20 million points came to nothing, but it's not a hindrance to my plans.

After my brief moment of relief, someone who's been watching from afar started approaching.

"They kept you there for a long time, huh?"

"Have you been waiting?"

"I was very curious about what you were talking about. Did you get some kind of order?"

"No, it looks like I lost my part in this."

"Still, you were in there talking for a long time, though."

"I handed them souvenirs from the school trip and discussed some unrelated things."

For now, I won't mention the fact that I've been asked to help out.

I'll wait for Nagumo to convey the order to Horikita and for her to directly ask me for help.

"For you, it's just one job to become the Student Council President."

"Well, I never thought that Ichinose-san would decline and even quit the Student Council."

"Same here. Leaving aside the duel about who gets the seat of Student Council President, I thought she would stay in the Student Council until the end."

I never imagined that she would throw away her position by her own hands.

This matter may be one of the reasons for the tears she showed me at the school trip.

"Is Kiryuuin-senpai still in there talking with them?"

“Looks like it. I’m sure you could also tell how mad she was.”

“Yes. I don’t know much about that person, but I wouldn’t want her to be my enemy. Student Council President Nagumo looked to be having a hard time with her too.”

From the viewpoint of a Student Council member, I’m sure Nagumo always looks like he’s in control, so there’s no wonder Horikita noticed the difference.

“About Student Council President Nagumo ordering another year-three student to frame her for shoplifting, how much of that do you think is true?”

“Who knows? One thing is for certain though, which is that the student named Yamanaka is being blamed for it.”

It’s also unclear if there’s another third party involved.

“Whether the perpetrator is Nagumo or someone else, I can’t see any reason or objective to entrapping Kiryuuin.”

“What about someone seeking revenge on her for something?”

“It’s possible, of course. It’s easy to imagine that there’s someone out there who hates her.”

There’s no point for us to strain ourselves thinking about this matter, though.

“More importantly, shouldn’t you be focusing on the Student Council?”

“You’re right. Things will be a lot easier just with you becoming an officer in the Student Council, though. I’m sure I can easily clear Student Council President Nagumo’s terms with your help.”

“We’ll see about that. At the very least, I know that Nagumo doesn’t like me.”

“It’s not a matter of liking or hating you.”

“That’s not true. This must be unpleasant for Nagumo, it has to be.”

“You just don’t want to enter the Student Council.”

“That’s right.”

If I enter the Student Council, I’m going to have a lot less free time. I’d like to avoid that.

“Can I ask you to help me out with finding some personnel, at least? You’re responsible for pulling me into the Student Council in the first place, so I don’t think you’d decline.”

She quickly finished off with that, cutting off my path of retreat.

“No, I’m not really interested in something like that. Sorry, but it’s a pass. You’re the one involved in the Student Council, so you should be the one solving their matters.”

Perhaps getting used to my uncooperativeness, Horikita sighed and backed down.

“Personally, I’d like to enlist someone from my own class. As the Student Council President already said, it’s a plus for the class to have someone in the Student Council.”

“I think Yousuke would gladly cooperate on most things.”

“Indeed. It would be hard to get him to give up his club activities, though.”

You can’t participate both in the Student Council and in club activities, and Yousuke is showing great results in the soccer club.

There’s little merit for him in moving over to the Student Council.

“I’m leaving.”

I tried to get away from this place, but Horikita got in front of me and blocked my path.

“Let’s leave the Student Council aside for now. Ayanokoji-kun, about the special test-”

“Sorry, but there’s nothing I can do about that either.”

“You told me that the Student Council should solve its own issues, right? But the special test relates to our class. Shouldn’t you be shutting up and helping me out here as my classmate?”

“Isn’t there anyone else you can ask for help? You have almost 40 classmates.”

There’s no reason for her to specifically rely on me.

“Good grief. You’re really not going to help me out, huh?”

“It’s not like things will suddenly change just because of my cooperation.”

“Aren’t you being too humble? I’d feel reassured if you lend me your help. I mean, our opponent is Sakayanagi-san. If you help us out in the strategic stage, we’ll have a better chance of getting through this, like the Athletic Festival.”

If we lose, there’ll be 100 more points between us and A Class, but we can still recover after that.

“There’s no advice for me to give you. But, as your classmate, I will follow your instructions. If you order me to solve a highly difficult problem, then I will obey.”

I won’t lend a hand at this stage, but I let her know that I will cooperate in the test.

“...Are you saying that you’ll solve any problem, no matter the subject or difficulty?”

“That’s right. My Academic Ability in the OAA was B Rank in December. I can’t get many points, but be it the minimum of 2 or the maximum of 5, I’ll solve as many problems as you want me to.”

This must be very important for Horikita, so I’ll make sure to guarantee her on this point.

“You don’t mind helping me out as an individual, but you won’t lend a hand in the preliminary stage. Is that it?”

“That’s right.”

“What’s the possibility of you being wrong?”

“Almost 0.”

As long as there are no problems outside the fundamental subjects or questions of miscellaneous knowledge, I won’t have any issues.

“How confident. But I’ve been hearing that maths is your only specialty, though?”

“I don’t remember that.”

Good grief. After muttering so, she nodded back in agreement with my offer.

“Let’s agree on that, then. If I can take into account that a student with a B in Academic Ability will reliably solve 5 questions, that’ll definitely make things easier.”

Handling this is a necessary experience for Horikita to gain as a leader.

Letting aside winning or losing, I’m sure she’d want to learn what she can from this test.

“I do sympathize with you. This was a really bad timing to be made Student Council President.”

It would have been better to solve this issue at a less busy time.

“There’s no helping it now. I knew things like this might happen when I entered the Student Council.”

It’s more like I (not really, but...) made her join the Student Council. I’m sure she has a few worries, but Horikita walking by my side seems relatively positive.

"Thinking negatively won't help anyone. We need to be positive and look at things on the bright side here. My reputation in the school will increase after becoming Student Council President, and I'll also have some more power. I won't abuse my authority, but I'm going to be in a gray area very close to that."

One has to use any means they can to rise to A Class.

That's a good thing. In fact, I think Horikita should be a little more greedy.

"You can help me out too, you know? With picking new Student Council members."

"Stop repeating yourself."

"I thought you might have forgotten now."

"I'll keep declining."

I just hope things get settled before Horikita learns that Nagumo told me to help her.

Part 3

Even though I sowed the seeds myself, I got wrapped up in something that's almost unrelated to me.

I would have liked to have done something like the Student Council election to settle the value of my relationship with Nagumo, but no one could have predicted Ichinose's resignation, so I guess it can't be helped.

I decided to call my girlfriend to give her a report, who I was making wait in the dorms.

“Aren’t you coming back yet!?”

Just as soon as the call began, Kei’s discontent voice came through.

“I just left the Student Council room. I’ll be back in about 15 minutes.”

I thought she would still be mad, but it looks like the fact that I made the timing clear won her over.

“Fine. I’ve been waiting here without bothering you. Aren’t I great?”

She suddenly started speaking more gently and asked me so.

“Very admirable.”

Girls like Kei use their cellphones well.

So, I’m sure she could keep sending messages every few seconds.

“Ehehehe.”

I’m not sure if it’s a compliment, but she seems happy so far.

“I’ll be waiting for you, then.”

After the short exchange, I put my cellphone into my pocket.

Even without lengthy conversations or such, I realize that the romance phase has progressed and we've established a relationship.

The fact that family members can detect any slight difference isn't because they're smart or perceptive.

It's only that one notices these changes easier after spending a long time together with the person.

It's not a matter of reading the other person's thoughts, but of feeling each other's skin.

You can change a tense situation into a gentle one in an instant.

It's like Two sides of a coin.

This applies to many things other than what I just said.

The remaining pages of the textbook are decreasing moment by moment.

But the textbook becomes more difficult towards the end, and it takes more time than at the beginning.

Now, onto the next subject——

Chapter 2

The New Student Council Members

Intro

While preparing for the second term's final special test, Horikita has a problem that she must solve.

The work to take over after Student Council President Nagumo resigns.

It looks like she decided to start working on it the very next day after being left with the role of the new Student Council President.

The person in question was discussing some things with her classmates.

The Student Council is also something she needs to handle, but she has to think about the countermeasures to the new special test too.

She'll make me repay it in double if I ignore her now.
I'd like to avoid that.

After around 10 minutes of thinking about that, I approached her without bothering to apologize.

"Should we go somewhere else now, then?"

"Is the strategy meeting over already?"

"I discussed things thoroughly with Hirata-kun and the others yesterday. I only asked for a progress report today. Fortunately, most of our classmates are very motivated. They're being positive even though they hate studying. The rise of Sudou, who was at the bottom in grades, the psychological pressure of Sakura-san dropping out, and the point difference and confrontation with A

Class, who are now in the shooting range for us. It's all proof that things are headed in a better way."

Just for a moment, Horikita looked to be checking for my reaction when she said out loud the name of Sakura Airi.

"Do you still feel bad?"

"I'm not callous enough to not feel bad. Even if it's true."

"That's no good. There's nothing for you to be ashamed of."

Horikita should be getting a better understanding as time passes.
As I started walking, Horikita followed me while looking slightly disconcerted.

"I felt very reassured when I heard from Nagumo-senpai that you would be cooperating with me."

"Of course he said that. I just want you to understand that I didn't want this in the least."

Things get hard later when there are disagreements because of the problem of a difference in motivation.

Well, I'm sure she already understands all this without me saying it.

"That's obvious. You didn't even tell me that he told you to help me out. You were just going to feign ignorance³ if I never spoke out to you, right?"

[³TL Note 3 : 知らぬ存ぜぬ *Shiranu Zonzen* ; expression, "if I don't know about it, then it doesn't exist."]

It seems that she already knew about it and was trying to incite me on purpose.

"Maybe you should have just let it go, considering that it's me."

"No way."

My attempts to find a way out of the situation were dashed by the immediate response.

Recently, the way she's been dealing with me has been getting more and more rough, in a good way, or even in a bad way too.

"Don't worry, though. I'm not going to bother gathering all the Student Council members together. I found some candidates throughout yesterday, so I'm going to make the decision today. The Student Council is important too, but I need to focus on the Special Test right now."

At least she wants to solve this quickly, so that's a relief.

"One person from year-two and one person from year-one, right?"

"Yes. I also received more concrete terms when I met with Student Council President Nagumo again. They need to have at least a B in Academic Ability in the OAA."

"Academic Ability, huh? Well, it's an understandable condition to let someone into the Student Council."

Since social contributions do not seem to be more important, a wide range of selections should be possible.

"Now that you mention it, a certain someone had just gotten up to B in Academic Ability, right? I wonder who they were."

"I'm suddenly getting a stomach ache. Let's go back."

"I can't even make jokes?"

"I'm worried that you're being serious."

"I need to fill the vacancy of a year-two student after Ichinose-san left. With someone other than you."

"Of course. So, you have made your decision, right?"

“Yes. The essential condition to become a member of the Student Council is to not participate in club activities.”

“Academic Ability B or above, and the rest is up to me to decide with my own judgement.”

With an unmotivated group of randomly assembled members, the Student Council's activities would be in jeopardy.

“I intend to give this my all. If just being in the Student Council gives you a small advantage, I don't want to bring in anyone from a rival like A Class.”

It looks like she wants to protect any advantage she can get, no matter how small.

“So the ideal thing is to bring people in from your own class.”

“That's right. That's the way it is. It's not against the rules to have an ulterior motive apparent in appointing someone from your own class.”

I think I'm starting to see the reason we've been waiting here instead of walking ahead.

“What did you want to talk to me about, Horikita-san?”

The person who came out of the classroom and spoke to us was Kushida.

For a moment, Horikita glanced at me as if to say “how about that?”.

Certainly, Kushida is a student who has a very high external reputation, including for her visuals.

Her Academic Ability is definitely above B as well, and her specs are equal to those of the Student Council's members.

That's all for people looking in from the outside, though. Kushida and Horikita would be like water and oil.

“Actually, I needed your help with something, Kushida-san.”

The dangerous act of pouring a large amount of water into a pot filled with oil.

“This is still off-record, but Ichinose-san has decided to resign from the student council.”

“Huh? I see. Does that mean there was some kind of problem?”

“It was because of personal reasons.”

Kushida hasn’t come to grips with the situation yet, but the oil is starting to heat up.

It’s not at high temperature just yet, though.

“There was a vacancy left behind after a Student Council member resigned, so I’d like you to fill that place.”

That should be clear enough to convey the message.

The oil that’s heating up started crackling and bouncing the water off.

“Is Student Council President Nagumo still continuing as President?”

“No, I’m the only year-two remaining in the Student Council. I was automatically moved up.”

“In other words... You’re going to become the Student Council President, right?”

“That’s the plan, as long as nothing troubling happens after this.”

Kushida seems a bit surprised at the sudden mention of the matter of the Student Council President, but that’s probably not the most important point.

It was already a given that Ichinose or Horikita would become the Student Council President.

“So, I ended up having to directly elect the new members. There’s a certain amount of minimum ability that is required to join the Student Council, but you clear all of the requirements.”

There's now enough oil and water flying around the pot to create burn marks. If it continues like this, I can't avoid being burned as a bystander.

"So, if I enter the Student Council... Am I going to be your secretary or something?"

Kushida asked about the most important matter for her.

"I haven't decided on your post yet, but you're probably right."

"Ahahaha, what a hilarious joke."

She's smiling and laughing, but we know the truth.

I can feel the intent behind her demeanour : "Like I would ever work under you."

"Depending on your willingness, you could instantly be elected Vice President too."

"Umm, you know this isn't about that, right?"

Kushida is saying that it's a waste of time to talk about something she wouldn't accept.

It's quite the thing to convey this while smiling.

"I don't think I could work in the Student Council."

Since we're in a corridor where many students are passing through, she's claiming the reason for her refusal is her lack of ability.

"That's not true. You have a high evaluation in the OAA, and most of the same year students and our juniors adore you. The new year-one students coming in next year will quickly open their hearts to you as well. Your ability is precisely why I scouted you."

Horikita is insisting that she has no ill intentions of pushing Kushida around.

However, I'm sure this doesn't make much of a difference for Kushida.

There's no way she can accept working under Horikita.

"I appreciate your consideration, but it would be quite difficult after all. I have no experience in the Student Council, and..."

Horikita has been persistent up until now, but this isn't going to be easy for her.

The diagram of working under Horikita is a hard reality to accept for Kushida.

"The class will get an advantage just by entering you into the School Council, even if only a small one. You should consider working in the Student Council as a weapon to help you on your way to A Class."

"Right. I get what you're saying, but... I can't. I'm sorry."

Horikita must have aimed for this timing to make sure that Kushida would be in friendly mode⁴.

[⁴TL Note 4 : 猫を被る *Neko wo Kaburu*, *Putting on a cat, expression; to feign friendliness.*]

If this was a dorm room or somewhere else with no one around, Kushida would have declined instantly.

"Please, Kushida-san. I need your help."

Putting more force into her words, Horikita grabbed Kushida's hand and started pleading.

The students passing by also started to turn their gazes over to them.

"..."

Kushida is continuing to act surprised and troubled.

It must be hard for front Kushida to bluntly deny Horikita's request for aid, which is lucky for Horikita.

For a moment, I turned my gaze ahead of us.

“What is it?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

Horikita noticed this and asked me about it, but I don’t want to interrupt them with something unrelated.

There was a moment of awkward silence, but Horikita continued speaking as Kushida was silent.

“I’m not telling you to work for my sake. I want you to help us reach A Class.”

“But... I think it would be better for someone else to do it. I don’t have the confidence.”

“You’ll be the one who benefits the most if you take this on, Kushida-san.”

She doesn’t want to join a Horikita-run Student Council, but she’ll be the one who benefits the most if she joins.

“Hmm? What does that mean?”

It’s understandable that she has to ask that question.

“That’s obvious, isn’t it, Kushida-senpai?” If you join the Student Council, even if there’s someone that really hates you, they can’t so easily mess with you any more~”

The one who answered wasn’t Kushida or Horikita, but a third party: Amasawa Ichika. She’s been quietly approaching since a moment ago, but I didn’t think she’d suddenly bud in like this.

“...Why are you in a place meant for year-two students, Amasawa-san?”

Kushida is being pressed even further by the appearance of her great rival.

“Am I not allowed to visit my senpai?”

“We’re a bit busy right now. Did you need something from someone?”

“It’s not like I came to see someone specific. Well, if I had to say a name, I guess it would be yours, Kushida-senpai.”

“Me? I-I see. Just what do you need from me?”

It’s obvious she’s angry from the bulging veins in her head.

“Hmm… I wonder what it is? What business do you think I could have with you?”

“I wouldn’t know. I have no idea what you’re thinking, so.”

Kushida is clearly displeased, but I should be the only one who can see that. Maybe Horikita can see it too.

“I’m talking about something very important with Horikita-san right now, so could we do this later?”

“No way. It would be scary to be alone with you.”

Clearly not thinking about Kushida, Amasawa frankly spoke so.

Looking at the two, Horikita should also be able to understand that Amasawa knows about the other side.

She could have known for a while already, though.

However, why did she come all the way here to see Kushida? I looked at Amasawa, trying to restrain her.

“It’s, it’s a lie, senpai. I actually came here to meet you, Ayanokoji-senpai, but you were talking with Horikita-senpai and Kushida-senpai, right? So I listened in a little.”

She openly confessed to eavesdropping.

“How long have you been listening?”

“Well, only a little while. Since Horikita-senpai said “I’m not telling you to work for my sake~”. You believe me, right?”

Amasawa was speaking honestly, but Kushida and Horikita were still doubtful.

“It’s true. Nothing more, nothing less. I’ve been watching Amasawa approach us, so.”

I should make sure that they know Amasawa is telling the truth here.

“I see. So that’s why you’ve been glancing around.”

“That’s right. I only tell the truth, right?”

“What about lying that you came to see Kushida-san? No, there’s no knowing if it’s true that you came to see Ayanokoji-kun either.”

With one doubt, all other things come into question.

“C’mon now, don’t worry about the tiny details. Please continue with your recruitment.”

She stepped back, signalling that she won’t hinder them any longer.

“...Right. Leaving Amasawa-san aside for a moment, may I get an answer?”

Horikita moved on to trying to convince Kushida and turn this bad situation around.

“I think I’ve already given you the answer. I won’t accept it.”

“No matter what?”

“Sorry. I can’t meet your expectations. I can’t work in the-”

“Why don’t you just enter the Student Council instead of saying stuff like that?”

Breaking her promise of not bothering them, Amasawa spoke out after only 10 seconds.

Rather, knowing that Kushida cannot attack her, Amasawa is getting excited right behind Kushida, pestering and touching her all over.

On top of all that, she started playing with her cheeks using her index finger.



“You’re so beautiful, Kushida-senpai, and you have a nice physique too. Wouldn’t it be a wise decision?”

She’s repeatedly whispering in Kushida’s ears like a little devil persuading... no, agitating her. But none of her expressions are honest compliments.

“Umm. If we’re going to continue talking, maybe we should go somewhere else?”

Even if she continues to refuse, it seems stressful for Kushida to be in front of the public.

She must feel that it would be difficult to continue the conversation any further like this.

Normally, she could cut the conversation off and leave, but this version of Kushida cannot do that.

“Ayanokoji-kun, how about you chat with Amasawa-san for a while?”

“Eh~? Are you really pawning me off on him like that, senpai?”

“I’m trying to lend Ayanokoji-kun to you.”

Horikita crossed her arms, telling Amasawa to be grateful that she is not just turning her away.

“I want to be with you and Kushida-senpai, not just with Ayanokoji-senpai.”

I’m sure she’s just trying to have fun.

“Besides, if you turn me away, I may have to talk about a bunch of secrets that I know.”

With these threats that may or may not be true, it is no longer desirable to force her away.

“...Fine. Let’s just go somewhere else like Kushida-san wanted.”

Horikita tried to surround herself with a large crowd of people as a weapon, but the situation got only worse because of Amasawa, who was subjecting us to merciless chatter.

Judging that she cannot get a good reply like this, Horikita decided to change location.

Part 1

Horikita led Kushida up the stairs and moved to the special building.

“There shouldn’t be anyone else here.”

Horikita asked for confirmation from Kushida that this was a good spot.

“Well, I guess.”

Kushida, who probably didn’t even want to follow Horikita here, breathed a deep, heavy sigh.

“This place seems safe, huh? We’ll know right away if anyone approaches, yep, yep.”

“How long are you going to follow us around, Amasawa-san?”

“I wanna know if Kushida-senpai will end up entering the Student Council.”

I guess she has no intentions of returning until she finds out the results.

“Ah~ So annoying. Horikita is annoying too, but you’re three times more annoying.”

It seems that Kushida is no longer in public mode, and her true face appeared without warning.

“She really doesn’t like you, huh?”

It’s quite the thing to be disliked three times more than Horikita, whom Kushida should hate the most here.

With cold eyes directed at her, Amasawa smiled the biggest smile of the day.

“Ahaha, I love seeing that face so much.”

Without hesitation, Amasawa clapped her hands together with delight as if it's finally time to have some fun.

"It's great that you can expose your true self to more people now. Are you not afraid of me now that you're allying with Ayanokoji-senpai and Horikita-senpai?"

"I don't know if you're trying to mess with me or something, but why don't you stop wasting your time?"

"I won't stop. I want to give you some more trouble, Kushida-senpai."

Amasawa decided to stay in the school, but does she intend on taking pleasure in making fun of Kushida? Was this the reason for her visit to Kushida, after all?

"Is it true that you're the type of person who thinks they'll never be expelled from the school?"

"Huh? Is there anyone here who can expel me? I'd like to see them, if there are any."

"Stop it already. Especially you, Amasawa-san. You're taking it too far."

It's true that Amasawa is pushing her unpleasant side forward to engage Kushida today. I don't want to be involved in the selection of Student Council members for too long either.

"It'll be a hindrance for Horikita too if you take this further. Stop it."

I lightly cautioned Amasawa, and...

"Fine. I'll be a good girl then, Ayanokoji-senpai."

She held her hands up to tell Kushida that she won't do any more teasing.

"Kushida-san. Just ignore her... So, can't I have you join the Student Council?"

"No."

“No matter what?”

“No matter what. Can I leave?”

I looked at Kushida, who was about to leave the scene, and decided to move a little.

“Horikita. Shouldn’t you give Kushida a clearer presentation?”

“...A clearer presentation?”

“It’s certain that Kushida can benefit from entering the Student Council, right? But at the same time, it’ll benefit you too. It’s reasonable that she would be a little displeased about that. Don’t you think so too, Kushida?”

“Well, I guess.”

Kushida glared at me for a moment, then averted her gaze.

“It’s naive of you to ask me to do this for free.”

Taking advantage of my guidance, Kushida threw such words at Horikita.

“I wonder if you would consider it under certain conditions, then? I’ll refuse if you want me to drop out like before, though.”

I’m sure that’s what Kushida would want, but of course, I can’t say that it’s realistic.

What kind of condition would make Kushida join the Student Council?

“If you really want me to lend you my aid, then I want you to get on your knees.”

“...Get on my knees?”

“That’s right. If you show me that you really need me, I’ll enter the Student Council for you.”

Promising to join the Student Council, Kushida of course knew that Horikita would never get on her knees for something like this.

Horikita is not as proud as Kushida, but She has a lot of pride too, even if not as much as Kushida.

Even if it was for the sake of her class, she would never get down on her knees in this situation.

“I see. Kneeling down before you, that’s your condition, huh? I understand.”

After muttering so, Horikita sat down on the cold floor on her knees.

“Huh? Is this a joke?”

“If I kneel before you, you’ll join the Student Council. You promised just now, right? Both Ayanokoji-kun and Amasawa-san saw it. If you want to take it back, it’s now or never.”

Horikita wanted to bring her in even if she had to kneel down to her.

Facing this, Kushida was unusually at a loss for words.

“You’re bluffing, right? You would never kneel down before me.”

“I get why you think that, but I don’t hate Kushida-san as much as you think I do. If kneeling down once will be a plus for my class, then it’s worth it.”

Looking up with serious eyes from below, Horikita earnestly replied so.

Amasawa looked like she was having a lot of fun watching the situation unfold.

“No, you won’t be able to kneel down. No way.”

The conclusion Kushida came to after some hesitation was that Horikita “can’t” do it.

“I see... I’m going to kneel down and have you enter the Student Council, then.”

After saying so, Horikita slowly reached out her arms to touch the floor, but she stopped just before her hands were down.

Then, she stopped moving for a few seconds.

"Oh, what's the matter, Horikita-san? Weren't you going to kneel down?"

Thinking that Horikita couldn't bear the humiliation and stopped moving, Kushida joyfully said so.

"I'd like to say one thing first. Will you really be satisfied with such a trivial thing?"

"Huh?"

"All I have to do is bow my head down, and you'll start working under me. No matter how you think about it, I'm the one with the better end of the deal."

Kushida will be able to burn the image of Horikita kneeling down into her eyes.

But at the same time, she will have to support Horikita as she works above her and manages the Student Council.

I can't say that it would be a cheap exchange.

"I know that you hate me. I understand that you want me to kneel down. But, I think you'd get more pleasure from forcing me to kneel down, rather than me doing it by my own volition. Right?"

So this is Horikita's tactic.

Horikita definitely doesn't want to kneel down before Kushida.

In other words, Kushida was right. However, Horikita strangely doesn't seem to be afraid of getting down on her knees here.

"I don't get it. If you don't mind kneeling before me, why don't you just do it? Why don't you leave aside things like joy and pleasure, and just bow your head to pull me in?"

Kushida, on the other hand, is not easily convinced. She wouldn't join the Student Council without a condition in the first place, so it's only natural that she would pursue that point.

"If I am hesitant to kneel down, it's only because I know that you will regret it. If I bow my head here, you're going to join the Student Council whether you like it or not. I don't want you to become a member with such low motivation."

If she's going to join the Student Council, Horikita wants to make full use of Kushida Kikyou's abilities.

In other words, Horikita needs Kushida to want to join the Student Council herself.

"It'll be hard for you to make me bow down to you if we are distanced from each other, but whether you like it or not, you'll have more chances to get in contact with me if you join the Student Council. If that happens, I'll have the opportunity to rely on you more. I'll have to bow down and ask you for help more than once or twice then."

Horikita is telling Kushida to create a situation where Horikita will bow down on her own accord instead of being forced to do so. This provocative remark seemed to have affected Kushida more than she had expected.

"It won't change the fact that I'll be working under you, though."

"You seem to think that the Student Council President is above the others, but you're wrong. It's up to each person to decide their real position. It's just a matter of building a relationship where the Vice President has more power than the Student Council President, right?"

Horikita is cornering Kushida from her low position by removing the obstacles in her way.

"You'll instantly become Vice President, and you'll hold enough authority to lead me around by the nose. That's plenty to fulfill your need for social approval and self-esteem, right?"

Since She has already dissected Kushida, Horikita knows what she needs and wants.

Once again, it's clear from that point of view that Kushida is a good fit for the Student Council.

"I don't like this."

"It doesn't matter if you like it or not for now, does it? That's a trivial matter."

Kushida's expression was grim, but she turned away from Horikita who was ready to bow down at any moment.

"My position will get stronger if I enter the Student Council. That doesn't sound so bad."

"Yes, that's right. It's not interesting to have it offered in exchange for something."

"You're trying to make me fall for your smooth talk, but I intend on using you just as much as you'll use me."

"Indeed."

Horikita tried to pull back her arms with a smile, but...

"But, you know, Horikita-san. I still want to see you bowing down here."

Kushida turned back and said so with a broad smile.

"You won't be able to make me bow down in the true sense then, though?"

"It's fine. I'm sure I'll have another chance to do that. Just bow down for today, okay?"

Things have been splendidly going at Horikita's pace up until now, but she made a miscalculation at the last moment.

Kushida cheered up and revealed more of her bad-natured personality, and turned the tables on Horikita.

"Well? Are you going to stop? I won't join the Student Council if you do."

Noticing that she has the upper hand, Kushida continued to put more pressure onto Horikita.

Horikita is at a disadvantage here, trying to get Kushida to join the Student Council even though she doesn't want to.

"...Ayanokoji-kun. Amasawa-san."

"What is it?"

"Sorry, but could you step away for a bit?"

Clearly in a foul mood, Horikita ordered us to get out of sight.

She was not going to let more than one person see the humiliation of her kneeling down.

I pulled Amasawa by the arm, and left the scene.

Horikita successfully completed her objective of having Kushida enter the Student Council of her own volition, She had to pay the price, however.

Part 2

“Oh, I wish I could have seen you bowing down to Kushida-senpai too.”

“Don’t say it out loud. It was a fatal mistake.”

Horikita shook with anger as she held her head and recalled what had happened a few minutes ago.

“You’re the one who brought it up, but Kushida really took advantage of you, huh?”

“I underestimated her need for approval.”

Amasawa and I saw Kushida leave with a very happy expression on her face.

“You forced her to join by bowing down.”

“...Still, Kushida replied with a yes in the end, and that’s her own decision. She didn’t have to do that if she didn’t want to. You get that too, right?”

“It’s impressive how well you read her.”

Kushida’s public face smiles at everyone without distinction, but, just as Horikita says, Kushida has a strong sense of ego behind the scenes.

In that situation, Kushida could show her true colours without being shy about it. Kushida could have rejected the offer after seeing Horikita bow down, but the reason why she agreed in the end was that she actually saw the merit in joining the Student Council.

“I know she’s going to hate working under me, but that’s not the important thing. Her cohesive power will certainly be increased by entering the Student Council. She was chased into the corner of the class once, but this should be a big support for the sake of her revenge.”

“You intend on using her as much as you can, don’t you?”

“Of course. I’m the one who chose to let her remain here. I have to make sure she gives the results that will convince our classmates. She even made me bow down, so.”

It looks like she is bothered by that after all, but that was her own strategic mistake, so there’s no helping it.

If she hadn’t bowed down then, Kushida probably wouldn’t have gone along with her.

“You should have used another tactic to fight her.”

“Stop talking about that already. I’ll put that to good use for the next time...”

She’s received some damage, but it’s just the first step. Not just anyone can serve on the student council.

By appointing Kushida to that position, the students will be made to feel that she is needed in the class, and she will avoid being cut off.

However, Kushida’s childish feelings of not wanting to be led by Horikita were a hindrance.

“With that, your class has an exclusive hold in the Student Council among year-two. That’s certainly an advantage.”

“If Student Council President Nagumo accepts it.”

“He said it himself, didn’t he? That you’re free to invite anyone from your own class.”

“That’s right, but that had a nuance of telling me to “try it if You’re brave enough”.”

“Just show him how brave you are, then.”

“That’s easy to say for you.”

Horikita looks glum, but she’s contradicting herself.

She went as far as bowing down to Kushida just to enter her into the Student Council for a slight advantage to her class.

What do you call that, if not bravery?

"I think that was the best way to convince Kushida."

"I think so too. I see that our new Student Council President is handling things well."

Showing how interested she is by overreacting, Amasawa nodded from behind.

"...Are you going to keep following me around? The show's over already."

"Can't I? I'm curious who else you're going to invite. Aren't we close enough for that?"

"I don't think we have a relationship where we can relax and chat with each other."

"Really? We opposed each other a little, but wasn't that only in the Special Test? Shouldn't we be getting along now that it's over?"

Horikita wrinkled her brows a little, but she gave up, knowing that she can't force Amasawa to leave.

"How about you take Amasawa into the Student Council? Her OAA is certainly good enough."

"Even if there are no problems with her OAA, she's not suited to be in the Student Council."

"Huh~? Why can't you just invite me? I might accept, you know."

"I'll pass."

It seems that Amasawa isn't fitting for the Student Council that Horikita has in mind.

Well, it's true that she's unfitting for a serious Student Council.

"Do you have anyone else in mind?"

"There are a few candidates, but... I wonder if he's still in the school?"

The "he" mentioned must be the year-one student she's targeting. Horikita looked around the year-one building, but she didn't seem to find the person she was looking for. After looking around from A Class to D Class, she sighed.

"Maybe he's already left after all."

Horikita complained a little that she spent too much time dealing with Kushida and Amasawa.

She couldn't give up right away, however, and called out to us.

"I'll ask his classmates directly. Wait here."

Then, she entered the year-one A Class.

Amasawa and I looked at each other and waited for her to come back.

"So? Were you looking for me?"

"Hm? Oh, the reason I came to visit the year-two students? Curious?"

"You've been sticking with us instead of going back, so of course."

"To be honest, I just came to see how Kushida-senpai was doing. I mean, we had some forced contact back in the Culture Festival, so I wondered how things were going. Besides, Takuya also gave her a lot of trouble."

"You still seemed to be teasing Kushida a lot."

Amasa stuck her tongue out a little and smiled.

"That's just how I am, of course I'd mess with her. I also wanted to check how strong she's become psychologically."

I see. I thought she was just being aggressive, but there was a reasoning behind it.

“I think it was a miscalculation for Kushida that the White Room students got involved, but it also helped her break out of her shell as a result. I guess it all turned out alright in the end.”

Then, Amasawa smiled a little.

“I gotta be of some use too.”

“The reason you came to see Kushida makes sense, but that doesn’t explain why you’re still following us around.”

“Simple curiosity. You care about Horikita-senpai, don’t you? She’s even going to become the Student Council President, so I wanted to experience her charm first hand. She seems serious, but she’s also a little out of the ordinary and is quite interesting. I even actually thought of joining the Student Council.”

“If that’s the case, you should have acted a little more seriously. Horikita already senses that you’re a skilled person, so she could have accepted you.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. There’s no point in joining the Student Council now.”

There’s no point in joining now? Even if the second term is ending, Amasawa is still a year-one. She has plenty of time to join the Student Council in Yagami’s stead and serve out her time.

Then, I thought back to the conversation I had with her before the school trip.

“What are you going to do? Have you still not changed your mind?”

After my indirect remark, Amasawa’s eyes became sharper.

“Well done, Ayanokoji-senpai. You managed to notice it among my roundabout words.”

“You did say that you wouldn’t cause me any trouble, and that I would be the only one receiving special treatment.”

It's not that difficult to make the relation between Yagami's expulsion and the Student Council.

"It's not like the reason you signed was that you wanted to stop him. That's not in your character."

"That is correct. I guess it's that I wanted to know whether you have a positive or negative stance on this."

"It's up to you what you want to do. If I am to say more, you're free to withdraw your previous remarks and turn your desire for revenge towards me."

"That's a broad-minded statement, or rather one that gives a lot of leeway."

After talking with the year-one students for a while, Horikita came out with a satisfied expression.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Let's move."

Horikita's steps were a little quicker than usual as she started to walk.

"Who did you really want to meet here?"

"I don't think you know him. His name is Ishigami."

"Ishigami?"

He must be the Ishigami that's coming up in my mind.

There are no other students with the same name in year-one.

"Wow, that's pretty smart of you to have your eye on Ishigami-kun, Horikita-senpai."

Amasawa, who is also a year-one student and his classmate naturally knew and recognized him, which she showed with her reaction.

"Is he a good student? Like a class leader type person?"

I decided to ask Horikita and Amasawa about Ishigami, pretending to know nothing about him.

“He’s not really a leader, but he’s like an adviser for A Class.”

Unlike most students, Amasawa won’t let it be seen when she’s uncomfortable.

She’s never shown me whether she knew about Ishigami beforehand, who knows my true identity.

There’s nothing to hide now, so I can believe that she knows nothing about it, but it’s dangerous to make assumptions.

“What’s his connection with you?”

I didn’t expect to hear Ishigami’s name coming from Horikita, so I decided to ask why.

“He’s just a bit of an acquaintance. His Academic Ability on the OAA is good enough, and he seemed to be getting relied on a lot by his classmates. I think he’s the right person. He was apparently in the classroom just now, so we can still catch up to him.”

She’s walking pretty quickly, though.

I never thought about meeting Ishigami with Horikita like this, but there’s no use worrying about it.

We have an odd connection with each other, but it’s conceivable that one of us may unexpectedly try to contact the other, or that we may one day be assigned to the same group in some Special Exam.

Trying to avoid him by force would be an act contrary to the natural order of things.

As we approached the hallway leading to the entrance, we saw a small group of boys chatting in a circle.

Horikita quickly noticed Ishigami among them and approached.

“Ishigami-kun.”

Ishigami turned around when Horikita called his name, and quietly looked at us.



This is an unexpected first meeting, but Ishigami doesn't seem to be upset in the least.

On the contrary, he seemed to be ignoring my presence.

I can understand why he isn't surprised, as this is a small school and we were bound to meet at some point.

The other year-one students were familiar with Amasawa, but they seemed nervous about the presence of me and Horikita.

"Do you want something?"

"I came to ask you for a favour. Would you like to enter the Student Council?"

"..."

Ishigami threw a silent look at his friends.

"I'm sorry, go ahead. I'll catch up with you guys soon."

Was there a plan to hang out together after this?

"I'm sorry. I don't want to take up too much of your time."

"I don't mind. But, why me?"

Ishigami is speaking formally with her. He doesn't seem to be speaking casually like he did with me.

"I have very little interaction with year-one students. You're one of the few I've talked to, and you're in A Class. You also excel in Academic Ability in the OAA. What's so surprising about me inviting you?"

Certainly, there is nothing wrong with his abilities.

As Horikita said, there is no doubt that he is a person who would easily be approached by the Student Council.

“You don’t seem to be participating in club activities either right now, so how about it?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not interested in joining the Student Council.”

Ishigami quickly declined without hesitation.

“I can’t even get you to consider it?”

“I don’t want to participate in club activities, and I don’t want to participate in the Student Council either. Please try someone else.”

After saying this, Ishigami turned around and started walking away. Horikita hesitated about calling out to him for a moment, but he clearly has no interest in the Student Council, so it seems she decided not to force things.

“He was pretty unapproachable, huh?”

“I thought he would be a good candidate, but I guess I have to give up on him.”

“There are a lot of other good students in A Class, so maybe there’s still a chance to get in touch with them?”

“I’d like to believe that, but… I don’t know. The ambitious students would want to enter the Student Council as quickly as they can, just like Ichinose-san from last year and Yagami-kun from this year, right? If they haven’t taken any action up until now, that means they don’t want anything to do with the Student Council.”

Indeed. If they were interested, they would have knocked on the door during the Nagumo administration.

“So, what’s next?”

“All I have left is year-one D Class.”

“D Class? That’s a surprising choice.”

The Student Council's approach is to elect students from A and B classes, as they have a high percentage of competent and earnest students.

So, why D Class?

"The difference between them and C Class is 200 points, so they still have a chance. The birth of a Student Council member should be a boost for the D Class. There might be students who see it that way. We just have to make them aware of the advantages."

"What about inviting Housen-kun or someone like that? It might be interesting."

Probably hoping to cause a stir, Amasawa recommended an unthinkable person.

"I don't think he would want to join. Even if he did, I wouldn't be able to accept him with his current violent behaviour. He would have to achieve a lot of good results in the next year."

Horikita rejected the playful proposal, judging that he would not be fitting.

Horikita returned to D Class and looked around at the remaining students in the classroom.

One of the students quickly noticed her and approached.

"Welcome, Horikita-senpai, Ayanokoji-senpai, and Amasawa-san too."

It's Nanase Tsubasa, a very polite student unlike the others in year-one D Class.

"Hey."

"I'm a bit surprised to see you here with them too, Amasawa-san."

I wouldn't go as far as calling it caution, but Nanase said so and threw a glance at me and Amasawa.

"It looks like most of the students have left already."

“I think there’s a lot fewer here than normal. There’s usually a few more students left here at this time.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. One of our classmates has a birthday, and they’re celebrating it in Keyaki Mall. I was also invited… Actually, why are you here?”

It’s only natural that she would ask that.

“There is a vacancy in the Student Council because of Yagami Takuya being expelled. I’m here to fill the vacancy.”

“Are you recruiting members for the Student Council?”

“It’s been decided that I’m going to become the Student Council President, so this is my first task.”

Nanase nodded with admiration, and looked over her D Class.

“Can someone from D Class stand as a candidate too?”

“Of course. I’m from D Class too, after all, so there’s no reason to refuse any of you.”

“Then, would you let me help you out?”

“…You?”

“Yes. If you think even someone like me could be of assistance too, of course… I’d definitely want to help out with the Student Council.”

“I wouldn’t know what decision the soon to retire President Nagumo will make, however.”

She replied that it’s still not a sure thing.

Horikita may not remember the details of Nanase’s OAA, so I’ll supplement.

“It’s fine, isn’t it? Nanase has a good OAA and is very serious, I think she’s fitting for the Student Council.”

“Indeed. I don’t think there are any problems with her.”

This would be a quick solution after being refused by Ishigami.

“Alright, may I count on you then, Nanase-san?”

“Of course!!”

I have my doubts about Nanase, but that’s that, and this is this.

If she’s going to take a role in the Student Council’s formation, then there’s no reason to refuse her.

“I think Nanase-chan will do just great.”

“Yes. Unlike you.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“I think highly of your abilities. But, your candid attitude and way of thinking and personality just aren’t suited for the Student Council.”

Horikita nodded in satisfaction at this last minute addition to the Student Council.

“Umm, so what should I do after tomorrow!?”

“I don’t think there’ll be any problems, but I’ll talk to President Nagumo first tomorrow. I’ll contact you again after that when you’ve been accepted into the Student Council.”

Horikita exchanged contact information with Nanase.

After that was done, Nanase smiled with joy.

“I’m always glad to have more contacts, in any way I can.”

“See you tomorrow, then.”

“Yes, I will be waiting for your contact!”

Seeing Nanase off with a smile, we left the D Class.

“Looks like I gathered the members. All I have to do now is to wait for an answer from President Nagumo.”

“I’ll get going too, then. See you later, you two.”

We saw Amasawa off, who came and left like a storm.

“It’s always so hard to tell what that girl is thinking.”

“Indeed.”

“Thanks for your help today.”

“Well, I just followed you around and didn’t really do anything. I’m glad it was easy.”

“That’s not true. It’s clear that your words had an effect on the Kushida matter. I’ll make sure to report that you were helpful.”

She must be referring to the time when I dragged out the presentation from Kushida.

“I don’t think I’ll get any compliments from Nagumo, but I’m so happy that I could burst into tears.”

“What? Oh, I’m having a study session at a cafe in Keyaki Mall after this. Do you want to come? Your girlfriend is also going to participate.”

“A study session, huh? Well, I think I’ll drop by for a bit.”

“Huh?”

Even though she’s the one who invited me, Horikita showed a surprised expression.

“What is it?”

“No, I was just sure that you would refuse. Is it because of Karuizawa-san?”

That's not really true, but I guess that's how she has to see it.

“That's right. I'm worried if she's studying properly.”

Replying so, I decided to go to the cafe with Horikita.

Part 3

The two of us arrived at the cafe where the study group was meeting after school.

“Hey everyone, sorry I kept you waiting.”

Saying so, Horikita joined her classmates in a natural manner.

Noticing her movements here, I’m impressed at how much she’s improved.

“Kiyotaka, you came too!?”

Facing a notebook with a frown, Kei noticed us and smiled.

“Sorry, but I’m just here for a quick visit.”

“But...”

Kei showed a clearly dissatisfied expression, but no further complaints followed.

I think it was largely due to the fact that I had told her in advance that I would not be helping her out with studying.

“Oh, sorry I’m late!”

Right after we arrived, Sudou hurriedly ran into the café.

“It’s really hard to balance studying with club activities, isn’t it?”

“It’s not that big of a deal. I’m used to it.”

Sudou’s gaze was caught by Horikita for a moment, but then he sat down on an empty seat nearby.

Then, he placed his bag on his lap and took out a set of study materials.

He then took out a rectangular case, and pulled out a pair of glasses from it.

“Huh? Sudou-kun, do you wear glasses?”

“Yeah, I just started to. I’ve been wearing them when I study. Ah, they don’t really have a degree or anything, though.”

If a person has good vision, they usually don’t use corrective devices such as glasses.

However, good eyesight does not mean that one cannot or should not wear glasses. Studying is a close-range battle, unlike basketball which requires a wide field of vision.

Adjusting your focus when looking at things is a big burden.

Just like most of the other students, Kei was surprised to see Sudou in studying mode like this in the study session.

“What’s with all the staring?”

“You just have a different image with your glasses on. You really are studying more now, huh?”

Shinohara nudged her boyfriend Ike while showing admiration for Sudou.

“Of course, I’m trying my best too now!”

“I know that. Sudou-kun has quite a lead on you, though.”

“That’s, well, yeah...”

Ike tried to argue back, but he nodded in response to her stinging words.

“Ah, sorry. I shouldn’t talk about other people like that. But, you know, do you have any tricks to keep going for a long time? I used to be at a similar level too, and I was wondering if you could give me any tips. It must be hard to balance basketball and studying at the same time, right?”

The other students nodded in agreement with Shionara.

To the students with lower academic ability, students like Yousuke, Mii-chan, and Horikita must seem to be in the realm of prodigies and geniuses.

They would not be able to put what they learn from such high-level students into practice.

They are smart from the start, so they must seem like they can do anything.

In this respect, Sudou started out with the lowest academic ability in his class. It is only natural that she would want to know the key to his growth.

“Tricks, huh?”

Sudou crossed his arms in a somewhat troubled manner.

Horikita was the main reason that Sudou originally started studying.

He wanted to be smarter and become a man worthy of Horikita, but Sudou would probably be very reluctant to talk about that here.

“Ah, umm... Right.”

Sudou was about to start speaking after a while, but he started sorting things in his head. He was still a bit awkward, but he began speaking:

“The weird thing is, studying has actually become fun for me. Then, basketball became more interesting too. ...Umm, I guess it's something like that?”

He began to explain why he is able to do both, and that there are other advantages as well.

“At first, I didn't like studying. I got sleepy right away, and I couldn't solve the problems. But you know, the more you learn, the more you realize how useful studying is for school.”

“But, you know, Ken. Studying is useless for the future, isn't it? Especially depending on your occupation.”

Ike asked Sudou about a doubt that everyone must have had at least once in their lives.

“I’m going to be a professional basketball player myself, so I thought studying was just a pain in the ass, but what if I don’t make it as a pro? What job can I do if I don’t even study? I could probably do a job that anyone could do, right?”

There is no need to name a specific profession, but his options would be more limited than those of an average person.

“Even if I don’t make it as a pro, my options will be broader if I keep studying, right? I could also go to university and study something more specialized. Well, I have no concrete plans yet.”

You can have more than one dream.

“Studying is an investment in your future. That’s how I think of it.”

Sudou’s path to becoming a professional basketball player, which he has been pursuing for many years, may fail.

If he finds another big dream and holds on to it however, he will never fail in life.

This is the short story of Sudou, whose thinking has grown through his studies.

What might have been sneered at in the past was listened to earnestly without making fun of by anyone around him.

That’s how much weight and truth was born by his words. Sudou sat back down with an embarrassed expression on his face, and hurriedly opened his notebook.

“That’s, that’s enough, right? Let’s get studying already.”

Sudou, who should be more tired than anyone else after working hard in his club, said this without showing any sign of exhaustion.

He isn't the type to make good speeches, but that's why his words and attitude full of truthfulness strike a chord with people.

The students in the lower positions such as Shinohara and Ike must also be moved by this.

Part 4

The next day after the new Student Council members were gathered and the study sessions for the Special Test began.

Horikita was quickly called by Nagumo after school, and seemed to be heading to the Student Council room. I thought she wouldn't call on me again, but-

“He said that you should come with me too.”

She displayed a message from Nagumo and came over to tell me as she pointed the screen at me.

“My stomach feels as upset as it did yesterday, let me pass on that.”

“It can't be helped, then. He'll just call you again tomorrow if you can't come today, though?”

“Let's just meet him and get it over with.”

I don't want to be forced to do something troublesome again after some time passes.

I immediately got up and showed my intention to go to the Student Council room, but I was stopped.

“I'll bring Kushida-san here. Wait a bit.”

It seems that he means to meet all the new members at once. I looked around for Kushida in the classroom, but... She was already nowhere to be seen.

“It looks like she went ahead.”

I lined up shoulder to shoulder with an exasperated Horikita and left the classroom.

“So she didn't want to go with you?”

“We’re going to spend a lot more time when the Student Council work starts, whether she likes it or not.”

Well, that must be why she didn’t even want to spend one more second than she has to with Horikita in an unrelated area.

“It’s quite the nuisance to be randomly resented by someone while continuously being connected with them somehow.”

“I don’t know what would have happened if you were a little more gentle-mannered as a person.”

“It could have been worse, right? It’s dangerous to keep letting her take the lead.”

She needs to hold the reins and control her to some degree, that’s certainly true.

When I arrived at the Student Council room, Kushida and Nanase were waiting side by side in the distance.

Whether or not these two knew each other or not, they seemed to be chatting and getting along well.

“They’re having a good time.”

“They really are.”

Taking a look at the two, they don’t seem like they’ll ever stop talking.

They seem to be in a peaceful mood, constantly smiling.

They would keep chatting forever if kept alone.

“It looks like the Student Council can get along just fine without you, Horikita. I’m sure those two will be well received by the public too.”

“Shut up. Let’s just go in.”

Horikita quickly approached them to prevent them from getting even more excited.

“Hi there, Horikita-senpai.”

Kushida smiled without concealment as Nanase politely greeted Horikita.

“I was a bit relieved when I heard that Nanase-san was joining the Student Council too. I’ve been very nervous about all this.”

Kushida said something unexpected and made a gesture of patting her chest.

The three members of the Student Council entered the room first.

I feel very strange about following them in, but I’ve been called, so there’s no helping it.

“Student Council President Nagumo. I’ve invited Kushida Kikyou from year-two B Class, and Nanase Tsubasa from year-one D Class.”

“You actually picked someone from your own class? That’s quite bold of you, Suzune.”

Nagumo laughed, implying that he was half joking when he said Horikita could invite someone from her own class.

“I chose them from an impartial point of view. Are you dissatisfied with my selections?”

This is just her official stance, but Horikita lied without hesitation about this not being for the sake of her own class.

This isn’t believable after she brought in Kushida, but Nagumo showed a superficial agreement to this.

“There are no problems with your selections. I got no complaints.”

Looking at the new Student Council members, this is an unfamiliar structure with Nagumo, Kiriyama, and Ichinose leaving, and Yagami having gotten expelled.

“I think this is the first time there are more girls than boys in the Student Council.”

Former Vice President Kiriyma also took a look at the members and told us what he noticed.

“It should be alright. Women and men are equal these days. This just means that there are more women in the next generation of talented people. Isn’t that right, Ayanokoji?”

“I have nothing to say in return.”

It’s not a bad thing for girls to come into power, but if the ideal thing is a 1 to 1 ratio, one could say that this result reflects the timidity of the boys.

“Serve the Student Council from a fair point of view.”

“Understood.”

“Well then, I guess that means that I am being relieved of my duties as Student Council President.”

He patted his seat once as if having a hard time parting with it, and got up.

“It felt like both a long time and a short time. I don’t really have much to say.”

“Do you have any regrets?”

Seeing Nagumo’s sad expression, Horikita asked so.

“The most important thing is to create an environment where the students with the ability to surpass the limits of their class can graduate in A Class. I could not reach that ideal.”

Nagumo did emphasize that point quite strongly when he first took over as Student Council President.

As a result, the year-threes are in a similar situation to that, but that's more a result of the rules that Nagumo created personally rather than the results of his achievements as Student Council President.

"The Student Council here has more authority than normal high schools, but there was still no way to overturn the school's decisions. I thought I could have done more."

"You still definitely had an effect on things, Nagumo-senpai. There were no rules such as class transfer tickets or protection points up until now."

"I guess."

Whether or not this will produce good results will be discovered by future generations.

Horikita Manabu protected the Advanced Nurturing High School's traditions, and served well as the Student Council President.

Then, Nagumo Miyabi created the OAA, and brought about a new, more ability-oriented style.

How will Horikita Suzune's year as Student Council President go?

The most obvious, and difficult goal will be...

To start in D Class and graduate in A Class. If she succeeds in that, she'll definitely leave her name in history as a Student Council President.

"There are a few formalities that need to be completed, everyone except Ayanokoji should remain here."

With that directive from Kiriyama, I was informed that I was in the way.

"I'll take my leave now, then."

"See you later, Ayanokoji. Our duel's still not over yet."

It seems that he called me all the way here just to remind me of that.

“I know.”

I bowed slightly and left the Student Council room.

After leaving Horikita and the others behind, I took out my cell phone.

It's been vibrating inside my pocket, but it looks like I've got some messages.

I thought they were from my girlfriend Kei, but it doesn't look that way.

It was an invitation on a vacation day from a surprising person.

He said that he'd like to talk with me on the weekend if I have time.

By the time I was through the corridor, I received a message offering a specific time and place to meet at 2:00 p.m. on Saturday in Keyaki Mall.

There would be no problems with that, so I replied that would be fine.

No mention was made about the contents of the conversation, but it was not difficult to guess the direction from the name of my companion.

While leaving, I walked by a female student.

“Were you called to the Student Council room again?”

“It looks like you're headed for the Student Council too today, Kiryuuin-senpai. Is it about the matter from the other day?”

“That's correct. The conversation ended up going on a parallel track after that, and is still unresolved.”

“That's quite the calamity.”

By the looks of Nagumo back then, it probably ended without him replying with a yes or a no.

“I think I'm going to take a more aggressive approach today.”

“Feel free to do that, but it’s quite crowded right now. They’re in the middle of the procedures for Horikita to become the new Student Council President and for registering the new members.”

She might force her way in without caring about that, but I made sure to tell her anyway. It seemed to have more of an effect than I thought however, and Kiryuuin stopped in her tracks to think for a moment.

“I’ll take my leave, then.”

My intuition told me that I should leave right away, but it was already too late.

“Can I take up some of your time, Ayanokoji?”

“....Is it about that unsolved matter?”

“Even if I press Nagumo again, I don’t think he’ll spit it out so easily.”

“You wouldn’t want to traumatize the new Student Council President and the new members, would you?”

I don’t care about that in the least. Still, if she wants to avoid that, she can simply wait for Horikita and the others to leave.

“You figured that using me would be better than simply forcing your way through it, right?”

“Mhm. You’re quick as always, Ayanokoji.”

She snapped her fingers and complimented me, but anyone could have figured this out.

“You were just leaving anyway, right? Why don’t you come with me?”

“I have a date planned at my room with my girlfriend.”

“Just let her wait. It’s a girlfriend’s duty to quietly wait for the return of the house’s patriarch.”

It’s definitely not convincing when Kiryuuin is the one who says that.

“Can we talk while walking?”

“Mhm. That would be fine too.”

Kiryuuin turned around and matched my pace of walking.

“Did you try to set up an opportunity to talk with Yamanaka-senpai again?”

“Nagumo and Kiriyama strongly objected to it. I’ve accused Nagumo as the principal offender, so you shouldn’t expect a different result.”

“That’s strange, isn’t it? For the person who is suspected to be the culprit to stop your contact.”

Whether it was Nagumo who gave the order or not, as long as Kiryuuin claims that he did, he must have decided that it was unlikely that any other big names would come out after threatening Yamanaka.

“That’s certainly true, but even I agreed with him. You can’t expect any other names to come up after verbally threatening Yamanaka. When I first questioned her, I had already threatened her with as much as I could, excluding violence or torture.”

In other words, Kiryuuin already got what she could out of Yamanaka.

“Thinking about it logically, it has to be Student Council President Nagumo, doesn’t it?”

“Of course I suspect him. That’s why I tried to barge in like this. I can’t push this any further without proof though, right?”

So, as a result, she was planning to seriously threaten Nagumo.

“It’s still possible that Nagumo isn’t the criminal. Do you understand why that is?”

“It’s the possibility that Yamanaka-senpai could have held a grudge against you without you realizing it. That would also explain her trying to get revenge

by framing you as a shoplifter. I don't know a lot about the circumstances in year-three, but there could be some people that dislike you."

"That's painfully true."

She nodded without denying it, laughing rather than getting angry.

"Is it Nagumo, or is it Yamanaka? Or is there a completely different third party hiding in the background?"

"How about leaving it alone? If the criminal has learned their lesson from this incident, they'll probably pull back and pretend it never happened before their true identity is revealed."

"No. My pride won't allow me to ignore someone trying to make me out to be a criminal."

By the look of things, she doesn't look like she'll stop pursuing this until the criminal is caught.

"I won't stop, no matter what. So, I was wondering if you would do the searching for me."

"I don't feel like I have any obligation to help you. Besides, I don't have much contact with year-three students. It's pretty much just you or Student Council members like Nagumo-senpai."

It's not flattering to say that I'm the right person to secretly gather information.

"That's precisely why I'm asking you. You have a flat point of view, right?"

"It would make more sense if you asked someone with some good communication skills..."

"I certainly can't expect much from you on that front. However, I have nothing to criticize about your other abilities. You're especially above everyone in your fight sense. There is no other person who has convinced me of a complete defeat without a direct confrontation."

I think I'm being complimented, but it doesn't make me happy at all.

“There are some year-three students with a violent temperament. It’s not a bad thing to have a strong arm, you know.”

“Win or lose, I don’t want to fight with a year-three student.”

“Come on, just help me out. There’s no one that I could call a friend. I can’t act like a detective either.”

She’s so selfish.

I sympathize with the fact that Kiryuuin-senpai was framed, but it would be better to refuse here.

“I think you owe me one for the incident on the uninhabited island. You could have handled it without me showing up too, of course, but I may have to bring it up to the Student Council to make sure. I think you wouldn’t like everyone to know the entire story of your battle with the former board chairman, would you?”

She blocked my escape route with an aggressive approach, not allowing me to refuse.

“If you were going to threaten me, things would have been easier if you had done that from the start.”

“Don’t misunderstand me. I want to build a friendly relationship with you, which is why I don’t want to use this tactic.”

Kiryuuin brazenly looked over at me while crossing her arms.

“...Fine. I’ll look around a bit, okay?”

“I thought you might say that.”

Kiryuuin-senpai nodded joyfully with a satisfied expression.

I really can’t cut corners with her.

She is really perceptive.

Depending on the results, I'm likely to keep getting entangled with her.

Chapter 3

Spending time with Ichinose's classmates

Intro

It was early December, just before 2 pm on a Saturday - the weekend had arrived.

Two days ago, Kanzaki contacted me and arranged for us to meet at Keyaki Mall. Although a specific meeting place was not decided upon, I quickly found him and his peers as soon as I entered the mall.

Kanzaki, who had been scanning the entrance to Keyaki mall, noticed me right away and approached with his hand slightly raised.

“Sorry for bringing you out here on your day off.”

“On days off I tend to take it easy. There's plenty of free time, I welcome invitations like these.”

I reassured him that it wasn't an inconvenience and there was no reason to worry.

Alongside Kanzaki was Himeno, Watanabe, and Amikura.

“I thought it was only going to be Himeno, seems like there are others that will be joining us as well.”

“My apologies, that was supposed to be the case but some circumstances have arisen.”

Kanzaki attempted to explain the details, but was interrupted by Watanabe and Amikura.

“Yo Ayanokoji, it's pretty cold today huh”

“Good Afternoon, Ayanokoji-kun”

Watanabe and Amikura smiled at me in the same manner as they did when we had interacted with each other during the school trip.

I responded with nods of acknowledgement.

Kanzaki had informed me of only Himeno's presence beforehand, so I was a bit surprised by the combination of these four people.

It was unclear what their intentions were, but perhaps Watanabe and Amikura were necessary to Kanzaki and Himeno's plan.

Then again, was it just a coincidence that all happened to be together during the school trip?

“It's understandable that you're confused. I never imagined these two would be here.”

Himeno, also somewhat unsettled, slightly nodded her head in agreement.

“Is that so?”

Though there were more questions arising in my mind, Kanzaki was concerned with the increasing number of students.

The mall had been relatively empty when I arrived. But now students were coming to shop one after another.

“Well the Christmas sales have started after all.”

Amikura pointed towards the shops as the mall grew more and more crowded. Indeed, the shops are already decorated in Christmas colours, and the words “Christmas Sale” appear on the shelves of various products.

“For now, let's relocate to somewhere less conspicuous. We don't want outsiders, especially those in Sakayanagi and Ryuen's class, to become aware of our group's existence if we can help it.”

Given that I can easily surmise the situation around here without needing to ask for more details, there's no reason for me to decline.

While there wouldn't be an issue if it were just the four of them, my presence would make the gathering appear peculiar and inexplicable.

Besides, I would prefer discussing matters in a quieter setting away from this bustling thoroughfare.

"In that case, why don't we head to the usual karaoke spot?"

Within the premises, one of the few secluded areas was the karaoke room, which is often used for studying and strategic meetings.

Amikura suggested we head there for the time being, it can be reached on foot from here in about three minutes.

"That's a secure location. Let's go right away."

Kanzaki took the lead and started walking, with me following a few steps behind.

"Did I interrupt a serious discussion? I'm sorry, for some reason I didn't expect it would be like that."

Amikura, who was walking beside me, whispered apologetically.

Judging from her tone of voice, it seems that they ended up joining us on a whim.

Watanabe, who lined up next to Amikura, provides additional details of the situation.

"It was more of a coincidence that Amikura and I came here. We overheard a conversation between Kanzaki and Himeno. Since it sounded like they were meeting up with Ayanokoji, we asked if we could tag along."

"Right, right. Originally, I was planning on going shopping with Watanabe-kun today."

As Amikura responded, Watanabe seemed a little bashful but happy, though somewhat sorrowful as he looked away.

"Are you sure you don't need to go shopping then?"

Both of them were empty-handed, and there didn't seem to be any indication they purchased anything.

"It's not really that big of a deal. You could just go buy it later."

Kanzaki, who was walking ahead of us, heard the conversation and turned back to explain the details again.

"Initially, I thought only Himeno and I were needed for this meeting. However, after learning that Ayanokoji helped both of them out during the school trip, I changed my mind."

Helped out? That's supposed to be my line

Watanabe and Amikura were a big help in many ways during the school trip.

I am grateful to both of them, but I don't feel as if I've done anything to earn gratitude in return.

"So I've decided that it's time to take a step further then."

I asked Kanzaki about it, he nodded his head while showing a cryptic expression.

"What is it? What do you mean by 'step forward'?"

"I'll tell you the details later."

From the briskness in his strides, I could sense a feeling of impetuosity from Kanzaki.

I had a hunch about the reason behind it.

Part 1

The four of us, who had finished checking in at the karaoke reception, were led to the designated booth.

As the guest, I was escorted to the back, where Watanabe, Kanzaki, and the boys were already seated.

We couldn't just sit there without ordering anything, so we all casually ordered drinks.

"So, are we going to sing something right away... or not?"

Watanabe picked up the microphone from the table and jokingly directed the tip towards Kanzaki like he was conducting an interview.

Kanzaki, who wasn't as comfortable with this kind of light-hearted banter (like myself) made a troubled or angry face before lightly swiping the microphone away with his hand.

"I'm sorry, but can we leave that for later?"

"...Yeah, you're right."

Watanabe shrinks back dejectedly and retracts the microphone.

"First of all, I've already explained the details of today's discussion to Himeno, but the other two are hearing it for the first time. As I said before Ayanokoji arrived, everything that will be discussed here is privileged and not a word of it will be uttered to anyone else. Can we all agree to that?"

It seemed that Kanzaki had already informed them that this conversation would be confidential before allowing them to accompany us.

"Yeah. No matter what we talk about, we promise to keep it a secret, right?"

"Mmm. No problem."

Including Amikura, it seems both of them take pride in their tight-lippedness.

However, it seemed that Kanzaki still didn't fully trust those two despite their assurances.

"Sorry, but I'm still doubtful."

As if to prove his point, Kanzaki conveyed his thoughts without concealing anything.

"Oi Oi..... Then what are we supposed to do?"

Watanabe also had misgivings about this situation, he was still suspected even after promising not to tell anyone else.

However, based on the implications of the forthcoming conversation, Kanzaki's judgement is correct.

If it was just about 'crossing the bridge safely', he could have refused to let Watanabe and Amikura come along, who followed out of curiosity.

But he didn't.

Instead, he meticulously confirmed their intentions, using it as a way to test their resolve.

Kanzaki is likely taking a gamble here, his doubts were a testament to his desire to trust and rely on them.

"Should we sign a document or something? 'I swear not to speak a word of this to anyone else' like that?"

"I see. A written contract, that's a viable option. It's feasible to even record it on a portable device too."

By having them pledge not to speak of this in front of a camera and threatening punishment for any breach of trust.

It's one way to ensure they won't talk. Without hesitation, Kanzaki took out his cellphone and placed it on the table, almost flaunting it.

"Are you being serious? I have to admit, that would make me a little uneasy."

Amikura responded, displaying a hint of repulsion, finding it hard to believe a fellow classmate would suggest such a thing.

"Didn't I tell you? We're here today to have an important conversation with Ayanokoji. I believe that if this conversation is leaked, it could have immeasurable consequences later on."

"Isn't that a bit exaggerated....or maybe it isn't?"

Kanzaki wasn't the only one watching Watanabe. Himeno was also staring at him with a stern look.

"Let me ask you one more time. Can you promise that you won't tell anyone?"

Embracing the consequences of potential animosity towards him, Kanzaki placed his hand on the phone and confirmed it once again.

At this point if they don't want to shoulder the responsibility, they should consider leaving.

Perhaps Kanzaki's determination and intensity had permeated deeply into both of them.

"I promise, I won't speak a word of this to anyone."

"...me too. It would be pretty lame to leave now just because we're not confident we can't keep a secret between us. And if it helps you can record the conversation on your phone."

If they broke their word and spoke out, at the very least they would disappoint both Kanzaki and Himeno.

Although they don't appear to be particularly close, everyone held a clear sense of the boundaries they believed that must be protected as a group.

Convinced, Kanzaki put away his phone, looked away from the other two, and directed his attention towards me.

“So there you have it. With that settled, we will proceed with Watanabe and Amikura present here as well.”

“I never had any objections from the start. This is ultimately an issue that must be dealt with by the Ichinose class.”

If there were indeed subversive elements present, the responsibility would lie with Kanzaki for making a poor judgement call.

“That reminds me, before we get to the main topic, there's something I want to inquire about. It's a rumour that most of the class, including Watanabe and the others, have heard about: that Ichinose is leaving the student council.”

“Is this true?” This wasn't just a casual check, it's a serious request for a confirmation.

There hasn't been any official communication about Ichinose quitting since a replacement member hasn't been announced yet.

However, as the recruitment process continued, rumours spread and eventually reached the ears of Kanzaki and others.

“What makes you think I am privy to such information?”

“Because Ayanokoji's name was also mentioned in the rumours.”

Although the slightly suggestive wording caught my attention, the mystery was resolved by Watanabe's subsequent remark.

“There was also a rumour that Ayanokoji is joining the student council.”

It's funny how rumours spread. Someone must have seen me with Horikita, who is set to become the student council president, and assumed that ‘Ayanokoji would join as well’ —— resulting in falsehoods being spread as well.

“It will become clear soon, but it's true that Ichinose is leaving the student council.”

"So it's true after all..."

Although Ichinose may not have denied it if asked directly, perhaps Kanzaki and the others were not brave enough to confirm it with her.

If they were to ask her why she was leaving, it might lead to further questioning like: "How?" "Why?" and potentially risk creating dissonance in the class.

"I'm sure Ichinose wants to tell everyone as soon as possible, but the student council president, Nagumo, has ordered her to keep it a secret until a replacement is decided. So she can't say anything, even if she wants to."

It was important to make this point clear right from the start in order to avoid any misunderstandings.

"It's up to Ichinose to decide whether she continues with the student council or not. I understand that neither I nor anyone else in the class has the right to interfere. However, the negative impression it leaves is hard to erase."

"So, does that mean Ichinose-san has really given up on moving up to Class A after all?"

Unlike Kanzaki, who was beating around the bush, Himeno stated it plainly. Ichinose left the student council at a time when they were desperately struggling against the other classes, in pursuit of Class A.

With the right approach, this could have been framed as a positive development.

Had Ichinose communicated to her peers about redirecting the energy and effort she was investing in student council work towards focusing solely on their class, she could have potentially turned her departure from the student council, at a critical point of the class competition, into a display of determination.

Given the current circumstances, with her class on the verge of dropping out of the competition, leaving the student council may be perceived as surrendering a key weapon that could have been used to pursue victory.

In fact, it's safe to say that Kanzaki and Himeno interpreted it this way.

On the other hand...

"That's jumping to conclusions, Himeno."

"Mm, that's right. I don't think Honami-chan would give up on Class A so easily."

Conversely, Amikura, who was steadfast in hope, rebutted immediately.

"Then, why did she quit the student council?"

"Maybe she left the student council to alleviate her workload and concentrate on getting into Class A?"

Amikura objected, unwilling to believe that Ichinose had given up on Class A.

Watanabe, who shared Amikura's view, nodded repeatedly in affirmation.

"If only Ichinose had explained everything clearly, we could rest easy," Amikura said.

"But didn't the student council president ask her to keep it a secret? Honami-chan wouldn't break her promise carelessly."

Himeno's rebuttal was swiftly countered by Amikura with a solid argument.

"If Ichinose was told to remain silent, it would be natural for her to wait until she's allowed to reveal the truth."

"The class still believes that Ichinose has not given up on Class A"

"Then, Kanzaki, are you saying that Ichinose resigned from the student council because she gave up on reaching Class A?" asked Himeno.

"That's not what I'm implying. We won't know the truth until we hear it directly from her. However, I want to point out that you're blindly believing in her. Why hasn't anyone considered the possibility that she left the student council because she gave up on Class A?"

Amikura, and the others present, have spoken for themselves and their class.

“It's obvious, isn't it? Because Honami-chan isn't that kind of person.”

“I feel the same. Besides, Kanzaki, aren't you the one assuming that Ichinose gave up on Class A? You shouldn't phrase it like that.”

Upon hearing Amikura and Watanabe's statements, which seemed to be the epitome of blind faith, Kanzaki opened his mouth without hesitation.

“I strongly support that theory. However, it's at most a 70—30 ratio.”

Kanzaki leaned toward that theory 70% which was not a low number, but rather high.

“You're always so cynical, aren't you?”

Watanabe said, not surprised by the statement itself but rather looking exasperated.

“I'm not as much of a cynic as Kanzaki-kun, but I believe it's about 50%”

“Are you serious, Himeno-san?”

“Of course, I am. Or rather, shouldn't we all be a little suspicious?”

“It's not right. There is no reason to doubt Honami-chan.”

Himeno and Kanzaki exchange glances.

One might hope that there were other classmates who shared the same doubts as Kanzaki and Himeno.

But the reality was likely that there were more students like Amikura and Watanabe.

They didn't consider the possibility that Ichinose's heart had been broken.

"I think it's harsh how we are speaking, just because she quit the student council. I feel sorry for Honami-chan."

"I understand your concern, Watanabe, but there's no doubt that quitting the student council will reduce the benefits for the class."

"Do we even have the right to complain about something we're not a part of?"

Watanabe's point has some merit to it.

Nobody has the right to blame Ichinose.

If anyone tries to do so, they would be immediately reprimanded.

If they don't want to lose the benefits of being in the student council, they should run for a position themselves.

As opposing opinions clash, the karaoke box falls silent.

Even though they haven't gotten to the main point of the discussion yet, I can see the internal dynamics of Ichinose's class more clearly.

The structure, flow, and logic of the conversation are all presentable, and though Kanzaki is certainly not incompetent, his arguments were not always concrete and were met with pushback.

Perhaps there is a discrepancy between Kanzaki's thoughts and the inability to articulate himself properly.

His inexperience in speaking reveals weaknesses.

"Let's move the conversation forward. Ayanokoji doesn't really know why Ichinose quit, does he?"

Kanzaki, struggling, comes to me for confirmation, needing to hear it from someone else.

They all share the common understanding of wanting to know why she quit.

“I hate to disappoint, but to be honest, I have no idea what Ichinose is thinking right now. I never expected her to quit the student council.”

After conveying this, I decided to continue speaking before anyone could respond.

If I let Kanzaki take the reins again, the conversation would keep spiralling.

Even though I’m an outsider, I should manage the risks here.

Plus, it may serve as a test case that may prove useful for later.

“Well, isn’t someone who spends every day in the same classroom more knowledgeable about the circumstances than someone like me?”

“Uh, yeah, that’s certainly true...Ayanokoji, you really know how to hit where it hurts.”

While it’s fine for Watanabe and Amikura to trust Ichinose, they haven’t been able to grasp what’s at the heart of the matter.

The same goes for Kanzaki and Himeno.

It’s good that multiple viewpoints of suspicion have emerged in the class, but it’s still too early to say that they’ve taken on the role of transforming the class into an ideal shape.

“It might be a problem that our classmates don’t know anything about this...”

Amikura seemed to have some thoughts on this and expressed regret.

While waiting for the four to answer, a waiter came over to serve the drinks they had ordered.

It seemed that it had been crowded all day today and it was taking longer than usual.

We were asked to order early if we wanted something. Then the waiter went away.

“Kanzaki, before you criticise Watanabe and the others' ideas, you should at least be able to confirm the student council situation yourself? Don't you think so?”

“But even if I take action openly...”

“Openly? There's nothing secret or hidden about confirming Ichinose's true intentions. There are countless ways to contact her, whether it's early in the morning or late at night, or through phone, chat, or any other means.”

And the same can be said for Himeno, who was also wearing a plain expression.

“Are you content to just have a few like-minded peers without ever taking any action yourself?”

“Well, I mean... Even if I asked something, I don't think she would tell me the truth because I'm not particularly close with Ichinose-san.”

The problem that Ichinose-class faces is not limited to unilateral delusion based on worship.

“Then it would be good if Himeno became close to Ichinose without any secrets and became friends who can confide in each other. If Himeno had done that, this question and suspicion would not have arisen.”

Himeno, who drew out the information, only needed to share it with Kanzaki as soon as possible.

With a stiff expression, Himeno seemed unsure of how to respond.

“Well, hold on a second. I understand what Ayanokoji is trying to say, but isn't that going a bit too far?”

Watanabe, who had been blamed by Kanzaki and the others until now, came to their defence.

“That's not... It's not easy for Ichinose to tell us the truth. Regardless of the means, if we can understand her feelings easily, then nobody would have a hard time, right?”

He answered as if sensing that the atmosphere in the room was getting heavy.

The high consciousness of defending their friends is not a bad thing.

Even in the midst of many negative factors, discussing things like this can reveal something.

"I usually serve as the leader of the class, but I don't know the details of Ichinose's gaze or words directed towards our friends. That's why several questions come to mind."

"F——For example?"

"If you cannot ask directly, you can still observe and understand naturally. If there is a blatantly ill student, anyone would likely notice and inquire with a simple "Are you okay?" Even if Ichinose does not always have a poker face, observing changes in behaviour is a significant means of understanding emotions."

One essential aspect of decoding emotions is reading the other person's facial expressions.

Whether Ichinose showed any changes in behaviour before or after resigning from the student council and in everyday life is a crucial factor to consider.

Even if there are no details, it is important to know if there was any sense of discomfort.

The four of them are likely racking their brains to remember the recent times they spent with Ichinose.

They're trying to recall if there were any gestures, facial expressions, or events that might have signalled something before and after the class trip, or if there were any signs that could have been interpreted as an SOS.

However——

"Well, things seemed the same as usual...right?"

After a long silence, someone finally spoke up with words that conveyed a sense of normalcy.

Watanabe looked at his classmates, seeking their agreement.

Amikura also chimed in, sharing her thoughts in response to Watanabe's statement.

"Yeah, if it's true that she resigned from the student council, there may not have been any significant changes before or after. We even talked about the next special exam like usual today."

"I agree."

Kanzaki, who was likely observing Ichinose more closely than anyone else, did not contradict their opinions.

Most of Kanzaki's classmates tend to think in a self-contained manner and do not share information.

But when the four of them gather and talk, doors that were once closed can be opened.

"However... It's not just recently, but ever since the deserted island test ended, she hasn't been herself. I don't think it has anything to do with Class A or anything like that."

As Amikura spoke hesitantly, she casually glanced in my direction.

"Huh? Is that so? I didn't notice at all... Really?"

Not just Watanabe, but also Kanzaki seemed to have been unaware of it.

"Indeed, now that you mention it, it may have been strange."

Himeno said, showing a certain degree of understanding.

Perhaps she had been in a state of mind where she hadn't noticed it until now.

While the two boys didn't recall anything specific, the two girls seemed to have some recollection.

"It's no wonder Honami-chan is acting weird..."

"Amikura seems to have some idea of what's causing it. Please tell us." Watanabe asked.

"Well, let's see... I'm not sure it's just that Honami-chan didn't seem to be feeling well, but that's not really related to her resignation from the student council, is it?" Amikura replied.

"Why do you assume that? Even if it's not related, if there was something bothering her, we need to know the cause as soon as possible. It could also have been affecting her decisions." Kanzaki said.

"I understand what you mean, but... Ah, Ayanokoji-kun. What should I do?"

Amikura asked, seeking help in a panic.

Unlike Amikura, who understood things as one of Ichinose's closest friends, the others seemed clueless.

However, Himeno had a sudden realization when she saw the odd situation and Amikura seeking help from me.

"Could it be that the cause is... you know, that?" she asked.

"That's it, that's it, that thing!"

Even though they were just a bunch of clueless individuals, Himeno was the first to notice it among the three.

"I didn't know the details, but... yes, it does seem to make sense." Himeno replied.

"Please tell us, Himeno. What could be the factor that led to Ichinose's loss of her usual enthusiasm?"

Kanzaki asked, pushing the matter.

“Although it's not really appropriate to say this in front of the person, But Ayanokoji-kun is somehow responsible for Ichinose's lack of energy. right?”

Despite her hesitation, Amikura nods in agreement with Himeno's bold statement.

“What did you say...?”

To Kanzaki, this was completely unexpected news.

He is shocked to hear that the reason for Ichinose's decline is related to me.

Continuing the conversation in this half-hearted manner will only cause further confusion for Kanzaki and Watanabe.

“While it also pertains to Ichinose's private life, it's not good to withhold information in this situation. So, I will say ——— During the uninhabited island exam, I received a confession from Ichinose.”

Upon revealing this previously undisclosed information, Watanabe is more shocked than anyone.

“Confession? What? You mean She likes you?”

“Yes. It just, it sort of happened.”

“Is that for real!? Ichinose likes Ayanokoji!? That's huge news...!” said Watanabe

“Is that true!? I didn't know anything about that either...” said Amikura

Amikura covers her mouth with both hands and is speechless.

“What are you talking about, Amikura!?” said Watanabe

Due to each person having different information, the inside of the karaoke box was in a state of panic.

"Oh, that. I knew that Honami-chan liked Ayanokoji-kun, but I thought she was just shocked..... to find out that Karuizawa-san became his girlfriend." said Amikura, seemingly taken aback.

It seems that even Amikura, a close friend, didn't know that Ichinose had expressed her feelings to me.

"Well, it was almost at the same time, That I found out about Karuizawa-san too. So, I thought there wasn't much difference."

Watanabe held his head in confusion.

"What a mess... if that idiot Shibata found out, he'll be heartbroken... No, it's not just about Shibata..."

"Love-related, huh... I see." said Kanzaki, rubbing his forehead as if he had a headache.

"Well, even if she was feeling down, the relevance of it seems to be low..."

The three of them tried to separate the issue from the student council incident, but...

"But I don't understand. I don't know if Ichinose liked Ayanokoji from the beginning, but it seems like heartbreak can weigh heavily on a person, so maybe that's why she's been feeling down."

Himeno quietly analyzed the situation.

Did her resignation from the Student Council have something to do with it?

I thought about denying it, but with the current information, I couldn't prove that it was 100% wrong.

"If Ayanokoji were to break up with Karuizawa right now and start dating Ichinose, is there a possibility for improvement...?"

Kanzaki, who wanted to improve the class in any way possible, thought to himself.

“That's an absurd idea...right?”

While saying that, Amikura also had a nuance of "What do you think?" in her tone.

“I'm sorry, but I can't accept such a proposal from someone who is not involved.”

“That's a good point.”

Love and class battles must be separated, even if they affect each other indirectly.

“I've shared this with you as information, but we need to approach it from a different direction now.”

“Why are you so calm, Ayanokoji? You should realize that being liked by Ichinose is a really lucky thing!”

I don't want to be talked to passionately about something like that.

Anyway, the first priority is to change the minds of the four who have become unsettled.

We need to narrow down the reason why Ichinose resigned from the Student Council.

“Is there any sign of reluctance or negativity towards fighting Ryuuen's class?”

Their minds don't seem to switch gears quickly, and they don't answer immediately.

While drinking their drinks, Amikura raises her hand slightly after a short pause.

“For now, it doesn't seem like anything has really changed. It feels like everyone is trying to win positively, right?”

“I agree. We should keep doing our best, just like we have been.”

“Yeah. And we've also heard some specific ways to fight back.”

Only Kanzaki did not speak, but perhaps his thoughts aligned with those of the three.

That's what I thought, but he seemed to be thinking about what would happen next.

“That's why it can be seen as the flip side of pushing oneself too hard. She put on a bold front as to not put a burden on her classmates, even while being driven to quit the Student Council.”

Once she started thinking, she couldn't stop until she was trapped in a swamp of thoughts.

But Kanzaki and the others had to think carefully.

They had to delve a little deeper and explore laterally.

By giving each individual the power to think, they can revitalise the class.

“I understand that you want to know why Ichinose quit the Student Council. I can also understand that you all are struggling with both positive and negative aspects. But what is your true intention? Do you not want Honami to strain herself, or do you want her to work for the benefit of the class if she's resigned from the student council? I would like to hear more about that.”

I said, conveying what I wanted to know to the four of them while taking a sip of oolong tea.

Everyone stopped moving and exchanged glances, struggling to come up with a response.

You could tell just by watching them.

A prediction of what Ichinose's classmates who weren't here were thinking.

There would probably be many people who were anxious about Ichinose's mental state.

Regardless of whether the leader falls or not, they would simply be genuinely worried about Ichinose.

However, this was not the case for Kanzaki and Himeno.

"Let me start by speaking. Of course, I expect Ichinose to have the leadership skills as a leader. The incident with the student council is irrelevant, and if the student council is a burden, I think she should quit without hesitation. What's important is whether she has the will to rebuild your class and aim for Class A. If she's lost that will, then it's a problem."

"I think she still has the same will as before. But if she's given up on Class A, then it's not something anyone can comment on, is it? In extreme cases, whether to aim for something or not is a personal freedom." said Watanabe.

It's no wonder that Watanabe, who shows a side of himself that cares about his comrades, cannot force anyone to do something.

"Yeah...we can't force her, can we?"

Amikura feels the same way, and expresses her resignation that there is nothing that can be done.

When someone gives up, it is certainly cruel to continue forcing them to aim at Class A.

"However, it is not an act that is allowed as a leader. We need to report it to the class as soon as possible."

At least I hope that they won't hesitate to act.

In that regard, there is no need to worry about Ichinose, who would hate to do anything that would cause trouble for her comrades.

It is easy to imagine that she will contribute with the power she has for the sake of her comrades.

"If she intends to quit, she will likely announce it early on. She understands that if she remains in the leadership position without actively aiming for Class A, she will not achieve positive outcomes."

"So it's fine. After all, Ichinose hasn't said anything, right?"

"What I'm afraid of is Ichinose's human nature, which comes from her kindness. I said something similar before, but what if she's pretending to be tough and covering up the truth that she gave up in a bluff? There's nothing more severe for the class than that."

For the sake of her comrades, she won't show that she gave up for them on the surface.

If Ichinose had really been broken, there is also the possibility that she might have concealed it.

"I understand what you mean somewhat, but..... isn't cooperation with Himeno necessary to prevent that?"

"That's not all. By gathering those who can give advice to Ichinose, the class can have another brain to rely on besides the leader. We need to prepare a second choice that doesn't leave everything to the leader alone."

"Isn't that a bit like a betrayal?"

The class led by Ichinose must be united.

No, that's not it.

From Amikura's point of view, it's no wonder that Kanzaki's actions seem like a betrayal.

"I think we need to act now before it's too late. That's why we're making the necessary preparations."

"That's right. Although, as Ayanokoji pointed out, there are still many areas that need improvement."

Initially, Watanabe and Amikura hadn't given much thought to the situation, but now they had come to understand the details.

However, the discussion was far from clear and concise.

Kanzaki also seemed to feel the awkward atmosphere, as there was no progress being made.

For now, it seemed that questioning Ichinose's reasons for leaving the student council had come to a halt.

Continuing the discussion with no answers would be meaningless, given the limited information available.

"Kanzaki, can you tell me what you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

Kanzaki replied, checking his phone for the time.

"The main reason I called you today was to introduce a new member. They had something come up this morning, so they're running a bit late, but they should be here soon."

After that, we shifted the conversation to lighter topics for about 20 minutes, putting aside the heavy discussion.

We talked about our school trip and waited for the arrival of the new member.

"Excuse me for intruding."

"Hey there, Hamaguchi. I'm glad you came."

When I looked towards him, Hamaguchi Tetsuya from Ichinose's class appeared.

"I didn't expect to see Hamaguchi-kun here. Unexpected..."

Amikura's expression showed that she hadn't anticipated this, as she exchanged glances with Watanabe.

"Hey, Ayanokoji-kun. I think the last time we met face to face was during the deserted island test, wasn't it?" Hamaguchi said.

“Probably. You were a big help back then.”

I vividly remembered how Hamaguchi had cordially welcomed me despite the need to conserve food.

“It wasn’t a big deal. So where should I sit?”

“For now...could you sit on this side, Hamaguchi?”

Kanzaki stood up and shifted over a bit to guide Hamaguchi to the seat next to him.

“So Hamaguchi was the one who was going to join us later?”

“Yeah. For now, he’s the only one who can be considered a third member.”

In other words, if not for Watanabe and Amikura unexpectedly joining, they would only have been a group of three.

“Hamaguchi has already agreed to help us with the usual task.”

“That means he’s the third official member, right?”

He was the person who could replace Ichinose, that Kanzaki and Himeno had in mind.

Of course, Watanabe and Amikura were probably unaware of the situation.

However, Kanzaki had allowed them to join this gathering, even though they were an unexpected addition.

If he thought they were a hindrance, he could have simply declined and rescheduled for another day.

“We’ve reached the point where we need to start moving forward to make progress.” Kanzaki said, his enthusiasm increasing a notch.

Himeno nodded quietly in agreement.

“Wait a minute, Hamaguchi-kun. Do you know what we’re planning to do?”

“Ichinose-san's mental state is precarious. It's not a good idea to leave her alone like this. Kanzaki-kun pointed this out, but it's something I've been concerned about since becoming a second-year student.”

It seemed that Hamaguchi had already sensed Ichinose's anxiety.

“Seriously? You've never shown any sign of it before.”

“That's true. Our class didn't like that kind of atmosphere, so even if I tried to take action alone, no one would follow. Kanzaki-kun has been suffering because of this for a long time, and everyone has seen it.” Hamaguchi said.

The details of what had happened were unknown to me, but the gestures and facial expressions of the classmates present here speak for themselves.

“I don't want to remove Ichinose-san from the leader position. But I constantly think about becoming a teammate who can support her when she's in trouble. Kanzaki-kun's invitation came at a good time.”

“During the unanimous special exam, when I was alone and isolated, Hamaguchi privately showed concern for me in ways that others couldn't see. His actions and tone made it clear that he understood my situation.”

You can tell a lot by looking at your surroundings.

Hamaguchi is dependable and also someone who can be relied upon.

It may be similar to Yousuke's role and potential in Horikita's class.

“...Was it a good idea to tell me and Amikura such a secret?”

“It's a gamble. It's important to proceed slowly behind the scenes, but with Ichinose's withdrawal from the student council, we can't afford to take too much time. If we can't bring in Watanabe and Amikura, we'll be stuck soon enough.”

Kanzaki seemed to have chosen to move forward with confidence after a chance encounter.

Although Amikura's statements tend to lean towards Ichinose, she also has her own thoughts firmly in place.

"I don't mind that you trust me, but..."

"Well, we promised not to tell anyone else, right?"

Both seem unable to hide their confusion, but at the same time, there's no sign that they would betray Kanzaki and his group.

"I don't want you to immediately stand on our side. I just want you to change your one-sided reliance on Ichinose's judgement. Even if it's a slow process from now on."

"If you were trying to do something bad, it would be a different story, but I know that you're acting for the sake of the class. I can't say yes right away, but I'll consider it."

Watanabe showed some understanding and answered with a slight loosening of his cheeks.

"I still...can't say anything for sure. But, like Watanabe-kun said, I won't tell Honami-chan about this. That's all I can say for now..."

"That's enough."

Even if you try to forcefully demand more here, you won't get a satisfying answer.

"By the way, what are Kanzaki and the others planning to do specifically from now on?"

"Specifically, huh? This is the first step to save the class——"

Kanzaki was about to continue his statement when the door suddenly burst open.

"Hey hey! We're here to crash the party!" exclaimed Ishizaki and Komiya as they entered the karaoke box without permission.

Did someone in the room call for them? It didn't seem like it.

The atmosphere was clearly different from before they arrived.

"What are you guys doing here on our day off? Include me too." Ishizaki said, oblivious to my presence until now, and turned his gaze towards me for the first time.

"Wait, why is Ayanokoji here among this group?"

"Why are you guys here?"

"Well, you know, various things...right?"

Ishizaki avoided my gaze with a guilty look and turned to Komiya.

"Yeah, we came to karaoke and saw you guys here. We thought it'd be more fun to sing with a larger group than just the two of us." he answered, tapping on the glass door of the karaoke box.

"We're not friends, though, are we?"

Amikura confronted Ishizaki and Komiya directly.

"Uh, well, you know...that's why we aimed to deepen our friendship with the best singing performance."

Ishizaki made an obvious excuse.

Kanzaki had enough of this charade and revealed their true intentions.

"Ever since the announcement of the special exam, there have been daily unauthorized contacts from students in Ryuen's class."

"Huh? Here we go again..... Feels like déjà vu, doesn't it?"

Although she didn't seem angry, Amikura crossed her arms with a look of exasperation.

"Why are you acting so outraged?"

"You guys barged in without permission into the Karaoke room of another group. Are you saying I'm wrong?"

"We just came to check on our peers, that's all. We just wanted to see what kind of songs you all were singing and have some fun if it looked enjoyable."

Ishizaki desperately tried to justify their actions in line with Komiya's statement, but no one believed him.

"Unfortunately, this gathering today isn't a study group."

"...It seems that way."

Ishizaki noticed that there were no study materials on the table and scratched his head.

It seemed that for Ishizaki's group, who were at a significant disadvantage in terms of academic ability compared to Ichinose's class, their emphasis was on disrupting their opponents rather than studying seriously.

From Amikura's comment of "déjà vu" it seemed like this kind of thing had been happening repeatedly since the announcement to compete against Ichinose's class.

"In that case, are you going to leave?"

Unless we were actually studying, there was no benefit for them to continue staying in this situation that seemed to be nothing more than a group enjoying karaoke.

"Tch. Let's move on to the next place."

Finally, in an overtly admitting tone, Ishizaki and the others left the room while clicking their tongues.

"They're an unbearable bunch. No, it's all because of Ryuuen, who gave them that order."

“Seriously. They only think about tripping up their opponents instead of studying seriously.”

“It's like the end-of-term exams from last year all over again.”

At that time, even though Ryuen won, he was engaged in a quite dangerous behaviour.

I don't think he will go too far this time, but we don't know what means Ryuen will use.

“Are you being presented with a contract that has unreasonable demands?”

“No, we're fine. We've already prepared countermeasures. Of course, we won't let our guard down since we can't guarantee that there won't be any more trouble in the future.”

Kanzaki stood up, checked if Ishizaki and the others had really left, and then returned to his seat.

“Let's get back to the main topic, now that we've got rid of unnecessary distractions. The first step to saving the class is to quickly confirm what state Ichinose is in. We can't move forward or backward unless we get her back to her normal state.”

Indeed. We've had a prolonged period of time where no one knows Ichinose's true state.

“If only there were a way to perfectly grasp the current situation...”

“Don't we just need to support Honami-chan properly?”

“What's different from what we've been doing until now?”

“Well, if we just keep watching silently like we have been, we'll end up in the same situation we're in now.”

“Hey, Kanzaki, don't blame us so harshly. Isn't this a place where we can freely express ourselves?”

Watanabe interrupted Kanzaki's lecture with a slightly angry tone.

"We had the courage to offer our ideas, but if they're suppressed and crushed, then it will be difficult to offer the next opinion, won't it?"

"...But..."

"No, I also agree with Watanabe's opinion. Up until now, I've held back on my own opinions, but it's not just Ichinose-san who's facing a big problem. I thought that Kanzaki-kun's strong tone of voice was also one of the reasons."

In defence of Watanabe, Hamaguchi calmly expressed his criticism of Kanzaki.

"I appreciate Kanzaki-kun's efforts for the class, but if it goes in the wrong direction, it's meaningless, isn't it?"

Although they were still a small group, each member had their own will.

Even among those who blindly believed in Ichinose, there were students who had doubts.

However, Hamaguchi and Watanabe didn't feel pressured to speak out in a heavy atmosphere.

That's why it was important to have Kanzaki, who would take the initiative to step forward, which made it easier to speak freely.

"I think it's not a bad idea to support and be there for each other. I don't think Ichinose-san will easily answer our questions if we try to force her, so it's important to observe and determine things naturally."

"Are you saying we should take more time? But we're in a situation where time is running out. It's too late for that."

"No, I think it depends on how we approach the situation. We only know Ichinose-san as a leader, but Amikura-san is different. She has plenty of opportunities to hang out with her on both of their days off, doesn't she? That should increase our chances."

Amikura nodded vigorously in agreement.

"Having more opportunities is definitely an advantage. However...there might be some disadvantages too. Because Amikura-san and the others are often with Ichinose-san, she's more likely to be on guard and it's harder to get close to her."

Familiarity breeds contempt. Amikura couldn't just ask anything she wanted.

"Oh, I see. I have an idea for that."

Himeno, who seemed least likely to speak up, was the first to raise her hand.

"Please tell us."

"What about a plan where Ayanokoji-kun checks on Ichinose-san's day off? And then, he can ask her some questions while he's at it. Other students from different classes wouldn't normally be trusted, but if it's someone you like, you'll let your guard down, right?"

"That might be a good idea. Ichinose-san wouldn't mind being invited by someone she likes, and as Himeno said, her guard might be down."

Hamaguchi seems to know that Ichinose has feelings for me as a matter of course.

"But, as I said earlier, Ayanokoji is from a different class. That's the biggest concern."

"But you trust him, right? You invited him to such an important discussion."

Himeno's sharp retort stopped Kanzaki in his tracks.

"Let's have him look into the parts that we, as classmates, can't see."

"Wait a minute. I understand what Himeno is saying, but doesn't Ayanokoji have a girlfriend? That's a problem, isn't it? Especially if it's Karuizawa."

"Honami-chan stands out, so if she's alone with a guy, rumours might start to spread. We need to get permission from Karuizawa-san at least. It's not like

we're deceiving anyone... but, if it's a fact that Honami-chan likes Ayanokoji-kun, so isn't this more of a permission issue...?"

They started bringing up my name and getting carried away on their own.

"Can we even do this without Honami-chan? I understand it's for the class, but it feels wrong to use someone's feelings like this."

Amikura, who seems to be particularly close to Ichinose, voiced her dissatisfaction.

The Ichinose class has always revolved around Ichinose, for better or for worse.

"We're not doing this to prepare for the special exam on our own. This is just one of the actions we're taking for Ichinose. It would be strange to tell her that we're worried about her thoughts and feelings."

Kanzaki tried to persuade Amikura, but she doesn't seem to be convinced.

"I realized that Kanzaki-kun wants to change classes at the time of the unanimous special test. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. But, doing things behind the scenes, like talking to Ayanokoji-kun or aligning with Himeno-san, isn't praiseworthy."

As a member of the Ichinose class, who values transparency, is it natural to think that way too?

"If you act with confidence, it's clear that opposition will arise. That's why the opposition is gaining strength, because it's not just me alone, but Himeno and Hamaguchi are also cooperating with me."

Even now, it is a fact that more than half are on Kanzaki's side.

If it were only Kanzaki alone, he would have to fight at a disadvantage of 1 to 4, but now it's effectively 3 to 2.

With allies, he can also expect help from reinforcements.

"So we decided on a date with Ayanokoji-kun, right?"

That's what Himeno concluded, but still, Amikura's expression remained stern and unchanged.

"Himeno-san, You seem to have no doubts, but do you have that much dissatisfaction with Honami-chan's way of doing things?"

"I....."

"I understand Kanzaki-kun. He has been giving opinions by Honami-chan's side, and sometimes strongly advocating for his own opinion. But I have never heard such a thing from Himeno-san."

"Himeno is..."

Kanzaki tried to refute in place of her, but Hamaguchi stopped him with his hand.

"Isn't it meaningless if you don't speak out about such important matters yourself?"

Looking around at everyone, Hamaguchi's ability to objectively judge the right thing is still significant.

"It's not that I'm dissatisfied... I don't like the stance of everyone holding hands and being friendly. It's not just recently, it's always been like that even before coming to this school. I don't really like making friends, and I feel like it's more comfortable to be alone."

Amikura, who had never known this about her, was surprised.

"But I'm not good at expressing my opinion, and it's easier to just go along silently. So if I was invited to play, I just followed along quietly, and if everyone followed Ichinose-san, then I had to follow too."

She had accepted being swayed by her surroundings without expressing her own opinion.

“But deep down, I always thought that Ichinose's way might not be the only way to succeed in class A. But there was nothing I could do. I just followed along because everyone else did.”

Even now, it seems that she is not good at making eye contact with others, and Himeno continued to speak while looking at the monitor where the video is still playing.

“But I found out that Kanzaki-kun is seriously trying to change the class. I found out that he doesn't want to give up graduating from Class A. So, I decided to bet on it.”

“So it's a choice between going with the flow and ending up in Class B or working hard to graduate from Class A. That's the decision you made.”

Upon hearing Himeno's thoughts, which she had never spoken of before, Watanabe was amazed.

“...I see. I understand how you feel, Himeno-san. I didn't know anything.”

“It's not your fault. I never spoke about it honestly before.”

However, the same could be said for Ichinose.

It's hard to tell how much someone is speaking from their heart until they reveal it themselves.

Although Amikura seemed somewhat dissatisfied with the plan, she eventually gave in and showed her understanding.

“Representing the class, I'll ask. From Ichinose, I want to know her thoughts on resigning from the student council and her future plans. Does she still think she can win? I want you to find out her true feelings.”

After reaching a conclusion, Kanzaki lowered his head to me.

“I've gotten on board with this ship, and there's no reason to refuse...”

Then, with an unusual smile, Kanzaki thanked me and lowered his head.

“But what about the issue with Karuizawa? What are you going to do about that?”

“There’s nothing else to do. I’ll just explain the situation and make her understand.”

“But even if you call it a situation, it’s about other classes, isn’t it? Will Karuizawa-san just accept to help without suspicion?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.”

Although it was a sudden request, it was a good opportunity to try something I wanted to do.

Part 2

After Amikura's proposal, it was decided to enjoy karaoke for a little while, and I went to the restroom before that.

Although it was unexpected, the fact that Kanzaki and the others showed signs of growth in their discussion was a great harvest.

Now, All that remained was to invite Ichinose another day and confirm the reasons for her resignation from the student council.

Ideally, it would be preferable for Kanzaki and the others to handle this, but given the potential for class disruption, I would not recommend them to act rashly.

They should maintain their role as allies who follow Ichinose.

While I don't regret taking on the task, the difficult part is simply conversing with Ichinose for this invitation.

With the special exam and the student council's departure, Ichinose has had two major events happen in succession, and trying to lure her out could raise suspicion.

Would it be better to straightforwardly ask and confirm with her in person?

No, it's better to check Ichinose's mental state first and then decide what to do.

If asking her directly could lead to negative consequences, then it would be pointless.

"Hey, Ayanokoji."

Watanabe hurriedly followed me into the men's restroom.

At first, I thought Watanabe needed to use the restroom, but it seemed that was not the case.

"Listen...you're going to meet with Ichinose soon, right? Well, I have a favour to ask...it's something simple, I think."

"If it's something easy, I don't mind."

After finishing up in the restroom and washing hands, we returned to the hallway.

"I think it's probably something easy, but, well, maybe it's difficult...? Umm..."

Watanabe's usually clear-cut way of speaking became hesitant.

However, he must have thought it wouldn't be good to be away for too long because he cut to the chase.

"It's, uh...about Amikura."

"Amikura? Is there something you're worried about?"

Since Amikura was the one who seemed most emotionally unstable during their earlier discussion, it's possible that Watanabe sensed something.

Though it didn't seem like she needed immediate attention.

"It's not that. Well, I mean, it is, but it's not just that."

Though his words were somewhat incoherent, I decided to listen to him for the time being.

"Has she, uh...mentioned liking any boys recently? I mean, Ichinose should already know about it, right?...Can you try asking her? If it's not too much trouble."

"I see."

I too am starting to understand a little bit about love, emotions, and actions related to them.

I can understand why Watanabe stutters as he tries to convey his feelings.

“You have a crush on Amikura.”

“Hey hey hey! Don't say it so blatantly here!”

“It's okay. There's no one here right now.”

The only sounds leaking out into the hallway are the BGM playing inside the store and the singing voice from the karaoke box.

It's actually more of a problem for Watanabe to be flustered and yelling so loudly.

“Even when the person you like is in the same group, you were calm. Especially during the school trip.”

“I'm not a child, so I don't show it so obviously in my attitude.”

Come to think of it, didn't Watanabe say he was shopping together with Amikura today?

When that fact comes to light, things start to make sense.

“Could it be that you were trying to ask her out on a date today?”

If that's the case, then Watanabe is quite the strategist.

“Huh? Oh...well, I was aiming for something similar to that. I got up early and prepared myself. Then we met in the lobby. I was really nervous on the inside.”

Looking back on that morning, Watanabe spoke with a bitter expression.

“But once we started walking together, we couldn't really get the conversation going. We're usually good at talking to each other when there are a lot of people around, but suddenly the words wouldn't come out. It was kind of hellish until we got to Keyaki Mall.”

It was good up until they went out together, but things didn't go smoothly afterwards.

“Did you dislike being alone with her?”

“I didn't hate it. But I got frustrated with myself for not being able to talk well, and I kept thinking that it probably wasn't fun for Amikura to be with someone like me. And then I heard Kanzaki and Himeno walking and talking about meeting with you.”

It might have been a lifeline for Watanabe who had fallen into a difficult situation.

“I asked them if we can come and hang out since we were in the same group during our school trip,”

Perhaps it was a decision to take the easy way out, but not to retreat completely.

“I see, so that's what happened.”

It would have been regrettable to lose that chance to be alone with her, but there is nothing more painful than a date that doesn't go well.

Although, Amikura might not have even considered it a date.

“I was a bit scared when I realized an important conversation was about to start, but in hindsight, I'm glad it happened. I feel like I understand Kanzaki's and Ichinose's perspectives now.”

Given what I've seen of Watanabe's personality thus far, if Kanzaki and the others had acted earlier, he might have been able to join their side like Hamaguchi.

There are likely still students of that sort in Ichinose's class.

“So... it's about Amikura. Can you find out more about her for me?”

“Me?”

“You're going to meet Ichinose soon, right? I want you to casually bring it up and see if you can get any information.”

"There's no guarantee that Ichinose is aware of Amikura's love life situation, let alone if she's willing to talk about it."

"No, she knows. If Amikura was interested in someone or dating someone, she would definitely know."

Watanabe answered with confidence, though it's unclear where that confidence came from.

"Like, the typical gossip among girls?"

"Yeah, that's it. I can't imagine Amikura being the type to date a guy without discussing it with someone first. If she didn't tell Ichinose, then I might have a chance."

"I see. So you want to confirm that there isn't a specific guy she likes yet."

Watanabe nodded with a sly smile.

"Well...actually, what I really want is for my name to come up in the conversation. But there's no sign of that happening, so I guess there's no helping it. If I don't have any rivals right now, then I just have to keep pushing forward."

I haven't been able to grasp any feelings about it myself, so I analyze that there's no possibility of leading.

Well, I'm not sure how reliable self-analysis is when it comes to romance, but I'm also grateful for the kindness shown during the school trip.

There may be some parts that are difficult to ask classmates for help with this kind of thing.

Above all, I appreciate Watanabe's positive attitude.

"If I can casually find out, I'll ask. But please don't have excessive expectations. It would be inconvenient for you if I intruded too much and made her cautious."

“Yeah, that's totally fine.”

Watanabe was happy, with a slightly embarrassed yet delighted expression on his face.

Part 3

It was just after 4 p.m.

After being a good listener at the karaoke for a while, I finished my role and we parted ways.

I then sat alone on a bench on the second floor of Keyaki Mall.

I had decided to stay regardless of whether the group ended early or late today.

With no particular purpose in mind, I thought about browsing the internet on my phone, but before I knew it, I received a message and a photo from Kei.

At a glance, I could see that she was happily snuggled up to Sato, making a peace sign.

It seemed that she planned to gather with her female friends in the dorm and chat until evening.

The other members included Sato, Mori, Ishikura, and Maezono.

One of Kei's strengths is that she can gather with her close friends like this, even if she can't spend time with me.

When asked what time she would return, I hesitated for a moment, but replied that it would be after 8 pm.

If I had told her that I could come back earlier, she might have cut short her time with her friends.

It would be better for her to enjoy spending time with her friends without being caught up in distractions on days like this.

“Now then...”

Since there doesn't seem to be anyone else around, I don't have to worry about someone overhearing my phone call.

While occasionally observing students who appear in the distance, I took out my phone and called Ichinose.

There's no point in putting it off any longer, and if possible, I'd like to make an appointment for tomorrow.

Although the phone rang for a while next to my ear, Ichinose did not answer the call.

Is she spending time with someone and not noticing her phone, or is she intentionally not answering?

Did contacting Ichinose on the night nearing the end of the school trip ultimately lead to distortion?

While pondering various thoughts, I looked at my call history and a call came back.

"Hel-hello? Sorry, I couldn't answer the phone."

The first words of the nervous-sounding caller.

There was no apparent indication that she particularly disliked the call, based on her voice.

"Were you busy?"

"N-no, I was just preparing dinner...This is an unusual call, huh?"

I realized that might be true as she told me.

Because I hardly had a few memories of calling Ichinose during her private time like this.

Faint voices could be heard on the other end of the phone.

I thought she might be with someone, but upon closer listening, I realized it was the sound of a TV.

“It's a bit sudden, but can we meet tomorrow if you're free?”

I directly stated the reason as if boldly entering the front.

“Me and you?”

“Do I sound like I'm inviting someone other than you?”

“N-no, it's not that...but...uh, the two of us...?”

“If it's possible, just the two of us.”

I conveyed it plainly as this was not a moment to beat around the bush.

However, there was no response from Ichinose, and a somewhat heavy silence lasted for a few seconds.

“I don't have any plans...What's the reason?”

The reason.

Depending on that, Ichinose wouldn't necessarily be opposed to meeting.

In simpler terms, if it was a consultation or if I had some sort of problem, then she would likely be easy to meet with.

However, I couldn't reveal the part about being asked by Kanzaki and the others.

I had been asked to investigate without letting her know.

“Is it possible for us to meet even if there's no business to discuss?”

“Well, that's... but being alone together...”

“I just want to meet you.”

“Tsu...!?”

“But if it's mentally tough for you, it might be better not to.”

With full knowledge of the risks, I decided to take a step back and see where Ichinose's emotions were.

“W-wait... umm, no... it's okay.”

Although she was not without suspicion, it seemed that there was no emotion that she particularly wanted to avoid.

“Are you sure? I don't want to force you.”

“I'm not forcing myself... I also want to meet Ayanokoji-kun...”

“I see. Then, how about meeting at Keyaki Mall tomorrow at 10 o'clock?”

I wasn't sure how long it would take, so it was best to keep her as long as possible.

“O-okay. At 10 o'clock.”

“That's settled then. If anything comes up, feel free to contact me.”

Although it was possible to have a longer conversation, I decided to avoid it.

“Okay... see you tomorrow.”

With those words, the awkward conversation ended and the call was disconnected.

For now, I had managed to make an appointment to meet with Ichinose.

All that was left was to find out more about her mental state tomorrow.

It would be ideal if I could also learn what she was thinking.

Perhaps I should stop by a bookstore later. I still have plenty of time to spend alone today.

The time I spend alone now, by choice, is different from when I had no friends.

It's a moment of bliss where I can come to notice things from a different point of view.

Part 4

After enjoying my time until nightfall, I stopped by the supermarket and bought a late dinner.

I told Kei that I was heading home and left Keyaki Mall.

The temperature had dropped significantly, it was quite difficult to bear, having been in an environment with heating for so long.

The phone in my pocket vibrated.

As soon as I read the message, Kei replied that she had just finished dinner with her friends and they had parted ways.

I responded that I was glad she had a good day and walked back to the dormitory on the less crowded path alone.

On the way, I noticed a female student standing still with her gaze fixed on the sky.



I couldn't make out who it was in the dark, but I had a vague feeling of recognition.

As I approached, her identity became clear.

There were no other students around, only her.

"Surprised to see you here. I thought you had already gone back."

Himeno turned around upon hearing my voice.

"Huh? Didn't you go back already?"

"I told you I was going shopping before heading home."

"I see, I remember you saying something like that... but isn't it a little late for that now?"

It seemed like she had only half-listened to what was said.

However, it had been almost four hours since we had disbanded, so it was no use wondering about it.

"So you're heading back now?"

Himeno asked, looking at the plastic bag from the supermarket. I nodded in agreement.

"What have you been doing all this time?"

"I... was just wandering around. Went to a variety store and even went to the front of a movie theatre for no reason."

It seemed like Himeno had enjoyed spending time alone in the same way as I did.

"By the way, would you like to walk back to the dorm together while we're at it?"

I was a little surprised by the uncharacteristic proposal from Himeno, but I couldn't think of a reason to refuse.

"Uuh, it gets cold at night."

She shuddered as if she hadn't noticed until now.

"Actually, Kanzaki and the others asked if I wanted to hang out with them a little more after we disbanded."

"Is that so?"

"I thought it was important to have a chance to talk with just classmates, but I declined."

"Why?"

"To be honest, I just wanted to avoid that environment a little. Oh, it's not like I want to leave the group or anything like that. I just didn't like doing things with a lot of people."

Himeno seemed to be struggling with how to deal with a large group of people, although she was gradually getting used to it.

"I always thought it's calming to be alone, but before I knew it, it was nighttime.'

"I see, so that's how it is."

"But since I had more time alone, I ended up thinking a lot. Especially the words Ayanokoji-kun said to me really hit home, or rather, I felt like you hit a sore spot. It hurts."

It seems like she was worried about the struggles she showed during karaoke.

"I realized that I couldn't do anything that I had imagined myself doing. Unlike the others, who didn't realize that Ichinose-san was in danger, I had a bit of confidence in being able to notice things, and I thought I was doing something special by working with Kanzaki-kun. But now, I feel like I've been brought down a notch, like I've had the rug pulled out from under me."

“I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s not like you need to apologize or anything. Actually, what Ayanokoji-kun said was right.”

Himeno let out a wry smile and exhaled a white breath.

“I thought it would be easier to do something amazing... but taking action is tough, huh?”

“Everyone feels that way. Even Ichinose and I. But it’s not helpful to get too hung up on it.”

I didn’t want to console her, but I gently conveyed that it would be troublesome if she got too deeply caught up in her worries.

“I’m in the middle of searching for the path forward, but I’m at a loss as to whether I should continue taking action with Kanzaki-kun and Hamaguchi-kun to improve the situation.”

“It’s not a bad thing to be unsure. However, standing still won’t solve the problem.”

“That’s true. I thought we were starting to take action to save the class, but now it seems like the invisible gears are starting to slip. That’s the feeling I get.”

The invisible gears are starting to slip... If you try to do something unprecedented, it’s natural for anxiety to creep in.

“I understand how you feel. But even if you were asked if the gears had been turning smoothly up until now, could you honestly answer yes?”

“Well, that’s true.”

A sound class management has been in place, but the results have not followed.

This indicates that the gears were not functioning properly.

“It is a fact that a transformation is about to take place in your class.”

Whether it's fortunate or unfortunate, I still don't know the answer to where it will lead.

Not only Kanzaki's presence, but also Ichinose, who resigned from the student council.

Even though I intend to manage various things, the future is uncertain and opaque.

However, there are two outcomes: life or death.

In other words, it's a choice of whether Ichinose's class will be saved or not. Yet the path of that process is shrouded in impenetrable fog.

March, the end of the second year, will soon arrive.

By that time, Himeno will probably be able to see the results.

“Ayanokoji-kun, do you think there is still a possibility for our class to become Class A if we change?”

“Do you want an objective opinion?”

“Yes, if possible.”

‘If I can answer that question... it's a conditional yes.’

“Huh...I thought you were going to say it's impossible. But conditional?”

‘It's not easy for second-year students to reach Class A just by changing their mindset. In fact, the gap between Ichinose's class and Class A is becoming more serious. To bridge that gap, everyone in the class must have the appropriate pain and determination. Otherwise, they won't be able to reach it.’

“Pain and determination...what do you mean specifically?”

“I'm sorry, but I can't answer that right now.”

“You can't answer that, huh? I didn't expect such a response to come back. Do you think I would say that you didn't think about it at all, or that you just said it randomly?”

‘Normally, that's what people would think.’

“Because it's like a story of another class's troubles, or their anguish. The more we suffer, the more Ayanokoji-kun's class benefits relatively. Isn't that right?”

“Yeah.”

“Yet you sympathise with us and cooperate with us. Why is that?”

“Before being enemies or allies, it's because I strongly feel like I want to see where Ichinose's class will end up.”

“Where will we end up...? It sounds like Ayanokoji-kun can see into the future or something.”

No one can see the future, but they can predict and prepare for it.

“That's why I plan to lend a hand when you're in trouble for a while. If it's okay with you.”

“I'm sure Kanzaki-kun would be happy. I feel really reassured too.”

Himeno, who perceived it favourably, made a small victory pose with both arms.

“I hope you can always look that confident.”

“Huh? Ah, suddenly I feel embarrassed...”

Saying that, she put both hands into her pockets and averted her gaze.

Part 5

While walking back to the dormitory with Himeno, We found Kei sitting on a bench and playing with her cellphone.

“Well then, see you later.”

Himeno, who quickly read the atmosphere, moved away from my side and walked briskly.

She slightly bowed to Kei sitting on the bench, then continued walking back to the dormitory.

“What are you doing here? Weren't you supposed to go back to your room?”

“What am I doing? What does it look like I'm doing?”

“Waiting for someone.”

“Correct. Now, who do you think I'm waiting for? 1. Ike-kun, 2. Minami-kun, 3. Kiyotaka.”

She said, holding up one finger at a time as she presented her quiz.

“That's an extremely difficult question. While the possibility of 1 seems high...”

“If you get it wrong, there'll be a punishment game.”

“Shouldn't I hear the contents of the punishment game before answering?”

“That's right. How about writing 'Love from Kei-chan' on your forehead with a marker and going to school like that?”

“Alright, I'll choose number 3.”

“Hey, you don't want to play the punishment game that badly?”

While a little angry, she stood up from the bench and lined up next to me.

"So, that girl earlier was Himeno-san, right? Why was she walking with Kiyotaka?"

She smiled, but pressed me with a strong pressure to explain the reason.

"I told you I was going to meet Kanzaki. Himeno was one of the people there."

"Hmm? But Kanzaki-kun wasn't there, right?"

"We disbanded once. And then, as we were leaving, I happened to meet Himeno and we just had a casual chat."

"Hmm? Hmm? Well, since I'm your girlfriend, I'll trust your words for now, but..."

Although she said that, it seemed that she still had some doubts.

"It looked like you were getting along well, though."

"That's wrong. In the darkness, you can't see that far."

"Uh... y-yeah, that's true. But there was just something that I couldn't quite put into words! But never mind that now!"

The person next to me wrapped her arm around mine, as if to assert that the seat is hers.

"Let's talk about something fun."

"I agree."

"Then how about we go to Keyaki Mall together tomorrow? Christmas is coming up soon, after all."

She invited me with a sly smile. "You know what I'm trying to say, right?" That was her expression.

"Because Sudou's confession failed, right? So it's for a Christmas present, isn't it?"

“Correct. Surprising me with a present is good, but it's not a bad idea to go shopping with your boyfriend for something you really want, either.”

It's definitely better to make her happy than to worry about it on my own, so it's helpful for me too.

“I want to live up to your expectations, but tomorrow is a little difficult. Can we do it next week?”

“Huh? Did you accidentally schedule something else again?”

I had informed Kei in advance about meeting Kanzaki and the others today.

Kei doesn't have a connection with Kanzaki and the others and doesn't understand my relationship with them well, so she was a little curious, but didn't pay much attention to it...

“That's the case.”

“Can't you make even a little time? What are you doing tomorrow?”

I'll be spending time with Ichinose.

It's easy to deceive her by not telling her, but just like when I talked about Kanzaki and the others, the drawbacks of keeping it a secret are too big.

Ichinose's existence is already noticeable enough, and if I'm with her, rumours of Restlessness will spread.

In addition, Kei has many friends, and those students will be her eyes and ears.

“I'm meeting Ichinose.”

“.....With Ichinose-san?”

Kei immediately froze, her reaction was markedly different when I mentioned meeting Ichinose, compared to when I told her I was meeting Kanzaki.

“Who else is there? Like Kanzaki-kun or Himeno-san?”

“No one else for now. Only Ichinose.”

“What's that supposed to mean? I don't really understand. Meeting with a girl alone on a holiday?”

It was clear that she was in a bad mood, but it was understandable.

Even if the situation was reversed, a normal guy would have shown a similar reaction.

“That's right.”

I glanced at Kei's expression and she met my gaze with a glare.

“So?”

“So what?”

“Normally, you explain the reasons and talk about it properly. Like, 'We're meeting alone, but don't get the wrong idea. There's a reason for this.' You shouldn't make your girlfriend feel anxious like that.”

“That's true. There are several reasons why I'm meeting with Ichinose, but one of them is that Kanzaki and the others asked me to.”

“.....Kanzaki-kun and the others asked you? Huh?”

With Kanzaki's name being mentioned, Kei felt slightly relieved.

“It hasn't been announced publicly yet, but Ichinose resigned from the student council. There's confusion because of that.”

“Wait a minute. Really? I don't really understand why though.”

“Isn't it strange? Kanzaki and the others want to know the truth. Being a part of the student council has a positive effect on the class as well. With the class falling to D now, it's understandable that classmates would be upset about

Ichinose leaving the student council, which could mean losing even more points."

Even with this brief explanation, Kei could somehow sense the anxiety that Kanzaki and the others were feeling.

"But Kanzaki and the others are afraid to ask Ichinose directly. Hearing from Ichinose herself that she's given up on pursuing A-class would be unbearable for them."

"Does that mean that Kiyotaka will be the one to find out the reason instead?"

"That's right."

"I understand the situation, but...why is Kiyotaka getting involved with Ichinose's class? Wouldn't it be better to just leave it alone? If we help them, they might become our rivals again."

It was a reasonable question to ask, but this was not a story that could be shared with Horikita and the others.

"There is a reason why we are sending salt to our enemies. However, I can't tell you about it yet."

"You can't tell me? You think I would ever tell anyone?"

"That's not it. I know that you can keep a secret. I just don't want to share what I'm planning with anyone right now."

Kei's expression tightened a bit as she spoke in a rigid, dismissive manner.

But it was natural that Kei couldn't simply accept it.

"I know Kiyotaka is thinking about a lot of things. I understand that he must be doing something to help the class that I don't know about, and that he's trying to get information from Ichinose-san because of Kanzaki-kun's request. But...I don't like it. It's uncomfortable for me that you are meeting with a girl on a holiday... there must be other ways, like meeting at school or only during lunch break, right?"

With a pout, Kei turned her head to the side.

It would be easy to say that she was the only one who mattered and apologise, but in love, it was important to reassure the other person. I had learned that already.

So what would happen if it were the opposite?

I had an idea of the answer, but I couldn't say I understood it until I actually reached it.

“Do you want to get in my way then? Just go ahead and disrupt us when I'm with Ichinose.”

“W—why would I do that——”

“You wouldn't, right? There's no benefit in doing something like that. Then, let's end this discussion here. We'll go buy Christmas presents together next week, and there shouldn't be any problems.”

Just by omitting a few consoling words, a sudden heaviness descended upon the atmosphere.

The joyful image of Kei eagerly awaiting my arrival under the chilly skies had vanished.

“Okay, it's fine. Kiyotaka has his own plans, I have no right to say anything.”

Not only her expression, but her emotions too seemed to have escaped somewhere far away.

“I'll stop by the convenience store on the way back. You can go ahead.”

With that, she ran towards the convenience store without looking back.

However, her pace was quick yet slow, and I could tell from her back that she was expecting me to chase after her.

I could just quickly catch up to her and apologize, and think of a way to meet Ichinose.

That would improve her mood, just like before.

But I decided to break my gaze away from her back and head back to the dormitory.

By doing this, the gap between us would deepen.

It would be a good opportunity to experience how Kei would react and what attitude she would show, and how I would feel and act in response.

Chapter 4

How to Spend Your Day Off

Intro

It was Sunday, the day after the discussion with Kanzaki and the others, and after experiencing a little friction with Kei.

It was time to meet Ichinose, whom I had promised to meet with the previous day.

I went down to the lobby a bit early, but didn't see Ichinose in the area.

I thought there was a possibility of bumping into her by chance, but that didn't seem to be the case.

I turned around and looked at the elevator, but it didn't seem to be moving either.

"I guess Kei wouldn't follow me after all."

If Kei was concerned about my meeting with Ichinose, she might have done something like that.

No, it's premature to assume that she won't do anything yet.

There's a possibility that she's already on her way, or that she's even there ahead of me.

Or, she might boldly walk in during my meeting with Ichinose.

Analyzing her past behaviour, the probability of that cannot be reduced to zero.

If that happens, I'll just have to stand my ground, but...

From the way she looked yesterday, I don't think she'll take any reckless actions.

It takes a certain amount of courage to stand up and look at something you don't want to see.

I left the dormitory.

The sky is clear right now, but unfortunately, it's predicted that it will rain in the afternoon, so I brought an umbrella.

I wonder how Ichinose felt this morning.

What does she wish for, what does she want?

It's clear that there's more than one thing.

To be an excellent leader, to win in love, to be psychologically strong.

It would take both hands to count her desires.

The night of the school trip alone didn't bring about any concrete change in our relationship.

I had no way of knowing what the unstable Ichinose was thinking without meeting with her in person.

When I arrived there a little before the appointed time while thinking about what's ahead, Ichinose was already waiting for me with an umbrella behind her.

She noticed me before I called out to her, and slowly waved.

"G-good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."



When I arrived at the location a little before the appointed time,
Ichinose was already waiting, holding an umbrella behind her.

"Oh, Good morning Ayanokoji-kun."

I don't feel a heavy atmosphere.

If anything, there is a fresh and innocent sense of tension.

Unlike the surprise visit that night, Ichinose has prepared herself for the public.

The first time I looked at her, she looked back at me, but when I kept looking to understand her intent, she averted her gaze right away.

I can tell that she dropped her eyes to my mouth, nose and neck while trying not to be noticed.

"I'm sorry I forced you to meet with me today."

"It's no big deal. I didn't have any plans today anyway. Really."

As the one who invited her, I'm grateful to hear that.

Even if she's only being polite.

It was still a few minutes before Keyaki Mall opened, so we lined up at the entrance.

We're next to each other, but the distance between us isn't too close nor too far.

For a third party who doesn't know anything, it would be difficult to judge whether we are waiting together or separately.

"It's not often that I come here before the store opens, but there's no one here yet, huh?"

"It's especially cold today, so. I guess everyone's still relaxing in their dorms."

That's true.

Unless it's a special sale day, there's no need to wait in line for a mall to open early in the morning.

It really is cold out here.

Ichinose quietly muttered so, repeating her words.

The conversation stopped there, as I figured that we would talk after entering the building.

My daily routine of spending time with Kei, my lover, has been increasing.

That daily routine is not always full of conversation.

Sometimes, we stay silent for 10 or 20 minutes while still sharing each other's company.

I felt the same awkwardness as I do now at first, but before I knew it, it disappeared and I even began to feel comfortable with the silence sometimes.

This isn't a problem of getting used to it or not, but rather a problem of feeling awkward in the time spent in silence with someone that you are neither close nor distant with.

It's not that I couldn't stand the continued silence, but I think I should be the one to start a conversation as the side who invited her.

Perhaps Ichinose was also thinking the same thing. However, neither of us could start speaking and take the first step.

A common topic of conversation.

Something that you keep playing catch with two or three more times after opening the topic.

When I thought about that, a male student came up in my mind.

"By the way, I was in the same group with Watanabe in the school trip earlier."

"I see."

"I didn't know him before as I had no point of interaction with him, but Watanabe was a friendly, easy to talk to and nice guy."

When I honestly told Ichinose what I thought, she was pleased as if I was talking about her.

"Mhm. I think all of our classmates like him, both boys and girls."

He doesn't easily get carried away like Ike, and he can read the room, even if not as well as Yousuke can.

I've only spent a little time with Watanabe, but I'm sure he's the same in his class too.

"I've been studying at the same place for two years, but there's so much I don't know about other classes."

"It's the same for me. I don't know much about other classes, even though I think I do. It's very different from primary school or even middle school... I guess it's because we're really competing with each other."

People show their weaknesses to each other and help each other out in normal friendships.

In this school however, that concept of normalcy doesn't apply. This is the impression that most students have, including Ichinose.

"People are hard to deal with. Even with my classmates, I still can't say that I'm getting along well with them. I think it's really amazing that you can make friends so fast, Ichinose."

"Huh? I'm definitely not amazing or anything like that."

Rather than being modest, it seems that she is unaware of her own skills.

"Is there a trick or something, then? A way to get along with everyone?"

No matter how much I learn about building friendly relationships, I'm still far from being the best at it.

I haven't acquired the skills that people like Ichinose and Kushida have. I know what I need to do.

I know what to say, and I know the words.

Still, I can't be like them.

The slightest difference in the atmosphere in the place or body language can make a big difference in the outcomes.

"Hmm... I wonder if there is such a thing. Even if there is, I don't think I'd know."

It's a natural skill that she possesses, so she is unable to break it down into theoretical pieces and explain it.

So even if one tries to learn this skill by watching, it's no easy thing to absorb it and use it well. It's like a verbal catch-ball that somehow continues.

Before long, the automatic doors opened at 10 p.m.

"Let's go in."

"Yep."

When we entered Keyaki Mall first, we were covered in the warmth from the heating inside.

"How long can you stay today?"

"I don't have any plans after this, so as long as we want."

I wanted to ask Ichinose a few things today, so this is a great chance. If I limit the time, we may not be able to converse well.

I want to know the reason she quit the Student Council, and there's also the important subject Kanzaki and the others asked me about.

It's very convenient that I was able to secure enough time to fulfill Kanzaki and the others' requests.

But... I do feel a sense of strangeness.

We've put the romance aspect aside for a moment, but Ichinose isn't fundamentally an insensitive person.

Even if she doesn't have a first-class sense of her surroundings, her perception is better than the average student.

She wouldn't be able to work as a leader if it wasn't so.

Even in her current psychological state, she is likely to know how she is viewed by her classmates from the way they look at her and from their words and feelings.

In which case, it isn't a good idea to decide that this was a coincidental opportunity.

I'm sure she was able to guess the intent behind my invitation.

Depending on the conditions, she may have guessed that her classmates are hiding behind my intentions.

I should be prepared for that today.

"So, what are we going to do?"

My secret intent is to gather information from her, but she doesn't know my outward intention yet.

That's the conclusion I came to after thinking about my plan to share some time with Ichinose today.

"I didn't have a clear goal in mind, but... Right. Can you show me how you spend your days off?"

"How do I spend my days off?"

"Yeah. I want to learn the kind of daily life you live that lets you become friendly with everyone."

"Huh? Can you really understand that from something like this?"

“I just said what came to mind, but... No good?”

I thought I would put a second plan into motion if I was refused, but Ichinose nodded without showing a displeased expression.

“I don’t know if I can help you, but if you’re okay with that, then let’s do that.”

She seems to have thought about it positively, so she consented.

It looks like my first step was effective for now.

“Umm, then... So we really can do whatever I do on my days off, right?”

“Of course. Shopping, movies, cafes, I’ll follow you with anything.”

“I might not meet your expectations, though. Is that okay?”

That doesn’t apply to anything I’ve said, but Ichinose laughed.

She looked a bit awkward when we met up in the morning, but she’s now showing me a natural smile.

“Let’s get going, then.”

Ichinose said so and we headed for the second floor in an escalator.

Part 1

There are various commercial facilities in Keyaki Mall, and I've already visited most of them.

However, there are still a few that I haven't experienced yet.

One of them is the training gym on the second floor.

"I try to come here on the weekends. I'm a bit clumsy, so I'm hoping to improve that a little."

We reached the gym and Ichinose took out her student card.

"You don't go to any gyms, right, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Yeah. I've never been in one."

"This is perfect, then."

"Still, I'm a bit surprised. How long have you been coming here?"

"I came here for a free trial in September, and became a member in October."

So she's been coming here for two months already. I had no idea.

"Did you start by yourself? I'm not good with places like this, but——"

I'm sure one gets used to it after a while, but the first one or two times would be very hard.

"I'm the same. That's why I started with my friend. I was scared when alone, but I can do a lot better when someone else is with me. We can hang out here a bit today, right?"

I nodded and let Ichinose lead me into the facility.

Ichinose greeted the friendly staff woman at the reception desk, and started talking about me while showing her student card.

“Do you have your student card?”

“Yeah.”

It looks like you can easily get a free trial without filling any forms if you show your student card.

“See you in a bit then, Ayanokouji-kun. The staff will explain everything to you from here.”

After that, a male trainer took over and explained how to use the lockers and to change clothes, the showers rooms etc. before I was asked to change.

It seems that this gym allows people to go in empty-handed without bringing in any luggage.

After taking off my clothes by a locker and changing into the rental training wear, I headed for the training room at the back of the gym.

It seems that Ichinose still hasn't finished changing her clothes, so I couldn't see anyone else.

The place just opened, so I suppose it's only normal.

However, I was a little troubled by the fact that I was the first here.

A male trainer offered to teach me some things, but I refused.

I came all the way here, so I thought it would be better if I learned from Ichinose.

Not knowing how to behave however, I just looked around at the equipment.

I was familiar with the training equipment itself, so I didn't feel too uncomfortable.

I had all of the newest equipment available in the White Room in order to train my body.

Even if the makers or the year of the equipment were different, they all seemed high quality.

As I was thinking about all this, the gym surprisingly started getting filled up with students.

I thought it would be a little more quiet, but this place is quite popular.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ayanokouji-un. Ah, it looks like the boys are already starting.”

Ichinose came out into the training area after changing her clothes, and I agreed while being a little surprised at her outfit.

“There were two or three girls in the women’s locker room too.”

“I see adults around too, so I guess non-students can use this place too?”

I knew that this place wasn’t exclusively for students from places like the movie theatre or the supermarket, so it looks like this gym is no exception either.

“I see Mashima-sensei here a lot as well.”

I see. The teachers are no exception either.

For the people living inside the school facilities, a place to train your body is very important.

I’ve long shied away from facilities like this, but if there are familiar students like Ichinose here, I may be able to imitate them.

As I was thinking about such things, Ichinose began explaining the equipment. She explained both by words and by showing me in practice.

I made sure not to tell her that I don’t need any explanations, and quietly listened while pretending not to know anything.

Ichinose had already acquired a certain amount of knowledge, but she was still a newcomer to the gym and didn't seem to be able to use everything that well.

After about 10 minutes of instructions on how to use the equipment, the number of students in the gym gradually increased and about seven men and women excluding us started to sweat it out.

"We should get started too- Ah, good morning Mako-chan!"

Just as we were about to get started, Ichinose called out to someone she knew.

"Eh, ah, Honami-chan!?"

It was Amikura, who had just come out of the locker room after changing.

She was surprised to see us, especially since I'm here too with Ichinose today.

"W-why are you in the gym?"

She must have been so restless that the question on her mind leaked out from her mouth.

"I started going to the gym on my days off, right? I thought I should introduce Ayanokouji-kun to this place as well."

"Oh, I see..."

I'm sure she didn't expect to see the two of us here in the gym.

Ichinose cannot understand Amikura's feelings on this subject, so I ended things off with a normal expression.

"So, that's about it. Sorry to bother you."

"...It's not like you're bothering me or anything, but..."

Amikura gave me a look that said "don't say anything unnecessary".

By that, she would mean the time we met up at the karaoke the other day. I won't talk about that, of course.

I'm not sure how effective it will be, but I also gave her the same look.

"It's very strange to see you in a gym, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Really?"

"I never imagined you doing something like this, or rather I thought you hated crowded places."

I would like to say that she is wrong, but she's right.

I had some resistance to the idea of working out in front of the general public.

I also had an image of the gym as a place to hang out with friends rather than to work out in silence, so it was very difficult for me to consider going to one.

I have to admit that I had been staying away from them for that reason.

"Actually, can we chat a bit, Honami-chan?"

Amikura noticed something and pulled Ichinose by her arm.

Then, the two started whispering to each other. For some reason, their mouths are turned away from me.

"...!?"

Ichinose jumped with surprise and hid behind Amikura for some reason.

"I didn't notice that, Honami-chan..."

Amikura who replied so, was also somewhat embarrassed.

"What..?"

"Ah, no, umm... I'm a bit embarrassed because I'm not used to this kind of clothing."

She looked at me as if saying that I should already realize what happened.

"Okay?"

Apparently, she was embarrassed that a boy saw her in her gym clothes.

The characteristics of the gym mean that you'll be moving around and sweating a lot however, so there are inevitably some restrictions on what you can wear.

It's better not to bring the concept of embarrassment into a gym.

Ichinose had not noticed this reality, but it seems Amikura made her notice.

It was easy to see the expression of failure on Amikura's face at her blatant reaction.

As a person of the opposite sex, I understand that she may be concerned, but this is a gym.

I'd like her to remember that it's best not to worry about such things.

"We're here to sweat, right? Tell me all about it, I want to try everything."

I tried to get her to think about something else.

It looks like Ichinose made her resolve with these words.

"That's, that's right. Umm... What should we do then, Mako-chan?"

"Why do you ask me?"

It looks like she's still in a bit of a panic, so she asked Amikura for help.

The two whispered to each other again, then nodded at the same time.

“We’re still beginners, so maybe we should start with something familiar like a treadmill?”

“I’m fine with that, of course.”

The two got on their treadmills and put them on the mode they wanted.

The maker and such are different, but I’ve been using these since I was a child, so there’s nothing to be confused about for me.

It’s a necessary exercise machine for in-doors training.

Ichinose and Amikura had mostly the same settings, so I matched mine with theirs.

“It’s your first time in a gym, isn’t it? Don’t force yourself, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Amikura said so in a caring manner, but I told her that it’s okay with a light wave of my hand.

Then, we started quietly training on treadmills for a while.

Ichinose couldn’t get over her nerves and embarrassment at first, but she seems to have forgotten it over time, and after 30 minutes she was completely normal.



After we used the treadmills for 30 minutes, Ichinose and I looked at each other when the treadmills stopped.

“Phew... I’m so tired.”

She’s already said that she’s not good at exercise, but she seems to be even more exhausted than Amikura and deeply sighed while stretching her shoulders.

“I’m gonna get some water.”

After saying so, Ichinose asked us for permission and left.

I do remember seeing a machine for water bottles in the locker room.

Amikura and I were left alone on the spot, so I decided to chat with her a little.

“I’ve reached your level after only a little time, huh.”

“Of course. You had the same program as us, but you don’t seem tired at all.”

“Boys are stronger than girls on the physical level, so.”

“I see. I’m still surprised, though. I had imagined that we might see each other in Keyaki Mall, but I didn’t think we’d meet here in the morning.”

It looks like Amikura was surprised by our meeting here as well.

“So? Did you get anything from Honami-chan?”

“Nothing yet. We came to the gym right after meeting up, then ran into you.”

“I see. She looks like she’s having a lot of fun, though.”

Amikura happily said so while wiping her sweat with a towel.

“I guess friends can notice that about each other.”

“Of course. She always smiles anyway, but it’s like she’s having an explosion of smiles today.”

Now that we are alone after Ichinose has left, in order to fulfill my promise to Watanabe, I’ll try to pull out some information here.

“It’s about to be christmas already, huh?”

“Yep. You’re gonna spend it with Karuizawa-san, right?”

She asked me first before I could ask her the details.

“Hm? Well, I guess so.”

“Umm... This is going to be sudden, but what do you intend on doing with Honami-chan?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you know about her feelings, right? Don’t you?”

Perhaps hesitating to express this so openly, Amikura said so in an evasive way.

“What do you think I should do?”

“Huh? You’re asking me!?”

“I thought you had something in mind, since you’re the one who asked first.”

She wiped away the sweat from her neck with a worried expression.

“I... As her friend, what I want most is to see Honami-chan smile. But you’re with Karuizawa-san right now. I think it would be wrong to go as far as separating with her. The best thing would be for Honami-chan to love someone else and become happy with him.”

She reached to such a conclusion while thinking in her own way about what would be ideal.

It's true that it's troubling for Ichinose to show feelings of affection towards me right now.

So if she turns those feelings towards an unrelated third party, things would instantly be solved.

"You're right. It's not like I know a lot of other boys, but Watanabe is easy to approach, and it seems like he would get along well with Ichinose."

Going along with Amikura, I put out Watanabe's name here to see what happens.

Depending on her reaction here, I may be able to tell what Amikura's impression of Watanabe is.

Amikura appreciates Watanabe enough to go shopping with him on her day off.

"Watanabe-kun, right? From my class?"

"Yeah. We stayed in the same room during the school trip, so I had a lot of chances to talk with him. Wouldn't he be a good fit for Ichinose?"

"Hmm, I guess so."

It looks like she had to think a little.

It's ambiguous whether or not she thinks favourably towards him.

"Personally, I think Honami-chan could go for someone a little better."

"I see. You're saying Watanabe is out of Ichinose's league."

"I don't mean to say anything bad about Watanabe-kun though, okay? I just think he's a normal guy."

"I see. By the way, what about you?"

She's being unclear, so I decided to quickly step into her territory. Ichinose might come back if we take too long here.

“Me?”

“You seem to know a lot about romance.”

“No way. It’s always been one-sided for me.”

“Wow. So there is someone you like?”

“Well, yeah. I am a high schooler, after all.”

Who is that? That’s what I’d like to learn the most.

“I’ve had a crush on someone for 5 years now. When am I going to move onto someone else, I wonder?”

She muttered as if talking to herself.

5 years.

In other words, it’s a love that has been continuing since before she entered this school.

It seems that there is no need to press this any further, but I don’t know if this is good news or bad news for Watanabe.

Perhaps I could say that it’s a good thing his rival isn’t in this school, but...

I wanted to learn what type of person he was, at least, but Ichinose returned from getting water.

We can’t let Ichinose learn that we have been talking about her feelings, so Amikura quickly took some distance from me.

“Sorry I kept you waiting.”

“No, it’s okay. All good?”

It won’t help me if I keep pushing Amikura now.

I'll ask Ichinose about it again later if I ever get the chance to.

Part 2

I continued experiencing the gym with Ichinose and Amikura for another hour after that.

Just before we were about to finish, Amikura intentionally said that she would remain here for a while and that Ichinose and I should meet her at the reception desk after changing our clothes.

In the meantime, I received a pamphlet from the gym to consider officially joining.

It's a pain to have to spend a few more thousand points each month, but it's not a bad idea to sweat it out once in a while.

Since I haven't done much voluntary exercise here for the past two years, I've confirmed again that my abilities have deteriorated to an extent that is incomparable to when I had just enrolled.

I've reached the conclusion that I need to improve them a certain amount.

Ichinose and I changed clothes and left the gym, and returned to the mall.

"You took a pamphlet?"

"I'm seriously considering joining the gym."

"I see... I guess we can see each other more often then."

"Yeah."

"I see..."

"What are we going to do now?"

Her routine shouldn't end with just the gym, so I asked about what was ahead of us.

“I visit the bookstore a lot. I also go to the general store. I want to rest a bit today though, as I’m more tired than usual. Should we sit for a moment on a bench?”

Even if it’s the same training, you will expend more physical power when your environment changes.

It’s important to take a rest when you need to instead of forcing yourself to stick to your routine.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to a cafe?”

“Mhm. I mean, I think we’d stand out too much, and——”

It looks like she was being considerate of me.

“Thank you for thinking about me, but I don’t mind. We can go to a cafe if you want.”

“Really? If it’s okay with you, I’m fine with it too.”

In fact, it would seem more suspicious to clumsily try and avoid being seen.

Two people having tea or something in a cafe is a regular everyday scene, even if they are the opposite genders.

It just makes it feel special when you put too much thought into things.

We went to the cafe, urging each other to be mindful as usual.

As a matter of consideration, we chose the cafe on the second floor, instead of the more crowded cafe on the first floor.

We each got a drink and sat around a table.

“Is it okay if I ask you something, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Ask me something? Of course.”

“Does the reason you invited me here today have anything to do with me resigning from the Student Council?”

She asked with some restraint, but it seems that Ichinose was almost sure about this.

I suppose it was easy to infer when I suddenly invited her here on a weekend.

“It would be a lie to say that has nothing to do with it.”

“Yeah. Thanks for replying honestly.”

She’s averting her gaze as usual, but she smiled a little after saying so.

“I was surprised about you resigning too. I thought that you had a good chance of winning in the election against Horikita.”

One has to consider Ichinose’s character, abilities, and the fact that she has been contributing to the Student Council from early on in year-one.

Horikita on the other hand joined the Student Council later than Ichinose, but considering the fact that her brother was the Student Council President, and the fact that she has momentum in the B Class, they would be evenly split.

“Who would you have supported if there was an election? What... What a stupid question, huh?”

Leaving aside likes or dislikes, Horikita is currently in the same class as me.

For the betterment of the class, here’s a big merit to someone from our class becoming the Student Council President.

“I personally had a flat way of thinking on it. I didn’t feel that it was necessary to support Horikita just because she’s in my class. If Nagumo had picked Horikita, I would have been fine with supporting you.”

This was just honesty, but Ichinose probably took it as flattery.

She looked happy, but also seemed to be feeling a little sorry.

“But... You couldn’t have won if you did that. I’m no match for Horikita-san.”

So Ichinose didn’t feel like she could beat Horikita, even before actually fighting her.

However, rather than a difference of ability, that is a loss on the psychological side of things.

“I’m glad that I resigned, since things ended without me embarrassing you.”

“We can’t know how the match would have turned out.”

“That makes me very happy to hear. Thank you.”

“You had already decided to resign from the Student Council before that though, right?”

“Mhm.”

“Is it because of what happened on the school trip? If so——”

“It’s not.”

She interrupted me and firmly denied it.

She’s almost bending the paper cup in her hand.

“I was already thinking about it before that. That I wasn’t fit for the Student Council. I have no real abilities, I’m not popular, and most of all—— I have a past that can’t be erased.”

Ichinose’s face looked just like it did back on the school trip for just a moment, but she didn’t start crying this time.

It looks like she doesn’t want to continue whining.

“But, you know... It’s not like I gave up on everything. There are people in my class who worry that I’ve given up on rising to A Class, but that’s wrong.”

“So you’re going to continue aiming for A Class?”

“If you’re not brave enough to take the first step, I can lend you a hand. That’s what you said to me. After hearing that, I made up my mind that night on the school trip.”

Ichinose then looked at me, and laughed.

“I can still fight. But, I didn’t want to fight two fights at a time. I could have chosen to continue remaining in the Student Council, but I thought that would just cause me unnecessary worry.”

So that’s the reason she reached the point of resigning from the Student Council.

“Ah... But I guess the school trip may be the cause of me quitting the Student Council after all, then.”

“Looks like it.”

Laughing after exchanging a light joke, Ichinose closed her eyes.

“Quitting the Student Council, and what I have been thinking until then. Next week, I’m going to tell my classmates everything that I’ve told you. I don’t want anyone to misunderstand me.”

“That’s good.”

If there are misunderstandings among her allies, it will become a hindrance to their confrontation against the Ryuuen’s Class.

I can accept that everything she’s told me here are her true thoughts.

It’s a great strength that she was able to self-digest over time from the stage up to the unstable school trip.

She lost her role in the Student Council, which was one of her weapons, but what she’s gained is even greater than that.

I think it’s safe to say that the situation I had feared is over, even if temporarily.

I think this will make up a good report for Kanzaki too.

"Oh, right. This is completely unrelated, but there's something I want to ask you. Is that okay?"

"Sure, what is it?"

I want to try and help Watanabe out here.

"Do you know what type of boy Amikura likes?"

"Huh?"

Ichinose froze up with the cup in her hand.

Her gaze which she had been averting up until now is completely glued to my eyes.

It's almost so much that I'm the one that wants to avert my gaze now.

"Why do you ask something like that?"

Her voice is the same.

She doesn't look angry.

But, something's strange.

She seems the same, but I feel that something has strangely changed.

"Well... There's not really any reason, I was just wondering."

"Just curious? You want to know the type of guy Mako-chan likes without any reason? That's definitely unlike you in any way you look at it."

That would normally be the end of it, but the mood keeps getting heavier and heavier.

Whether I like it or not, I'm having a hard time coming up with something to say.

But I can't openly hint at Watanabe's existence here.

"I thought about it when we were together during the school trip too, but Amikura is pretty cute, and she seems popular too."

"Mhm, I know Mako-chan is cute. So? What does that have to do with her type?"

"It... doesn't, I guess."

"Mhm. That's very unlike you, huh?"

She said the same thing again.

More importantly, it doesn't seem like she's going to look somewhere else.

"Well, I guess it isn't."

Where did the peaceful mood that was here up until now go to?

With the cup next to her mouth, Ichinose continued pressing with an unchanging expression.

"So why do you want to learn Mako-chan's type?"

"There's not really any specific——"

"Reason?"

"Well, I guess there has to be. I am asking, after all."

I stopped meeting eyes with her, and averted my gaze to a worker in the cafe.

Ah, I guess they just got an order, because they're making some kind of chocolate drink.

"Did you meet up with Mako-chan somewhere before me?"

Her pursuit continued, regardless of the fact that I averted my gaze.

“What do you mean?”

“Your eyes met in a strange way when we ran into each other at the gym today. Like you were talking with your eyes?”

When she’s this convinced, awkwardly denying it would only make the situation worse.

“So you noticed.”

“Of course I did. I mean, I’m... I’m always watching you, always thinking about you.”

Then, Ichinose’s gaze separated from me.

She must have noticed that she just said something embarrassing.

“This is my deduction, but... Mako-chan and everyone else in the class must be worried after I resigned from the Student Council. So they asked you for help, right? To see how I was doing?”

Ichinose proved that she has a firm grasp on the situation, as if proving that she has mentally recovered.

“Impressive. You’re correct.”

I almost want to clap, but I’ll refrain from that.

“But, I don’t get it. Why do you want to know the type of guy Mako-chan likes?”

She inferred that I was talking with her somewhere before, but it’s understandable that she can’t connect it to the reason I was asking about what type of the opposite sex she likes.

“What do you think?”

I’ll ask if she can make a guess.

Rather, this is the only method I have left to hide Watanabe's existence.

It would be best to come up with a suitable answer from Ichinose's own suspicions.

"It's not because you're curious about her or anything. Mhm, I would hate that, so I won't think about it."

She put it out as an option, but then erased it herself.

Still, it was a very bold thing to say, even if it's just the two of us.

She's still in love with me and has no intention of hiding it.

Or, was she not thinking about this that deeply?

I can't see what Ichinose's true intentions are through the thick fog.

"If it's something other than that... There's someone that likes Mako-chan, and he asked you for help. Mhm, that would make sense. Maybe you thought I would know the answer."

It's almost scary how on the mark she is.

"Basically, a boy that knows about my relationship with Mako-chan, and has contact with you. If he's in my class, that would be..."

"I understand. I'll be honest and confess."

I'm sorry, Watanabe.

Clumsily trying to trick this perceptive Ichinose won't work here.

She was about to say the name in the next second if I hadn't stopped her.

"There's a boy who likes Amikura, and he asked me to investigate for him. But, I can't tell you who he is. That's what I thought, but I guess it was a bit one-sided."

I am not saying that the act of indirectly exploring the likes of the opposite sex is a bad act.

From Amikura's standpoint however, it's a different issue whether this is a joyful thing for her or not.

"Sorry. Please forget about it."

"Don't worry about it. It's only natural that someone would want to know more about the person they like, and I know it's very difficult to ask them directly, no matter how brave you are. Mako-chan is a very nice girl. I honestly don't know the type she likes. I never asked her, so. But, from what I can tell, I don't think there's anyone in this school she likes."

The meaning hidden behind those words is that there is someone outside of this school.

This also connects with the talk I had with Amikura earlier.

"It looks like there was a student in the same class who she liked in middle school. I don't think they ever dated, but I think she's still not over him and hasn't liked anyone else."

This probably wasn't what Watanabe had in mind.

It may be a surprisingly high hurdle to keep thinking about a person of the opposite sex for a long period of time.

Yet, that doesn't mean Watanabe doesn't have a chance.

If he can build a good relationship with her now and in the coming year, he should still have a good chance.

"This is all I can tell you, but is it any useful?"

"It's enough. Thank you, Ichinose."

"Ayanokouji-kun, I see Watanabe-kun has come to rely on you a lot too."

"I never said it was Watanabe."

“Ah, right. Sorry, sorry.”

The biggest reason for my defeat is that I have too few social relations, rather than the fact that I mentioned his name in the morning.

Part 3

After that, we enjoyed Keyaki Mall for a while.

Rather than shopping as Ichinose said, we just looked around some stores aimlessly.

It was a half day of her really showing me her routine. When it was about time for lunch, we left Keyaki Mall together.

“It’s raining already?”

I won’t say that it’s raining heavily, but it looks like it’s been coming down for a while.

“Looks like it.”

We both had umbrellas with us, so we put them up and started walking.

“Sorry I made you keep me company today.”

“Oh, no. Now I know that there are people who really care about me.”

The whole reason I invited Ichinose here was to get information from her.

I would completely understand if she was angry.

“Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun.”

But she didn’t curse me, and rather expressed her gratitude.

“There’s no need for thanks. I should have been more upfront about it instead of going around and around.”

“Stop it. That’s the whole reason... that we were able to spend time together.”

Ichinose muttered so while blushing.

“Won’t Karuizawa-san get mad? You told her about today, didn’t you? I bet she didn’t like you spending time alone with another girl, no matter what the reason was.”

Ichinose is worrying about Kei, which is at odds with her own feelings.

Is she being sincere, or is this just courtesy?

“You may be right.”

Water splashed around as we walked over puddles on the way back home.

An unexpected silence.

Unlike the morning, the heavy feeling has lessened.

“Can I ask something? Did you confess to her? Or did she confess to you?”

She’s waiting for my answer.

I can’t give her the answer she wants.

“I confessed to her.”

“I see. You’re the one that liked her, huh... I’m so jealous.”

In the past, I would have never thought that I would have this kind of conversation with Ichinose.

Ichinose walking next to me, however, seems to have the composure to accept my answer.

Usually, this would mean that I’ve paid off my debt to Ichinose for her feelings.

This isn’t hubris, but looking at things calmly, it’s clear that Ichinose still has strong feelings towards me.

I wonder how her mental condition is right now.

Is she just bluffing? Or is she in a state of resignation?

I'm not sure which one it is.

Strangely, Ichinose's eyes seemed to have more sparkle in them right after asking about Kei.

"She didn't misunderstand anything, right?"

"It didn't go very smoothly. I explained everything properly, but she was still angry."

"I see. I can explain the circumstances to her, if you'd like."

"It's nothing for you to worry about. It's my responsibility for failing to explain things properly."

"But——"

Well, the cold war may continue for the time being.

Silence returned, and continued until the end.

We got onto an elevator that came down when we finally reached the dorms.

"Today was a lot of fun. Thanks, Ayanokouji-kun."

I got off after reaching the fourth floor, and she waved goodbye to me.

"See you later, Ichinose."

We waited for a few seconds while looking at each other until the doors closed.

After a few seconds, Ichinose was out of sight.

I went back to my room and contacted Kanzaki via a chat app to make a report.

I informed him that Ichinose has not given up hope of getting into A Class.

I finished typing that the reason she quit the Student Council was so she could focus more on the fight in the future, and that she would make her resignation known to the public tomorrow.

After my report, I received a message from Kanzaki asking if she really meant what she said.

As far as I could see, there was no falsehood in her words.

Most importantly, I was able to catch a glimpse of an unusual aggressiveness that I had never seen from Ichinose before.

It remains to be seen whether this will be a good or a bad thing, but I have a feeling that I will be seeing a different side of Ichinose than what I have seen in the past.

I told her that while I will watch over her, she should get more friends with whom she could express her opinions.

Perhaps a little relieved for the moment, Kanzaki sent me a message of deep gratitude.

“Huh...? No contact from Kei?”

I could have told her that it was over, but we’ll see each other in school tomorrow anyway.

It will be enough to make my explanation at that time.

So, I decided to leave things as they are and not contact her today.

Chapter 5

The Approaching Special Test

Intro

A few days after the matter with Kanzaki and the others and the Student Council came to an end.

The year-two students had been studying day after day for the upcoming Special Test.

This time, the students with lower academic ability were given heavier responsibilities, and it's certain that this has produced a big change from the previous written tests.

Most of the students went to the cafeteria as soon as lunch break started, but more than half of the students remained in the class and took out their lunch boxes or something from a convenience store.

In addition, a strange scene with tablets, books, notebooks and such on the table is all around.

“Uuuuh... So sleepy. I wanna sleep...”

I heard such a voice from a certain student.

“I wanna hang out, I wanna hang out, I wanna hang out, I wanna hang out...”

Another voice from a different student.

“Isn’t the corridor too loud? It’s ruining my focus~ Someone quiet them down~”

Some are even worrying about the outside noises.

More and more dissatisfied students are starting to talk about what they'd like to do instead of this.

It seems that many of the students were not getting enough sleep, and Sonoda was also one of them.

“I’m too sleepy~”

He held his head in his hands and shook it, desperately trying to get rid of his drowsiness.

“Let’s just work a little more. We’ll take a break after we finish here, so...!”

Mii-chan, guiding the study next to Sonoda, gave the others a soft talk of encouragement.

“You finished your work earlier already, didn’t you?”

“I feel suddenly motivated, or rather I’m going with the flow. I think I’m doing well.”

The couple combination of Ike and Shinohara studying together side by side. Shinohara seems to be doing a lot better than usual.

“I’ve been attending the study sessions every day for the past few days, right? I feel like I’m being made to pay for all the time I’ve been slacking off, but...”

Shinohara repeatedly yawned sleepily, but she seemed positive.

“I feel like I’ve learned some things.”

“Not me, not at all...”

“Well, let’s just keep at it.”

“So reliable. Now that’s my girlfriend!”

When Ike hugged Shinohara after shouting so, a textbook was smashed into the top of his head.

“After we’re all done.”

“Uuuh...”

“We can’t keep doing stupid things over and over again. Come on, focus on the problems.”

“You’re very motivated, huh, Shinohara-san?”

Seeing her up close, Yousuke called out to Shinohara.

“I’ve been nothing but a burden, but this Special Test is the best chance for me to make up for that, right? I have to contribute to the class a little, and I don’t want to get expelled.”

The reality is that if one does not improve their abilities, they will fall down in the rankings necessary for the class.

The fact that this will come back to haunt one in the event of an emergency is already proven by a previous case.

“You seem to be working hard too, Ike-kun. Don’t force yourself, though. There’s no point if you collapse before the real thing.”

“R-right.”

Yousuke praised him, and advised him to be more careful.

Such was their conversation.

It’s obvious, but students who are not motivated don’t want to waste their time studying.

However, it is necessary to be able to put in the effort. It doesn’t matter if it’s for your boyfriend or girlfriend.

One has to find a reason that suits them.

That is the shortcut to effort. Just like how Sudou’s driving force was Horikita.

There were a lot of students who had a hard time studying, but the whole class was able to come together in this way.

“Still, the corridor is so noisy.”

The students want to concentrate on their studies, but there are many people passing by in the corridor, or people talking and running around.

At a time when you need to concentrate, this noise is like an uninvited guest.

“I’m going to have a look. There’s a lot of students here who are being bothered, so.”

Even if I can’t stop the disturbance, I can at least find out what caused it.

If we know what’s going on, it will have a stabilizing effect on the restless students.

“Alright. Thank you.”

It would be best for me to go check the corridor, so that the students aren’t disturbed while studying.

Part 1

When I stepped into the corridor, students from Ichinose class were running with angry expressions.

Further, students from Ryuuuen class were also heading in the same direction.

As such, I quickly discovered the source of the noise.

A crowd of people in front of a certain classroom. Ishizaki and Albert were trying to kick it open.

“Come on out, Ichinose! Ryuuuen-san is here!”

Ishizaki shouted so to Ichinose inside the classroom, but Shibata, who was already in the hallway, stopped him.

“What the hell are you doing? We’re busy right now.”

“Busy? I don’t care. Make Ichinose come out here already.”

He tried to pull Shibata away from the entrance, but Shibata resisted. The one instructing Ishizaki is Ryuuuen, smiling behind him.

But it wouldn’t be good to openly beat him up.

It’s lunchtime with many people coming and going, and there are numerous surveillance cameras in the corridor, so the school will soon get wind of any problematic behaviour.

The students who saw Ryuuuen and the others’ conduct are probably sheltering Ichinose inside the class.

I thought the situation would stay the same for a while, but it quickly changed. The classroom’s door opened, and Ichinose showed herself.

She was accompanied by a few other girls at the same time, who seemed to be trying to stop her.

Further, Kanzaki, Hamaguchi and other chief students also showed up.

"Well, look at this. There she is. The stupid leader who quit the Student Council.

Ryuuken raised his voice with his usual attitude.

The new Student Council system was just revealed today.

So the fact that Ichinose resigned was not a surprise in itself, since everyone ended up knowing about it.

Publicly, the reason for Ichinose's resignation was to concentrate on her studies, but it doesn't matter to Ryuuken whether this is true or not.

He thought it would be a good idea to use this as a weakness, so he quickly came to shake her up.

It seems that he intentionally went for this timing.

He decided it would be more effective with other people around.

In fact, there were many students from other classes who heard the commotion and came to see what was going on.

Hashimoto from A Class, whose gaze clearly met mine, quickly blended in with other students.

"It's so loud here, huh?"

"Of course. She got into the Student Council early on and benefited from it. It's natural for the crowd to want to know why she can't even maintain that, right?"

"Mhm".

Ryuuken spoke to Ishizaki, who replied while crossing his arms.

"She said she will just concentrate on her schoolwork, though.."

With a slightly troubled expression on her face, Ichinose reiterated the reason she left the Student Council.

In the first place, like I said before, Ryuuen won't care about any answer she will give.

"You were really kicked out, right? They must have told you that you're too incompetent to serve in the Student Council."

"If it seems like that, then maybe it is."

Ichinose, realizing that it's pointless to try and reply seriously, went along with Ryuuen's words.

"Heh. Rather, are your past sins being called into question now? It would be bad for the Student Council President to be a cunning little shoplifter. I understand why you wanted to run away."

The verbal pressure from Ryuuen, who had no intention to settle this with an agreement, continued.

Ichinose may have some thoughts about the word shoplifter, but this subject isn't anything new for Ichinose these days.

"I suppose it doesn't matter what I say, but it's not good to trouble people like this."

"That ain't it. Everyone wants to know, right? The real reason you quit the Student Council."

He keeps trying to provoke her to confess.

Not able to quietly sit idly as a fellow student, Kanzaki interrupted the two.

"That's enough, Ryuuen. The Student Council itself also notified us of the reason she resigned."

"I don't care about their lies. It's obviously suspicious to quit at a time like this. If she loses in the next Special Test to me, she'll finally be falling off a cliff."

Ryuuuen uttered so, not even thinking about the possibility he might lose to her.

The Ichinose Class is on a downward trend right now, and they have no impetus to rise up.

If the point difference between them and A Class is doubled, they will be in an even more hopeless situation.

The students in Ichinose Class should be noticing this dangerous reality too by now.

"It must be annoying to take all these tests, I recommend your class just withdraw."

"Can you stop joking around now? We have no intention of giving up on A Class, and we're making every effort to win the next Special Test."

"Effort, huh? Indeed, your good point is that you guys are stupidly serious. I understand why you still have some hope in a Special Test like this, where you can win if you simply match your textbooks in the test."

The Ichinose Class will never withdraw because of something like this, even if they are further shaken up.

From what Kanzaki and the others are saying, numerous sabotage efforts against their studies have already begun.

Ichinose has remained silent since Kanzaki's interruption.

I thought maybe she had nothing to say back, but her expression wasn't clouded in the least.

"Ryuuuen-kun. Are you done now?"

With an unchanging attitude, Ichinose showed a smile while soothing the tense Kanzaki.

"You're free to say whatever you want to me, but I want you to stop hindering the students who are trying their best. Not to mention the people going to eat lunch now."

She warned Ryuuen and the others who were blocking the corridor.

Is this a simple bluff?

It was a fine line, but the corners of Ryuuen's mouth turned up slightly, as if he had decided that he had been effective in increasing the interest and suspicion of those around him about Ichinose leaving the Student Council.

"It looks like you're hindering them, and I'm hungry too. Let's pull out."

It lasted only a few minutes, but it's normal that things got loud after Ryuuen showed up.

Even a bad reputation is useful.

Everyone among year-two knows how strong Ryuuen is.

With Ryuuen no longer there, most of the students quickly dispersed.

Hashimoto's figure was gone too, and things became calm again.

With that, students in the Horikita class should also be able to eat their lunches and study.

"Ah. Ayanokoji-kun!"

Noticing me after the crowd left, Ichinose approached me with a smile.

"Sorry, all that noise was because of me, wasn't it?"

"It's not your fault. It was just Ryuuen who caused the commotion. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay. It was actually a rather good thing for us."

"That blatant provocation?"

"Ryuuen will keep trying to hinder us until the Special Test starts. For us, that's more of an advantage than a disadvantage."

She doesn't mind her studies being disturbed.

In fact, it looks like she wants them to be disturbed.

"Ichinose, it's about time to——"

While looking at the situation, Kanzaki approached with a look that said he didn't want to talk for long.

I'm sure they're discussing the Special Test and studying for it during this lunch break, just like the Horikita Class.

I could see that leeway in Kanzaki's expression.

"See you later, Ayanokoji-kun."

Saying so, Ichinose calmly returned to her classroom.

"...See me later?"

I was a little curious about those words, but first, I should return to the classroom to explain the situation to Horikita.

Part 2

After witnessing the commotion, Hashimoto quickly left the corridor and headed for the school cafeteria.

Then, he joined a group of 3 who had already arrived and were having their lunch.

“Hey, *Hime-san*⁵. Is it really okay for us to do nothing? I don’t think it’s a great tactic to face them head on like this.”

[⁵TL Note 5 : *Hime* means princess in japanese. That’s how Hashimoto addresses Sakayanagi.]

“You seem very worried about B Class, Hashimoto-kun. You should just leave them be.”

Sakayanagi put down the chopsticks in her hands and turned her gaze towards Hashimoto.

“I know they used to be D Class, but they’re up to B Class now. The difference between them and A Class isn’t laughably large any more either. If we lose now, the gap will be less than 200 points. Things can turn around after one big Special Test.”

Sakayanagi doesn’t seem to care, but Kanzaki sitting in front of her is different.

If you ask which, Hashimoto’s way of thinking is easier to understand and agree with.

“What does that have to do with what you just said?”

“I saw an example. Ryuuuen is using new methods to corner the Ichinose Class.”

“New methods? It doesn’t seem like that to me. He’s still doing the same things, just in different ways.”

“Still. I’m honestly a little envious.”

Hashimoto expressed his true feelings with some criticism towards Sakayanagi mixed in.

Facing these true feelings, Sakayanagi replied with a smile without any feelings of displeasure.

“In a written Special Test like this, we are extremely limited in what we can do. There is very little we can do externally, all we can do is sit at our desks, stare at our textbooks and face ourselves.”

“I know that, but it’s not like there’s nothing we can do.”

“There are a lot of students in our class who are not bothered by studying, who work on their own initiative or in their own teams. I don’t think there is anything I have to tell them, do you? Trying to cram more than you can handle is counterproductive.”

Hashimoto bit his lip a little and replied with an attitude of disagreement.

“It seems you’re dissatisfied with doing nothing. Should we observe everyone 24/7 and exert pressure on them like Ryuuen-kun and hinder our opponents too? I don’t think that would be efficient.”

Hashimoto let out a sigh and objected to Sakayanagi.

“It may not be efficient, yes, and I know that the probability of you adopting this tactic is low, considering that it would be a rehash of Ryuuen’s. Isn’t it much better than doing nothing, though? It’s annoying to be disturbed while studying when you need to focus.”

Hashimoto expressed that imitating Ryueen’s strategy is also one of the choices they have.

“It may make some sense on the surface, but even Ichinose would just shut herself in the dormitory if she is bothered by the interference, right? Is there a point in forcing her to change the location she is studying in?”

Kamuro asked so with half-curiosity as she tore off a piece of bread.

"It is true that you can't always achieve your full potential by studying in your room the whole time. Especially for those who are not accustomed to studying, it is easier to learn in a place where there is contact with the outside world."

"So that's why Ichinose and the others continue to study in places where they know they may be disturbed."

Kamuro nodded with agreement while putting jam on a piece of bread.

"You're forgetting the most crucial point however, Hashimoto-kun."

"The most crucial point?"

"It takes a lot of manpower to conduct an act of sabotage. Further, a middling sabotage won't make a good public impression. Can you really consider it harmless if our reputation as A Class worsens after having to interfere with our opponent's studies in order to win?"

"...That's..."

Indeed, that would be far from how the A Class, the champion, would conduct themselves.

"Besides, we'll lose a lot of learning time with that strategy. We won't be able to reduce the other class' score to zero, and we'll also decrease the score we can get. We could hire a year-one or year-three and ask them to interfere, but there's no proof they'll do a job worth the price, and we'll need people to monitor their work. It's not going to be that big of a big class point fluctuation this time, so it would be inefficient."

Continuously refused, Hashimoto kept thinking about what they could do.

"Then, it's okay if I move personally, right?"

"I wouldn't recommend it. His approach is a strategy that is perfectly suited for the expression 'putting the cart before the horse'.."

He's continuing his ignorant efforts of sabotage and reducing the number of people and time available for studying.

"And it's the same for one person or ten people. If your harassment of the other class becomes known, it is not only your fault, but it degrades the A Class too. Am I wrong?"

How many people will believe Hashimoto when he claims that he was doing things by himself?

If it's effective, then people will think Sakayanagi was the one giving the order behind the scenes.

"So you're saying that Ryuuuen is engaged in a useless strategy too?"

"Not exactly. Even if it's a useless strategy for us, it's very significant for Ryuuuen's class to adopt a strategy of sabotage, unlike us. They are one of the few classes in year-two that have a low motivation to learn and very few people who have good studying skills. Even if they were to study hard at their desks, they would not be able to match the academic ability of Ichinose-san's class. That's precisely why they're trying to make their opponent fall down, instead of making themselves grow."

Sakayanagi logically explained so to Hashimoto who was insisting that something should be done.

"So you're saying we can win like this, right?"

"If things go in order, we will win this Special Test. However, with the Special Test's rules, the initiative is on the opponent's side. Lower ranked classes can fight against higher ranked classes in this Special Test, but the lower ranked classes can get the most points. With this kind of battle, there is no definitive proof of how things will go."

Even if the Sakayanagi Class gets a perfect score, it cannot match a perfect score from Horikita's class under the current rules.

"The possibility is low, but defeat would be fine too. If Horikita-san's class goes above us and wins, it will be a chance for us to gather intelligence."

“...Gather intelligence?”

“There may be a possibility of students with talent appearing among the low level students. If we can determine this, we can improve the accuracy of the order of priority for elimination. In that sense, Ryuu-en-kun’s strategy is a foolish one for not taking that into account.”

The results of the Special Test will be announced to the opposing class in detail.

If a student shows remarkable success, they will inevitably catch the others’ attention.

“You still seem dissatisfied.”

Kitou, who had been silent up until now, threw a strongly worded remark at Hashimoto.

“No, I get what you’re saying. But... I’m wary of B Class. It’s good to be cautious of them catching up to us, isn’t it?”

Hashimoto did not say any more, but the first name on the list must be Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.

Further, he cannot ignore the potential of Kouenji and other top class students.

“If we only lose this Special Test, then that’s fine. The final tests however will be a showdown with Ryuu-en. The fluctuation in class points will be greater than ever, so we can make sure not to lose then, right?”

“You need a proper strategy for the final tests. If there aren’t any special rules that give the initiative to certain classes like in this Special Test, then I will never lose. Of course, I’m sure Ryuu-en-kun would give the same reply as well.”

Neither side would doubt their own victory.

By the end of this year however, one side will certainly lose their lead, and it will have a great effect on the fight for A Class.

“Sorry, I think I got a bit ahead of myself. I'll cool down a bit.”

Replying so, Hashimoto left after apologizing to Sakayanagi.

He then took off his indoors slippers and put on his shoes, walked out to the front door and headed towards the dorms.

A male student then approached Hashimoto.

They lined up side by side without greetings and began walking.

“Looks like you had an argument.”

The boy who said so with amusement had a grasp on the situation after watching through the cafeteria's window.

“I'm a realist, but also an Idealist.”

“You seem to be contradicting yourself, so what do you mean by that?”

“A realist is a realist. Normally, you wouldn't think that Sakayanagi would fall behind Ryuuuen. She will use any means necessary to gain victory. She would show her dignity as a student in the A Class.”

“Yes. I'm sure most people think the same way.”

“But, it's different in the world of mangas, novels or TV series, right?”

“So, are you saying Sakayanagi can lose?”

“It's a failure as a story for the A Class to run solo like this. It would be more exciting for it to be defeated in the final tests. A 3-way struggle with the Ryuuuen and Horikita class in year-three. Finally, one of them would beat the others and win the seat of Class A in the ending...”

For the students in A Class, a scenario like that is hard to believe.

“I see, you really are an Idealist.”

“Horikita and Ryuuen. We have to accept that one of them may cause a turn-around somehow.”

“It’s very like you to think that way, Hashimoto.”

Fortunately, Hashimoto is in a position to have a certain grasp on the information about A Class.

“But, I have to be cautious not just of the ones behind us, but also the ones in front of us, and the ones by our sides. I can’t just trust you so easily either, Kaneda.”

Kaneda, ominously laughing after hearing his name, put his finger on the rim of his glasses.

“It’s only natural that you would be suspicious of Ryuuen’s puppet. You have to keep being this way. Even I mess up my calculations sometimes.”

“I am for me. You are for you, and we utilize each other. This is the best kind of relationship.”

Kaneda showed an image from his phone to Hashimoto, and erased all the words from the screen when Hashimoto nodded after burning the text into his eyes.

Then, Kaneda naturally separated from his side.

“Do I go with Sakayanagi, or do I go with Ryuuen? Even Horikita’s class, perhaps. It’s about time to decide.”

Preparing for the end of this year and the third year ahead of it.

Hashimoto continued thinking about what he can do for himself.

Part 3

After school, the day after the opponents Ryuuuen and Ichinose had direct contact and some trouble.

I was invited to a study meeting by Horikita as usual, but I naturally declined.

Kei has been continuing to be silent while keeping her eye on me since the morning, and I don't have any real plans after this either.

That's why I can put aside some time to solve a troublesome problem.

The word "shoplifter" has been flying all around recently, but there's a matter that can be called the origin of this.

Why is Kiryuuin Fuuka being framed as a shoplifter?

From seeing her words and conduct, I can see why she said she doesn't even have one friend.

Of course, I'm sure some people from all of the year-threes and not just her own class do hate her.

However, one normally would not reach the idea of framing her for a crime just for this reason.

If it was during year-one when Kiryuuin had been recognized as an obstacle in the fight with A Class, it may have been considered a strategy without regard to right or wrong, but now that the match is determined, is there a point in going to the trouble of taking such a risk?

The highest possibility in the current situation is that this is an indirect form of harassment towards her by Nagumo.

A strategy by Nagumo to harass Kiryuuin into taking the contest seriously.

However, from how she broke into the Student Council meeting the other day, I can't say that this is definitely the case.

That would have been a good time to reveal what he had done and tell her to take the contest seriously.

That must be precisely why Kiryuuin is having trouble coming to a definitive conclusion.

There are a few choices I can take while moving with the investigation.

One is to confront Nagumo, the leading candidate.

The other is to listen to what Yamanaka, who put the goods into Kiryuuin's bag, has to say.

The last one is to ask for information from a reliable year-three.

Yet, the year-threes have limited informational exchange among each other even at the best of times.

The only people with contact details would be former Student Council members like Nagumo or Kiriyama.

In which case, I have no choice but to walk around and gather information by foot.

Of course, I have no intention of letting Nagumo make me waste my time.

I need someone who would have the most useful information for me, and who would not have any connections to the people who framed Kiryuuin.

I found a year-three student who is acting alone and gathered information.

From the information I gathered, I learned that the person I was looking for had gone to the gymnasium, and I immediately headed there.

I could not spot her on the way however, and arrived at the gymnasium.

It seems that the club activities had already started, and Sudou from my class was carefully practicing the basics while shouting louder than anyone else.

“She’s not here.”

As the club members began gathering in the gymnasium, I decided to withdraw in order to not disturb them.

I asked the students coming to the gymnasium, but I couldn’t gain any new information.

So I could not meet her after all, but when I returned to the entrance and checked for her shoes, I saw that she was still inside the school.

She had disappeared, but she was still here.

It’s almost 5 p.m., so there aren’t many students left in the school other than those participating in club activities.

There is a little risk of standing out here, but I decided to head for the area where the year-three classrooms are.

I can’t find her. I looked over all four classes, but she was nowhere to be seen.

It may be wiser to stay at the entrance and wait quietly here.

As I was beginning to think so, I happened to hear that the missing person had gone to the staff room.

I arrived at the staff room, and saw the person I was looking for was talking with a teacher from the corridor.

There are many teachers coming and going after school, so I decided to wait some distance away so as to not get noticed.

After about 10 minutes passed, the student finally left the staff room.

She always has a bright expression, but she began walking looking down with a gloomy expression today.

She went by me without noticing me watching over the staff room.

After hesitating a little after missing my chance to call out to her, I decided to follow her from a distance.

I thought that I should call out to her as she was putting on her shoes in the entrance.

However, that person did not head for the entrance immediately, but headed up the stairs towards the rooftop.

But we aren't allowed to go onto the roof, so she must be here to meet someone.

As I was thinking about that, she stopped for a moment and I heard something like a crying sound.

It seems that this place wasn't meant to meet someone, but to make sure that no one could see her.

The school building was strangely quiet.

She tried to hold back, but the sound of crying strangely stood out.

If someone who didn't know what was going on came here, they might think that I made her cry.

I could have walked away without being noticed, but I had business to conduct here.

“Excuse me.”

I tried to speak as quietly as possible, so as to not surprise her.

She must have been surprised however, as she probably did not think there was anyone near her.

“!? H-huh? Ayanokoji-kun!?”

“Sorry I started you.”

“Sorry, I'm sorry. Please wait a bit!”

“There’s nothing to apologize for...”

She was still in shock, but she slowly put her hands on her face and wiped away the tears running down her cheeks.



“I can leave if this is a bad time.”

“I-I’m fine. I’m fine, so!”

She held my sleeve to stop me.

I didn’t expect that kind of behaviour.

Perhaps she was instinctually aware of the risk that I might tell people she was crying if she lets me leave.

A few quiet minutes passed until Asahina gathered her composure.

“...Mhm. I’m okay.”

Asahina embarrassedly muttered after coughing once.

“Sorry.”

“Another apology? It’s my fault for surprising you, so.”

“That’s another issue. I didn’t want you to see me like that.”

I didn’t want to awkwardly barge into an unrelated subject, so I won’t ask why she was crying.

It seems that this had the opposite effect however, and Asahina began telling me the reason she was crying herself.

“This morning, Suchi... No, Honoka left the school. Suchi Honoka from C Class.”

“An expulsion at this time of the year? It’s not a penalty from a Special Test, right? Did she drop out herself?”

There shouldn’t be any Special Tests being conducted for the year-threes at this time.

However, Asahina shook her head to tell me she didn’t drop out herself.

“Apparently, it’s because she committed a serious violation. So it’s punishment for breaking the rules. I went and talked to the teachers to learn the details, but they didn’t tell me anything.”

So that’s why she was going to the staff room.

For Asahina from A Class, it doesn’t matter if someone from C Class is expelled.

However, it’s obvious that this person was a friend of hers that surpassed class lines.

“Did you try asking the person in question?”

“Honoka was expelled yesterday, so she wasn’t in the dorm this morning. I couldn’t get in touch with her either... I’ve been asking the kids from C Class, but no one knew anything. I don’t think people are that interested in some kid that’s already left.”

Either no one knows about the reasoning behind Suchi’s expulsion, or they’re hiding it.

Horikita Manabu’s generation, Nagumo’s generation, Horikita’s generation, or year-ones like Nanase or Amasawa.

I only know about four generations at this school, but it’s obvious that there’ve been a lot of expulsions in Nagumo’s generation.

Still, it is rare for an expulsion to happen that is not related to a Special Test.

The fact that the school is hiding the details may mean this is such a serious violation that it would have a bad effect on the school if it was known.

“All I can do is imagine, and I don’t know what the violation is. But, I think I know the reason. Students in B Class or below are using any means they can every day to catch up to A Class. I’m sure she did something she shouldn’t have done.”

“Isn’t it Nagumo-senpai who holds all authority in your generation?”

If you're approved by Nagumo, you're in A Class, if not, you're eliminated.

That's the way it's been for the year-threes, from what I can see.

However, Asahina's gloomy expression tells me that there's something else at play here.

"Is there a different, secret path for rising up to A Class?"

"I don't know if I would call it a secret path... Umm, Ayanokoji-kun, how's your relationship with Miyabi?"

"Our relationship? It's never been good, and that hasn't changed now either."

"Students from other years don't know about this, so..."

"Ah, I see. I won't tell anyone about what we talked about here."

As I said so to make her feel at ease, Asahina began telling me the circumstances of the year-threes.

I'm sure there's a lot she'd like to get off her chest after her friend was expelled.

"Around this time last year, it was said that victory was certain for A Class after Miyabi became the Student Council President, and hope disappeared from B Class and below. That's precisely why everyone was so happy when he officially vowed that anyone could get into A Class if they were talented enough."

Things aren't that easy, of course.

Students who can transfer classes with class points are very rare in this system.

Asahina interrupted her explanation to sigh, and slightly shook her body.

"Honoka wanted to do something to try and graduate in A Class with me too."

So she was expelled before even graduating, not achieving her dream.

"Did Nagumo-senpai say anything about Suchi-senpai's expulsion?"

"Nothing. Rather, he didn't even care. He probably only noticed it after being informed by a teacher."

He wouldn't care about some small-fry disappearing from the school.

I like that about Nagumo.

"If you'd like, should we go somewhere else? It's a bit cold here."

As the adrenaline wore off from her body, she finally started to feel the cold.

Unlike a classroom or the staffroom where there is heating, it feels cold in the corridor.

The night is close as well, so the temperature has begun going down.

There's a lot I'd like to ask her as well, so we decided to move to Keyaki Mall, even if it's a little far away from here.

Part 4

Asahina drank her warm tea while holding the cup with both hands.

“So, let’s continue our talk. So, dissatisfaction and opposition to Nagumo-senpai is increasing by the day, right?”

“Mhm. Concretely, I don’t know how many people there are. Such information doesn’t come up to A Class. I got along well with Honoka, so it’s just that she told me a little about it. You don’t know about the contract Nagumo made with the year-three students, right?”

“I thought he was using some method to bind the grade together, but I don’t know anything concrete.”

“Let’s start from that point, then.”

Saying so, Asahina told me about the details of the contract while making sure no one was listening in on us.

For the first time, the contract between Nagumo and the year-threes is being revealed to me.

- To transfer 75% of the private points earned each month personally to Nagumo.
- Listening to Nagumo Miyabi’s instructions and not engaging in hostile behaviour.
- Those who have collected their own points and have been approved will be entitled to a ticket.
- The funds must be handed over before a defined day for each class.
- If you disobey Nagumo after gaining a ticket, your rights will be revoked.
- The students who observe the above five conditions will get the right to compete for the 20,000,000 ticket.

Then, one more thing.

"It looks like Miyabi intends on leaving some points and conducting a lottery at the end. I think there'll be two or three tickets, but the students who made the contract will be able to draw them."

So even if one has not contributed, they still have a chance of going to A Class until the end of the year.

A contract that Nagumo approached the lower ranked students when the positioning of his A Class was flawless.

As long as it's impossible to collect 20,000,000 points individually, private points will be collected from many others and converted into class transfer tickets.

The chance of graduating in A Class is almost 0 for the students below B Class, but with redistribution of wealth, this chance increases by a few percent.

Seeing as how some students like Kiriyama have actually gained that right, I can say that this is an effective method.

The 75% taxation is very high, but it's necessary for the proposition of giving a ticket to as many students as possible.

Further, this is also beneficial for Nagumo.

By preventing the others from handling such large amounts of money, he can prevent the seeds of rebellion from sprouting.

"So he forced that onto the classes below B Class."

"Mhm. Miyabi is the only one who really knows how many people have made the contract. But, I think most of the students have done so. Also, it's different from the contract, but we're also giving him 50% as A class."

Only those in A Class, who are guaranteed to win, can use their full amount of private points freely each month.

This is a natural right, but students in lower classes may feel dissatisfied.

Nagumo understands this, which is why he is able to adjust and control the situation.

In year-three, A Class has the sole lead.

Therefore, even if the tax rate is 50%, this amounts to more than the full 75% collected from the other three classes.

Nagumo, having so much power that he can even decide the results of Special Tests at will, is like an emperor in control of everything.

“I just happened to be in the same B Class as Miyabi. Miyabi worked hard to get up to A Class, and created this environment. I know that I should be too grateful to him to say things like this, but...”

She seemed a bit hesitant, but she pulled the heavy words up from her throat.

“Even if indirectly, Honoka was expelled because of the environment that Miyabi created. I can’t help but cry when I think about that...”

That must be the reason behind her crying inside the school building.

I don’t think that there is any point of contact between this Suchi and Kiryuuin, but the expression “indirectly” may help me out here too.

“Asahina-senpai, would you lend me your aid?”

“My aid? What do you mean?”

“What’s your relationship like with Yamanaka from year-three D Class?”

“Yamanaka-san? We chat now and then, but I wouldn’t say we’re good friends. So I don’t think I can help you out, but...”

I am rather pleased to hear that they aren’t good friends, actually.

“It would be more troubling if you had answered that you had a deep friendship. It’s more important that you objectively tell me about Yamanaka-senpai as a year-three.”

“Really?”

I took out my phone, and displayed Yamanaka Ikuko’s OAA.

She’s a typical D Class student with below average abilities.

Nothing about her sticks out.

“Does she have a wide social circle?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. I think she gets along with the girls from her class, but she’s not really the popular type that everyone knows.”

I don’t want to rely on Asahina’s opinion alone, but from what I heard, I think I can say that she has nothing to offer other than the abilities shown on the OAA.

“Let’s keep what I’m about to say off-record.”

“Interesting. I would say the same thing.”

“I guess so.”

I told Asahina about the matter of Kiryuuin being framed as a shoplifter.

She was surprised at first, but she quickly began comprehending the circumstances.

“I see. So that’s why you wanted to talk to me about the year-threes.”

“There wasn’t anyone else I could rely on.”

“That’s kind of nice to hear. Since I’m with Miyabi a lot, people are usually suspicious of me.”

Well, I can understand why one would think she is in collusion with Nagumo.

“From your point of view, what do you think about this matter?”

“Hmm... I haven’t talked much with Kiryuuin in these three years, so I don’t know much about her, but I think you’re right.”

“Yeah.”

“I won’t say that there wouldn’t be anyone with a grudge against her, but it’s a different thing to frame her as a shoplifter for revenge. Most importantly, they may get expelled if that was to be revealed, right?”

“It also quickly ended in failure after being noticed by Kiryuuin-senpai. If it’s reported to the school, it may indeed end in an expulsion.”

In other words, this entire affair is baffling from the very start.

“But, yeah. I think I understand a little.”

“You do?”

“Mhm. It was probably right after she was framed to be a shoplifter. On the way home, I saw Kiryuuin-san stomping on a boy after making him fall down.”

“She made him fall down and stomped on him?”

Kiryuuin is usually elegant, or rather calm. It’s hard to imagine that happening.



"He was trying to stop her from seeing Yamanaka-san. She insisted that he let her see Yamanaka, so I think that's why she got mad. She kept pressing him to tell her where she was."

I don't know why he was protecting Yamanaka, but my condolences to him.

That's going to be a frightening memory for him.

"By the way, who was it?"

"I think it was Ansai-kun from D Class."

A new name has come up.

Was he the one instructing Yamanaka, or did he want to protect his classmate? I can't tell yet.

"I want to talk with Yamanaka-senpai, maybe you could call for her?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. That wouldn't be too hard, but..."

"Please do so, then."

I should be talking directly with Yamanaka, who tried to frame Kiryuuin.

As Asahina-senpai contacted her, the message was quickly read by Yamanaka-senpai.

"It looks like she's in Keyaki Mall right now. Should I tell her you want to see her?"

I nodded, and she sent her the message.

"She's read it, but there's no reply yet. Wait a bit."

After looking at her phone for a while, a message came back.

"She says she can come here in 30 minutes if you can wait."

“It’s fine, I can wait.”

With that, it’s determined that Yamanaka-senpai will be coming here.

“Thanks.”

“I didn’t really do anything. I’m curious about this too.”

Since we had some time, I decided to ask Asahina-senpai about her school life, her special tests and such.

Part 5

There were only a few minutes left until the appointed time.

As I finished my drink, a lone male student approached.

“Asahina, is this guy Ayanokoji?”

“Huh? Tachibana-kun? It is, but..?”

“Excuse me.”

The student called Tachibana pulled a chair and sat down.

He then put his arms on the table, and began speaking while pitching forwards.

“What do you want with Yamanaka?”

Tachibana Kento.

He's a classmate of Yamanaka in year-three D Class.

I thought it might be Ansai coming up here, but it was another new face.

“Hey, how do you...”

“Yamanaka-senpai contacted you, huh? Did she ask you to check up on us?”

“Huh? I'm the one that should be asking questions, right?”

Perhaps it's because he's my senior, but he doesn't seem to be losing his bullish attitude.

I think he is above Ansai in terms of physique and mentality.

“It's easy to guess when she's sending others for her. It's about Kiryuuin-senpai.”

“What do you have to do with it?”

“I have no direct relation to her, but Kiryuuin-senpai asked me to find out the truth.”

“Are you playing detective? Go tell her that nothing has changed, then.”

“She was ordered by Nagumo to frame her for shoplifting, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Hey, Tachibana-kun, is that really true? I don’t think Miyabi would do something like that.”

“You don’t? Nagumo is the kind of guy that would be perfectly fine with doing something like that. Isn’t he using us like slaves?”

From what I can see, he isn’t a part of the faction that supports Nagumo.

I could even say that he is in the anti-Nagumo faction.

“We gotta obey even if we don’t like it, though. Just like Yamanaka did.”

Tachibana sighed and tilted his head slightly.

“If you get it, don’t bother Yamanaka again. Okay?”

“Sorry, but that’s not possible. Nagumo-senpai hasn’t confirmed what she said.”

“You can blame anyone you want, but the truth is the truth. We can’t disobey Nagumo.”

“I heard. It’s because you have a contract with Nagumo-senpai, right?”

Tachibana looked at Asahina with a look that said “you even told him about that?”

“You must get it, then.”

“There should have been a way for the classes to collect private points and redistribute them for class transfers themselves. What’s the reason for everyone obeying Nagumo’s instructions?”

“You don’t get it. Before he came to us with the contract, the D Class or C Class had almost no class points left. We couldn’t have gathered 20,000,000 points as a class in one year. The possibility of graduating in A Class was 0. If we make the contract, however, we can be allowed to win in the Special Tests. In other words, we can receive class points. Is there any choice but to say yes? Besides, if we ignored Nagumo’s contract, we would have to thoroughly fight against Nagumo. What would happen then? The class points we had left would be taken away, and we would continue receiving 0 private points monthly.”

Nagumo didn’t miss his chance to make use of the strength and advantages of his own class.

“In addition to a stable school life, if Nagumo recognized me, I would be given the chance to graduate in A Class. Only an idiot like Kiryuuin could refuse that.”

By being under Nagumo’s control, one can maintain a certain amount of class points.

Even if you have to give up 75%, you will always have some left over each month.

Once the contract is signed, it’s difficult to break it due to its content.

If one or two people revolt, they will be found out by someone snitching on them.

“So even if Nagumo embezzles a large amount of money, no one is able to complain.”

“That’s... It’s not like we’re not dissatisfied. We definitely can’t complain, though. It’s okay if you’re a talented person, but for someone like me who has to rely on someone else to get into A Class, the lottery is the last thing we have left.”

Even if you are exploited for private points until graduation, you can still win the lottery.

Even if there is only one ticket, I suppose a one in a hundred chance isn't so bad.

"You said one of the instructions was to pin the crime of theft on Kiryuuin-senpai."

Tachibana looked down for a moment, then he nodded quietly.

"I'm one of his intermediaries. He said that he would value me if I was able to frame Kiryuuin for shoplifting."

"I don't really get what you mean by intermediary. The more people involved, the more of a risk there is of the secret being leaked. Besides, if a large number of people challenge a single event, each person's contributions will naturally be dispersed."

It would be less time-consuming and risky for Nagumo to approach a girl like Yamanaka directly.

Is there really a need to pass things on from Nagumo to Tachibana, and to Yamanaka from Tachibana?

This point is stuck in my mind and won't fall into place.

Besides, I can't trust everything that this Tachibana is telling us.

He looks like he's telling the truth, but he's still speaking too honestly.

"You were given hush money by Student President Council Nagumo, right?"

"Of, of course. The only thing is, I can't be blamed for naming names if I'm in trouble. Yamanaka and I both... don't really have a sense of responsibility, if I say so myself."

He's saying that he quickly confessed after being pressed.

He was very confident when he showed up here, but I can take a peek into his weak attitude here.

“Tachibana-senpai. You may not be the real criminal. But, you will be treated as such by the school if this gets out. Are you prepared for that?”

“Huh? Nagumo would never let the public know about this.”

“Maybe not, but Kiryuuin-senpai is furious. You must have noticed in these three years that there’s no stopping her if she wants to confront someone, right?”

“That’s... Ansai was pretty frightened too...”

“You got instructions from Student Council President Nagumo. Then, you chose Yamanaka-senpai as a girl who could get close to Kiryuuin-senpai and recruited her. You tempted her by saying she would gain reputation if she succeeds. That’s the whole truth. Do you swear it’s all true?”

I set my camera to video mode on my phone and brought it close to Tachibana’s eyes.

“But, that’s...”

“Do you swear?”

When I brought my phone close to him to remind him again, Tachibana brushed it away with force.

He then forced me to stop the recording.

“I’m telling you it’s true.”

“Then there’s no need to panic. Why don’t you want me to record it?”

“Because, you know, just give me a break!”

“Hey, Tachibana-kun!?”

Asahina tried to stop him, but Tachibana left without looking back.

“He looked like he wanted to say something, but... I wonder what it was.”

“It’s okay. That reaction just now gave me my target.”

“Is that so? Are you saying you learned who gave them the order?”

Tachibana obeyed that order and carried it out.

When he failed and was questioned by Kiryuuin, he mentioned Nagumo’s name.

He would not admit to anything except that, even at the risk of destabilizing his own standing.

“Thank you for today, Asahina-senpai. I think I will be able to solve this mystery soon.”

“Umm, right. I’m glad you figured it out, but... Will you tell me?”

“Let’s stop for now. I don’t want to clumsily wrap you up in this.”

We could end it here, but I decided it was best to stop for now.

Part 6

Although it took some time, I was able to obtain some important information that led me to the truth of the shoplifting matter.

With Asahina's help, I didn't waste any time but that's precisely why I want to stop for a moment.

I was on the verge of getting a solution on the day I embarked on my investigation.

I can attribute it to good fortune, of course, including unintended coincidences.

That's why I'm not satisfied.

It's not that Asahina, Yamanaka or Tachibana are lying.

What would happen if I reported these results to Kiryuuin as they are?

And what is the goal of the person who set this all up?

I feel that depending on the decision and the outcome here, there is a possibility that it will affect the third-years.

I decided to send a message to Kiryuuin, leaving out the crux of the matter.

The question is whether or not Kiryuuin will be on board, but since she wants a solution, I don't think there will be any problems.

I returned from Keyaki Mall and reached the dorms.

There were no messages on my phone from Kei after all, and there was no sign of her in the lobby.

As long as she is a parasite of a host, she will not be able to take independent action on her own.

The elevator stopped at the first floor, so I got in and went to the fourth floor.

Instead of Kei, let's get Kiryuuin's matter in order first.

That's what I was thinking, but...

"Welcome back, Ayanokoji-kun."

When I got off the elevator, Ichinose, who was wearing a coat, smiled at me.

It looks like she was waiting for me in front of my room.

"What happened?"

"Hm? I just wanted to see you. Is it a problem?"

"It's not. Didn't you have to wait a long time, though?"

I usually come back at 5 o'clock, but it was already around 6 o'clock since I had to make a detour because of Asahina and the other year-three students.

Ichinose curiously pulled out her phone and checked the time.

"Whoa. When did it get this late? I never noticed."

I thought she was being considerate to me, but it doesn't feel like it.

"Just how long have you been there?"

"Umm, a little after school ended... Since after 4:30 p.m., I think."

So she had been on her feet for at least an hour and a half here.

When she said "see you later", I guess that meant she was going to visit me.

"I wish you'd have called first."

Even if we couldn't meet up right away, I could have told her the time I'd be back.

"No, it would be bad to disturb you."

It's not a problem of it being a good or a bad thing, but...

If she isn't bothered by having to wait, there's nothing else for me to say.

"Umm, it's not like there's anything I have to talk to you about, but..."

She apologetically said so while waiting for me to talk.

"Did you make up with Karuizawa-san?"

"No, not yet."

As I said so, Ichinose muttered something like "Oh." Is it joy, sorrow, or something else?

I can't tell from her expression which one it is.

"Then... Can I be just a little selfish? I want to chat with you for a bit. Only if it's not going to be a problem, though..."

Since she took the time to wait here, I'm sure that wasn't just to say hello.

"If it's okay with you, it's okay with me too. Should we go inside my room?"

"Is that okay?"

There's no real reason to refuse.

As long as there is no contact from Kei, and I don't have to spend my time on something else after this, there's no reason to talk standing here like this.

Most of all, I don't want her body to get even colder here, so I turned the key and opened the door.

"I'm a bit nervous. Excuse me."

After saying so and entering the room, Ichinose immediately noticed the difference in the room compared to before.

“I think it was raining the last time you came to my room.”

“Thanks for back then. Sorry I was soaking wet when I came to your room...”

I took off my shoes first, then Ichinose followed and neatly lined them up.

I turned on the lights, and Ichinose spoke out when she could see around the room.

“Wow, your room got really cute, huh?”

As Ichinose said so, her eyes were caught by the changes in her surroundings.

It's not like there are big changes such as new furniture or redecorations.

But there are stuffed animals, hand mirrors, and cushions that look out of place in a man's room.

There are much more of these small things than there were before.

They were all brought in and left behind by Kei who comes and goes in and out of the room.

If someone unfamiliar with the circumstances in this school were to look at this room, it would be easy to think that we were living together.

Looking at the kitchen, one can also easily spot matching cups and chopsticks of different colours.

She knew *too well*⁶ that I am dating Kei, so she should have expected that there would be changes in my room. In fact, there was no sign of confusion on her face.

[⁶TL Note 6 : 百も承知 *Hyaku mo Shouchi*; expression; being fully aware.
Literally “knowing a hundred things”]

“Sit down wherever you want. I'll make something warm to drink. Is cocoa okay?”

“Mhm. Thanks.”

Ichinose smiled happily as I offered her the same drink from that day.

The best way to warm up a cold body is from the inside out.

Still, the room is pretty cold, so I put on the heating and the humidifier.

“I think it’ll get warmer here in a bit.”

Ichinose nodded and took off her coat, and placed it at her feet.

“Girls are pretty amazing, huh? Always going to and from school in skirts like that. It must be cold.”

“It’s certainly cold, but I’m so used to living with skirts that I’ve never really paid much attention to it.”

After replying so, Ichinose found a photo frame with a picture of me and Kei, took it, and stared at it for a while.

“Can I ask you how you ended up liking Karuizawa-san?”

“Are you interested?”

“Mhm. I never had much contact with her, but I knew she was dating Hirata-kun in the first year. I never thought she would end up going out with you.”

Many of the students in Horikita Class are also still tilting their heads.

I’m sure it’s hard to get an answer, especially when it’s a different class.

“It’s not that I don’t want to answer, but it’s a bit hard to do so. It’s my first time being in love, so I can’t talk about it in detail even if I wanted to. I guess it was just a natural progression of learning together in the class.”

Unable to give any specifics, I just lined up a few commonplace phrases.

“Karuizawa-san is pretty cute, isn’t she?”

“I won’t deny that.”

The water in the pot is now boiling, so I poured out the hot water and mixed the powder with a spoon to make cocoa.

“Here.”

“So warm.”

She held the cup with her chilly hands and breathed.

“When I selfishly took you to the gym and all that the other day, was that annoying for you?”

“I’m the one who wanted to learn how you spend your days off.
Besides——”

I pulled out a sheet of paper from a drawer under the desk.

“It was such a good experience that I’m thinking of using this on my next day off.”

“Ah, a gym admission...”

I had already finished filling it out with my name, student ID number, and monthly course selection.

“I’m always living a slovenly life. I thought I should move my body a little.”

“I see. That kinda makes me happy.”

Ichinose often had a downcast expression up until the school trip.

However, I feel like she’s been smiling more since we spent some time together on our last weekend.

“I think we’ll be seeing each other more often in the gym now, so I’m counting on you.”

“Mhm! Me too... I see, so we'll be together in the gym from now on.”

Ichinose drank from her cocoa and smiled.

“Actually, you know...”

“Hmm?”

Perhaps having something on her mind, Ichinose looked me in the eyes.

“I didn't wait in front of your room just to see you. There was something I really wanted to tell you... Is it okay if you sit next to me?”

She then lightly patted the empty space on the bed.

I understood that this was going to be a serious subject, so I sat down next to her as she wanted.

“The reason I met you last Sunday was to get closure.”

“Closure?”

“To stop my feelings for you.”

Ichinose looked decisive and didn't avert her gaze from me.

“There's someone you like, Karuizawa-san. I can't mess with your relationship. So I thought that day would be our first and last date.”

There was no hint of sadness on Ichinose's face as she said this.

So that's what she had on her mind when we were spending that day together when we went to the gym.

“Is that what you mean by closure?”

Ichinose firmly nodded.

“I won't meet with you in our private times any more. I thought that would be the right thing to do.”

If that's true, that creates a contradiction with this time today.

Even if it's not a day off, this is still a private time.

"But, I was wrong. That kind of thinking wasn't correct. I figured that nothing would change that way."

I still don't know what conclusion she came to.

But this change in thinking is probably the reason Ichinose was able to regain her current cheerful attitude.

"I don't know what I should do from now on..."

Her smile appeared to be the same as usual, but also a little different.

Until now, I had interpreted Ichinose as being a relatively easy person to read the expressions of.

However, Ichinose now often showed me a face that I can't read the true meaning of.

"You know, that day... I did decide on one thing. I decided not to ask about your girlfriend Karuizawa-san ever again."

"Why is that?"

"Because it hurts. It makes my heart ache. I thought I would feel pain if I asked."

Ichinose muttered while choosing the words to convey her feelings.

"But, right after the gym, I couldn't stop myself from asking about her. About who liked whom first."

She did ask me that. Now I know how she felt then.

"Did it hurt?"

“Strangely, it didn’t. That’s the moment I noticed that my way of thinking was wrong.”

“What’s the answer you came to?”

Ichinose slowly took a breath, and looked straight at me.

“I do love you, after all.”

She didn’t hesitate.

She has no intention of letting me go.

That’s what her eyes said.

“I knew again at that moment how much I love you.”

It was supposed to be the first and the last date, then she would step aside.

However, she came to the opposite conclusion.

“I thought that I can’t stay in the dark. I have to change from the bottom up.”

So that’s the moment that Ichinose changed after remaining in the dark.

“Hey, is it okay if I touch your face?”

“You won’t get a prize even if you do.”

After I jokingly said so, Ichinose softly laughed and nodded.

She then reached out with her right hand and touched my cheek.



"Hey, Ayanokoji-kun, is it okay if I touch your face?"

"You won't get a gift from me even if you do."

When I jokingly said so, Ichinose gently laughed and nodded. Then, she reached out with her right hand and touched my cheek.

She put in some force, and pulled my face towards hers.

"I've never done something like this with anyone. I've never felt anything like this for anyone. My heart is always thumping so hard, and I've been in so much pain... but, right now, I'm so happy. Just having the person I love beside me fills my heart."

As Ichinose was being so open, I wanted to ask her something.

"I asked you on the school trip too. I asked if there was something you wanted."

"Mhm. What I wanted was first of all to be in A Class. Me and my allies' objective. Back then, I lost sight of it and lost motivation, thinking that it was impossible. I even thought that I had no choice but to leave this school."

"Are things different now?"

"They are. I want to remain here. I want to go for A Class. I want to get it."

Her hand on my cheek tightened.

"And, I want one more thing. The person I love... You."

"You know already, but I ———"

"Mhm. You have Karuizawa-san. I know that. That's why I'm not asking for anything else right now. But..."

"But?"

"It's different from here on out. I'm going to become a person that you'll turn around and look at."

Her eyes were so straight that they never let go of mine even while her cheeks blushed. The last immoral step, Ichinose won't take it. I would have had no choice but to stop her if she would, but she restrained herself from doing so. This is the core of Ichinose's righteousness.

“Just watch me from now on, Ayanokoji-kun.”

“I was always going to watch over your future, even if you didn’t want me to.”

“End of the school year... Right?”

“Yeah. We’ll meet again then, just the two of us. I’m going to tell you a conclusion then.”

“My resolve from back then was broken once, but it’s completely fine now.”

That’s already clear to me.

I can feel in my skin the enthusiasm and force that Ichinose is releasing.

I don’t know how the outcome will turn out, but Ichinose has definitely grown a lot mentally.

She is rooted in an intense dependence reliance that is different from that of Karuizawa Kei.

This reliance, which may be a double-edged sword, undeniably gives Ichinose great strength.

It’s only natural that we want the person we love to respond to us.

Even if it’s temporary, you want them to say “I love you”.

It’s a desire to touch and know what is beyond.

However, Ichinose won’t beg.

It’s clear that she is determined to win that pledge herself.

She slowly pulled her hand back.

“I’ll be leaving now.”

“I’ll see you out.”

“No, it’s fine. Ayanokoji-kun, you should make up with Karuizawa-san soon, okay?”

“I’ll handle it.”

Ichinose took her coat, put on her shoes, and lightly opened the door.

She then softly waved at me, and closed it.

What followed was silence, and the slight scent of cocoa and citrus lingering in the air.

What kind of world will Ichinose create from now on?

Will she affect those around, and bring a change in my own thinking too?

I’m looking forward to my school life even more.

Chapter 6

The Expected and the Beyond Expectations

Intro

Finally, two days left in the second term.

Today is the day of the Special Cooperative Written Test, a direct confrontation with A Class.

Although there are some special rules, it is mostly the same as the usual mid-term and final tests.

Many of the students with Academic Ability C or below have been studying in the classroom since the morning, using as much time as they can spare.

Keisei and Horikita, the instructors who had already finished all their studies in advance, were watching over the students and giving them some advice and making careful final checks.

Many of the students think that the most difficult Special Test is on its way, but that's not true.

As the saying goes, "80% is in the preparation", and most of the preparations have been completed.

The attitude and the focus towards the Special Test.

Compared to these, the test itself is only about one-fifth of the workload.

When it's over, you notice that it wasn't that big of a deal after all.

The test procedure is based on the sheet that Horikita had submitted to Chabashira last night, which lays out the order in which everyone will take the test.

Since everyone is allowed to solve any question out of the 100 questions, some might think that the order is not that important.

However, the order is very important. 10 minutes are allotted to each participant, including the time when leaving the room.

This is a good amount of time to solve problems, but it's definitely not enough to read and understand all of the 100 questions.

If a student with low Academic Ability struggles to read and comprehend a problem, not only will they not be able to find five easy problems and write down the answers, but they will also probably make easy mistakes due to running out of time.

Therefore, the order in which the problems are solved is the key to reducing this probability.

Less than five minutes remaining until the bell rings to signal the start of the test.

While everyone was feeling a strong sense of tension, Kouenji was the only one who remained the same.

According to Horikita's prior confirmation, she could not tell if Kouenji was serious or not.

He simply replied that he had the right to do whatever he wanted.

Horikita, who understood that the strategy she had worked so hard to put together would be ruined if Kouenji alone disturbed it, made a wise offer.

She decided to have Kouenji be the last student to solve problems.

At that point, 98 problems out of 100 would already be filled in and 2 would be left for him.

Even if Kouenji, who is originally in the B rank in Academic Ability, cannot answer the two problems, the loss is 4 points. It's unlikely to be a big blow.

Further, since they are the last two problems, even if he did not answer them, it would not be a violation of the rules, as we could pass it off as him being unable to solve the problems rather than doing it on purpose.

Whether he decides to solve the problems, leave them blank or makes a mistake, there is no risk.

Kouenji earnestly agreed to that proposal. If the class is going to go up by 50 points if we win, then Kouenji shouldn't have any opposition to solving the problems correctly.

Rather, if we lose the 50 points we could gain because of him, then the private points Kouenji himself could collect would decrease.

Since it's impossible to estimate Kouenji's conduct based on common sense alone, Horikita had no choice but to use the strategy I just described.

The test will certainly not be easy.

Although I can't be optimistic, the conditions for victory are on our side.

The pressure on the students with low Academic Ability in A Class will be great.

The leader of the class, Sakyunagi is probably planning a strategy, but each student will take the test alone in the room, and the nature of the surveillance will make it impossible to find a different way of fighting.

I can also say that it's impossible to make the low Academic Ability students solve all the questions.

In other words, all that can be done by a class is to raise their current fighting strength to the highest possible level, and then rearrange the order in such a way to maximize their strength.

Or, like Ryuuuen, to directly harass the others outside the test.

There are some rough methods such as making a secret agreement to intentionally create a loss of points, but all of the results in this test will be public.

If one makes a blatant mistake, they will run the risk of being detected as a traitor, and above all, there is no guarantee that a class can win by buying out one or two people.

In a school full of students who are always doing their best, it is kind of an accident that entities like me and Kouenji, who have not received a proper evaluation in the OAA are mixed in.

The fact that one with lower evaluated Academic Ability than the reality can get a few points is significant.

I can say that there are several conditions in place that are favourable for the Horikita class.

With the guidance of Chabashira-sensei after the bell rang, we moved to the Special Test building and started waiting.

We then followed the order created by Horikita and started solving the questions one by one in the next classroom.

All we need to do is to repeat this until the last one, Kouenji.

Under the supervision of the teacher, students are not allowed to bring in tools or cellphones.

Chatting is also forbidden, and everyone is to wait for their turn in silence.

All that remains to be seen now is whether or not the students will be able to show off what they've learned without losing to stress.

Part 1

The students sighed with relief after the long Special Test ended.

"Good work, everyone. The results will be announced tomorrow, but classes are over as well for today. Act with restraint during the winter holiday starting the day after tomorrow. That's all for today."

With these words of appreciation from Chabashira-sensei, the school day came to an end.

All that remains is to wait for tomorrow's closing ceremony.

Many of the students will be released from this oppressive time and be able to fly freely.

Some of the students were discussing how well or poorly they had solved the problems, but Horikita did not take the initiative to formulate an opinion and grade herself.

Even if she guessed how many points they could get here, there is still the opponent class.

Most of all, the results will be announced tomorrow, so it seems that she saw no point in doing so.

"You know..."

Kei sitting quietly near me spoke to me in a quiet voice.

"What is it?"

"Umm... I, I think it's about time I forgive you."

She said so with timidity and some confusion.

"Can I talk with you a bit?" said Horikita

“Sorry Horikita-san, can you do this later?”

“I would, if I could. Unfortunately however, it’s a matter of the Student Council. Vice President Kiriyama, no, former Vice President Kiriyama called us to the Student Council room.”

As if trying to prove it, Horikita showed me the message on her phone.

Kushida was also standing a little behind her, smiling.

“Sorry, Kei. Let’s talk after this is over. You can message me any time.”

“M-mhm. See you...”

I left Kei in the classroom and went with Horikita and Kushida.

“I can’t believe it’s Student Council business again right after the Special Test. It looks like Nagumo-senpai is there as well.”

“Those two aren’t in the Student Council any more. You don’t have to obey them, do you?”

“That’s not true. Even if they have nothing to do with the Student Council any more, they’re still upperclassmen. Besides, it’s about Kiryuuin-senpai this time. Remember that?”

“I see.”

This is an event within my expectations after talking about it with Kiryuuin many times last night.

However, it is an unexpected development that this matter was conveyed to Horikita from Kiriyama.

The original plan was for it to be just Kiryuuin, Kiriyama, Nagumo and me.

“Hey. I don’t know what this is about, what happened with Kiryuuin-senpai?”

“Right, we should tell you too——”

“I’ll tell her about it. There’s something I need to convey to you as well.”

“Something you need to convey to me?”

“About a testimony I got from a third party on this shoplifting case.”

When we arrived at the front of the Student Council room after finishing our talk, there were two year-one students there.

Aga from A Class, and Nanase, who had joined the Student Council with Kushida.

I wonder if all of the Student Council members are here.

It looks like someone else has made developments in this case.

“This is kind of like my first job in the Student Council. I quickly joined as a secretary.”

She said so and held onto her notebook.



“Is that for the records?”

“Yes. I heard that a secretary’s job is to write things down, so.”

“It is, but isn’t there a notebook for record of proceedings in the Student Council room?”

“Eh, is there? But I already bought one...”

It seems that she was so enthusiastic about serving on the Student Council that she got a little ahead of herself.

“Well, it’s not a big problem, but if you have the receipt you can give it to me later. I’ll pay for it.”

“Y-yes. Sorry.”

Horikita told her that she would settle the notebook fee from the Student Council’s budget.

“Let’s enter the room then, shall we?”

Nagumo had already arrived at the Student Council room and was waiting inside with Kiriyama.

He was standing up, instead of sitting down on his usual seat of the President.

“Sorry, Horikita. The year-twos must be tired after the Special Test.”

“It’s not a problem. But, it was about Kiryuuin-senpai’s case...”

Horikita asked Nagumo about the matter I had explained to her.

“Yeah. Kiriyama contacted me. He said that Kiryuuin was going to be bringing a lawsuit to the Student Council, and that I should get prepared.”

“A lawsuit to the Student Council..?”

First time I’m hearing of it. Suing the Student Council?

I had no idea Kiryuuin was using such a method.

“Still, did you call Ayanokoji here too, Kiriyma?”

“He was here back then too. I decided that it was necessary. It’s a judgement I made while considering that it would be troubling if he spread clumsy rumours without knowing anything.”

“Well, it’s fine. He’s lucky to see your debut, Suzune.”

Saying so, Nagumo signaled for Horikita to sit down on the seat of the President.

“Excuse me.”

With a polite bow, Horikita sat down in the chair.

“You chose Kushida for the Vice President, after all?”

“Yes. I also thought about asking Aga-kun, but I thought Kushida-san would be more fitting as she knows more about the school. Is there a problem?”

“No. I have no complaints about the Student Council President’s personnel selection.”

Student Council President Horikita and the newly appointed Vice President Kushida sat down without exchanging any jokes with serious looks on their faces.

“She’s got a lot of nerves though, being late like this after calling us here.”

After this deliberation, Kiryuuin Fuuka entered the room as the last person to show up.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Student Council President.”

“Please take a seat.”

“No thanks. I’ll talk standing up. That’s alright, right?”

“I see. May I ask you a few questions, then?”

“Ask me anything.”

“It looks like you decided on suing the Student Council, but I’d like to hear the contents.”

Horikita asked, pretending not to know anything.

“Sue?”

Kiryuuin curiously tilted her head, but Kiriyama quickly urged her on.

“We’ve already lost time because of your tardiness. Please proceed without wasting any more time.”

“So impatient. Well, let me explain how it all happened.”

Kiryuuin was almost framed as a shoplifter by year-three D Class student Yamanaka in the Keyaki Mall after school.

Kiryuuin luckily noticed that something was being snuck into her bag, and stopped her.

The shoplifting itself ended in an unsuccessful attempt.

“I really don’t think Yamanaka did this because of some personal grudge herself, so.”

Kiryuuin glanced at Nagumo.

“When I questioned Yamanaka, she confessed that she was instructed to commit the crime by a certain person.”

“Who was this person?”

“It’s the former Student Council President here, Nagumo Miyabi.”

The year-one students hearing this for the first time looked over at Nagumo in shock.

A matter that occurred with Kiryuuin at the center.

A problematic act.

Was it according to Yamanaka's own intentions, or not?

If it's the former, she must be punished after being questioned.

If it's the latter, the criminal must be found.

I will see if Horikita can peacefully handle her first problem.

"Nagumo-senpai, do you have any objections to what Kiryuuin-senpai is saying?"

"Of course I do. Unfortunately, Kiryuuin, I never instructed Yamanaka to do something like that. If a matter like this was made public, people wouldn't trust me any more. There's no merit in it for me."

"I don't know about it. I know you always wanted to have a match with me, but I never accepted a year-three opponent. Didn't you begrudge me for that? Maybe you even wanted to stir things up and force me to fight with you."

Just like before, they aren't reaching an agreement.

"I was interested in a match with you. But, I already lost all my interest because of your lack of enthusiasm a long time ago."

"Fufufu. Is that really true?"

"Kiriyama-senpai, you're Kiryuuin-senpai's classmate. You've also supported Nagumo-senpai as the Vice President for a long time. What do you think after listening to both parties?"

Horikita asked Kiriyama, whom she had chosen as a familiar third party.

“I understand how Kiryuuin feels after being accused of shoplifting, but I don’t think Nagumo has anything to do with this matter. If Nagumo had really set her up, he would have chosen a better method.”

“Maybe you’re just overestimating Nagumo?”

Kiryuuin put her hand on her waist and stirred Kiriymama on with a faint smile.

“Thinking about the results Nagumo has shown in this school, it’s clear that I’m not overestimating him.”

“Then why did Yamanaka-senpai try to do something like this? Even if she did build a grudge on Kiryuuin-senpai without being noticed, why did she try to pin the blame on Nagumo-senpai? What do you think about that?”

“I don’t know the truth, but it’s hard to believe that Yamanaka did it on her own.”

“So you’re saying she wasn’t alone.”

“Yamanaka’s position is quite low among the year-three students. She could have been manipulated by someone else in return for private points.”

Kiriymama’s argument is that neither Nagumo or Yamanaka, but a third party, is lurking in the darkness.

“If that’s true, it means we need to move to identify the real criminal.”

“That’s right, but it’s going to be difficult. When she was forced to confess by Kiryuuin, she still didn’t tell the truth and gave out Nagumo’s name. She must have quite the resolve to be able to do something like that.”

“Do you know why that is? Kushida-san.”

Horikita then asked Kushida, who had been listening up until now.

“As a year-three student, framing Nagumo-senpai is nothing but a disadvantage for Yamanaka-san. If she still mentioned his name... She must really want to protect the real culprit.”

“That’s right. This means that she is more afraid of them than she is of even Nagumo.”

“I don’t get it. Is there really anyone to be more afraid of than Nagumo? You just want me to believe that there’s someone else, right?”

For Kiryuuin, who continues to suspect Nagumo, Kiriyma is just another person on Nagumo’s side, and her mistrust is only growing as he continues to insist that it is difficult to name the real culprit.

“Actually, aren’t you just convincing yourself that I’m the culprit?”

“There are no other candidates, so I have no choice.”

“Please quiet down, you two. It’s clear that there will be no solution from the two of you talking with each other.”

As she pointed out, the two will never reach an agreement.

“Kiriyma-senpai, how would you handle this matter?”

“I think we should avoid any further inquiry into this case. However, what Yamanaka did is an unforgivable act, even if it ended in only an attempt. Therefore, an apology to Kiryuuin and as much compensation as possible. These measures are acceptable, right?”

“So you’re saying there’s no need to report it to the school?”

“If Yamanaka committed the crime alone, we should report it. If we report it without finding the real culprit however, Yamanaka will bear all of the blame. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s true. Even if the school does investigate, that doesn’t mean that the real culprit will come to light...”

The conclusion is that Nagumo is innocent, but is this a reasonable compromise?

“I want an apology from the real culprit, though?”

"It doesn't look like that's possible. Or are you saying you can get to the real culprit? I don't recall hearing anything new in the past few weeks. Or did you get some good information from Ansai, whom you threatened with acts of violence?"

Kiryuuin shrugged after hearing Kiriyma, the former Vice President's comment.

He wasn't wounded, but it was still an assault.

Although there is room for sympathy, this would be a dangerous subject if pressed.

"Ayanokoji-kun. You were in contact with Asahina-senpai the other day, right?"

Here, Horikita turned to the topic I was asked about earlier.

After Asahina's name was mentioned, who is close to Nagumo, Nagumo who had been asked to remain calm turned his gaze over to me.

"I heard about the circumstances of the year-three students from Asahina-senpai. About the contract Nagumo-senpai forced onto the year-threes, and the relationship they have with each other. I tried to find out what kind of feelings they were harbouring for Nagumo."

"I received the report about that from Ayanokoji-kun before coming to the Student Council room. He also learned a lot of details about Yamanaka-senpai while talking with Asahina-senpai."

"Oh? As expected of Ayanokoji, I was right to count on him."

I had already reported this to Kiryuuin, but she pretended that she was hearing this for the first time.

"Are you the one that moved Ayanokoji, Kiryuuin?"

"Do you have any complaints, Nagumo?"

"No. But, in that case——"

Nagumo was about to continue, but he quickly closed his mouth.

“Sorry. Please continue, Suzune. This is your first matter as the Student Council President.”

He started watching again, showing that he will not do something reckless.

“It seems that he could not meet Yamanaka-senpai, but Ayanokoji-kun met someone in her place. Tachibana-senpai from the same year-three D Class. Why did he show up, even though he should be unrelated to this? It looks like it was to prevent Yamanaka-senpai from telling the truth.”

“So you’re saying Yamanaka and Tachibana were connected?”

Nagumo asked Horikita, acting like he knows nothing about this.

“Ayanokoji-kun said that the same answer came back when he questioned Tachibana-senpai. They received an instruction from Nagumo-senpai to put merchandise into Kiryuuin-senpai’s bag.”

“It’s obvious, but I never told Tachibana to do something like that. Actually, I don’t even remember talking to him this month. The true culprit may be Tachibana.”

“Well, you have to say that.”

It’s natural that Kiryuuin would reply like that to Nagumo.

“Kiryuuin-senpai, do you have a deep point of contact with Tachibana-senpai?”

“Not at all. I can say that we have nothing in common except Nagumo.”

“...So, he would have less motive than Yamanaka-senpai to be the real culprit.”

“Are you saying that Tachibana-senpai was also instructed by someone else like Yamanaka-senpai?”

Nanase, who had been taking notes in her notebook until this point, asked Horikita.

Horikita, however, did not answer the question and stayed silent.

Everyone expected a reply to come right away, so they were surprised.

"I'm sure that's not the end of the report you received, right? Let's hear the rest of it, Student Council President."

Kiryuuin urged her, but Horikita still didn't answer.

It's understandable.

Because I haven't told her the core of the rest.

I only gave her the information that Asahina knows about.

If she asks for help, I'll give it to her.

Before that, however, I wanted to see what Horikita's thinking would lead to.

"Nagumo-senpai says that he is not the culprit. On the other hand, Yamanaka and Tachibana are insisting that they were ordered by Nagumo. This is a clear contradiction."

"One of them must be lying."

"It's normal to think so. However, I would like to believe what both parties are saying."

"It would be difficult to believe contradictory statements."

Nanase stopped writing and muttered.

"Normally, yes. But what if both parties are really not lying? Wouldn't the contradiction disappear if some certain conditions were added in?"

It seems that Horikita has come up with a possibility while they continued their conversation.

“The real culprit told Tachibana-senpai that this order was from Nagumo-senpai. Tachibana-senpai and Yamanaka-senpai believed this and kept insisting that the order was from Nagumo. However, the request was a criminal act. Normally, you would want to begin by directly meeting with Nagumo-senpai and confirming if it’s true.”

It’s normal that one would want a guarantee that they would receive something in return.

“However, they didn’t do that. Why is that? Could it be because this person is someone worth trusting for Yamanaka-senpai and Tachibana-senpai? A spokesperson for Nagumo-senpai, and a person of power.”

In this school, there is only one person who can be described as such.

“In this case, the one pulling the strings is not Nagumo-senpai, but Kiriyama-senpai, the former Vice President. It’s you, isn’t it?”

Everyone turned their eyes towards Kiriyama-senpai.

“Me? Why would you reach that conclusion?”

Kiryama calmly expressed his doubt about the fact that his name had come up.

“Did you not get it from the explanation just now? After collecting all the information, this is the most likely conclusion.”

“There’s no proof that the information Ayanokoji got is true. I have a guaranteed ticket to A Class from Nagumo. I would never do anything to oppose him.”

After this explanation, an unexpected person extended a helping hand to Kiriyama.

“I think the Student Council President’s reasoning is interesting, but Kiriyama is right. Here’s the biggest reason I don’t suspect Kiriyama: a domesticated dog isn’t brave enough to threaten its master.”

“Then, may I call in Yamanaka-senpai and Tachibana-senpai as new witnesses now?

Horikita asked Nagumo to have him confirm.

“You’re the Student Council President. You can do whatever you want.”

“I see.”

“Wait.”

Kiryama interrupted them.

“Do the witnesses know they will be called here?”

“No. I will contact them now and negotiate.”

Kiryama glared at Horikita, and then at me, who was involved in this case.

If the theory that Kiryama was the real culprit had not emerged, he might have been able to ride it out without attracting any attention.

However, in order to clear up the suspicions that have emerged, a barrage of questions is inevitable.

The question is whether the two can hide Kiryama’s involvement without any prior planning. It’s not an easy thing to continue lying in this place.

“Is there a problem with calling them here?”

Horikita asked Kiryama.

If they don’t want to come into the light themselves, then we can just pull them in.

That’s the fastest method that can be used.

“That’s...”

“Why are you panicking, Kiriyama? You have nothing to do with it, so there’s no need to worry.”

Nagumo told Kiriyama in a light manner.

However, there was meaning behind his eyes.

He wasn’t suspecting Kiriyama up until just now, but it looks like he sensed the winds changing.

“...I understand. I’ll end it here, then.”

Realizing that there was no continuing this, said so as if he had given up.

“What does that mean?”

“It means there is no need to call witnesses. I’ll admit that it was me who instructed Tachibana.”

“I didn’t realize you were the culprit. May I ask why you did something like this?”

Perhaps having already prepared for the worst, Kiriyama doesn’t look to be panicking.

“I did something bad to you Kiryuuin, but with the objective I had, it couldn’t be anyone else.”

“It couldn’t be anyone else?”

“When I told Tachibana that it was an order by Nagumo to gather points, Tachibana accepted immediately. He was in a rush since the second term was already about to end. He didn’t even suspect anything.”

Coming from the Vice President Kiriyama, it’s understandable that Tachibana would believe it.

“This is the plot of the lie. If you can frame Kiryuuin for shoplifting without her realizing it, you can get a ticket to A Class. If you fail, that is of course invalid, but you still get points.”

“What a bold lie. If Yamanaka had succeeded, your lie would have been exposed immediately.”

Nagumo’s point is correct.

I’m sure Tachibana and Yamanaka would have gone to demand the reward tickets right away.

Then the others around would quickly learn that Kiriyama was lying.

“We’ve been in the same class for three years, so I know your character and abilities very well. I judged that it was impossible for someone on Yamanaka’s level to do this unnoticed by you.”

The reason that it had to be Kiryuuin.

He selected a person with whom the planting would definitely fail.

“So you knew from the start that she would be discovered? But, I don’t understand. This is all too elaborate to only make me angry, and it doesn’t benefit you.”

“The aim was to turn Kiryuuin-senpai into a shoplifter. We were mistaken about that idea itself.”

Nanase kept nodding as she continued writing down the record of proceedings.

“That’s right. I knew that when you questioned Yamanaka and Nagumo’s name came up, I knew that you would first make an appointment with me to talk directly to Nagumo. I adjusted that appointment’s timing to make it clash with another certain appointment.”

As I was present at that time too, I quickly realized Kiriyama’s objective.

“The Student Council election. Your objective was to shut it down before it ever got started.”

“Very good, Ayanokoji. I can see why Horikita-senpai counts on you.”

It seems that Nagumo also understood Kiriyma's aim.

"You wanted to put salt on Honami's wound about shoplifting and make her drop out."

"Yeah. I could have put out this problem of the past myself, but I figured that would be too weak. I calculated that Kiryuuin, who hates this type of crime, would stab her merciless words into Ichinose's heart who knew nothing."

Kiryuuin lightly clapped with amazement.

"Looks like you really made me dance. You get me on this one, Kiriyma."

Under the pretense of coincidence, he used Kiryuuin to undermine Ichinose's self-esteem and make her feel that she was unfit to be Student Council President.

Kiryuuin's abilities are as strong as those of Horikita Manabu, but she has no friends, so she is extremely vulnerable in terms of information warfare.

This was a strategy made by someone who knew everything about Nagumo and Kiryuuin's characters.

"The most unexpected thing was that Ichinose had already decided to leave the Student Council at that stage. If I had already known that, there would have been no need for me to take this risk. "

Horikita would have ended up winning even if he had not put out the shoplifting case.

"Why, Kiriyma? What's the reason you went to all that risk to control the election?"

"Don't you get it, Nagumo? I had enough of your arbitrary decisions. What would have happened if the election went on as planned without Ichinose quitting the Student Council? You gambled a massive amount of private points just for the sake of your fight with Ayanokoji. And you wouldn't even have hesitated to buy votes with the points in order to win."

Indeed, Nagumo has a huge amount of money.

If the fight was hard, it would not be surprising if he adopted a vote-buying strategy.

"I don't get it. Why do you care about money when it's already decided that you've won?"

"Why do I care? It's true that I have gained a ticket to A Class. However, do you know how mentally taxing it's all been? Envied and resented by my classmates. It's been unbearable."

Kiriyama glared at Nagumo, showing a serious anger that he has never shown before.

"We can increase the number of students that can move up to A Class if we use the points for them instead of your entertainment. But to put all those private points, soaked in the blood and sweat of the year-three students, in a fight just for your own desires? Give me a break."

Preventing the unnecessary outflow of private points.

That's Kiriyama's goal.

"I had no idea, Kiriyama. I didn't know you were thinking about other people. I thought all the people I've given tickets to are self-centered, competent people who only care about graduating in A Class."

Nagumo praised Kiriyama, as if impressed by him.

Whether or not everyone will take this as praise is another matter.

"Horikita-senpai and Ayanokoji. I'm just displeased that you're creating fights that are unnecessary for the year-three students."

"I understand what you want to say, but you betrayed me, Kiriyama. Are you prepared for the consequences?"

Nagumo has the authority to revoke what he's given. The ticket will not remain in Kiriyama's hands after his defiance.

“It’s an action under the terms of the contract. Do whatever you want.”

“Let’s leave Kiriyama’s punishment to Nagumo. That should be enough.”

After concluding so, Kiryuuin tried to leave the Student Council room right away.

“Please wait, Kiryuuin-senpai. We haven’t finished talking yet.”

“I thought the Student Council President’s turn to speak was over, but?”

“No, it’s not. This is a matter relating to the Student Council. I don’t think you have the right to judge Kiriyama-senpai yourself. Besides, there’s another puzzle left.”

“Puzzle? What else is there?”

“Kiryama-senpai tried to frame you for shoplifting. Then, he set it up so that you would discover it and come to the Student Council room. The aim was to stop the election. To make Ichinose-san recall her trauma and withdraw from the election.”

From the confession, this supposition is not incorrect.

“However, there would have been no need to take such a risk. If he really wanted to stop the elections, there were plenty of other ways to do it. If he was going to use the shoplifting matter, he could secretly contact Ichinose and make her withdraw too. This would have been safer and more certain.”

“It’s hard to believe that Kiriyama didn’t get that idea, right?”

Getting interested again, Kiryuuin returned to her position.

“The question of why he took this risk remains. Perhaps Kiriyama-senpai was prepared to be found out as the real culprit here today?”

Kiryama simply looked at the Student Council President Horikita without giving a reply.

"I thought that he wanted to make this matter public and raise a problem. All of the Student Council members are gathered here today, and so is Ayanokoji-kun. You told me before that this was all under Kiriyama-senpai's direction, right?"

I thought it was Kiryuuin who proposed the idea of appealing to the Student Council, but when Horikita asked her about it immediately after entering the room, she tilted her head, which was probably because it was Kiriyama's idea. It was also Kiriyama who urged her to talk so that the question would be swept under the rug.

"Horikita. For a moment, I saw your presence overlapping with that of Horikita-senpai, which is strange."

Kiryama praised her for her correct guess.

"I wasn't sure how effective it would be, but that's about it. The number of students complaining about Nagumo is increasing day by day. I told him about it, but he didn't listen to me. Right?"

"Maybe."

Nagumo said while not denying it, but rather as if confirming it.

He must have continued pushing that aside until now.

"I think that he was very wrong in his ways, but this seems to have been the truth. Nagumo-senpai."

"What will you do, Nagumo? Will you push the responsibility for this matter caused by your own selfishness on Kiriyama alone?"

"Yeah. I had thought that this had nothing to do with me, but I can see after hearing all this that I was wrong."

I was wondering what conclusion he would come to, but Nagumo moved his gaze from Kiriyama to Horikita.

"Reaching the truth of this matter is your achievement, Suzune. So, you should be the one to decide the punishment."

“...Are you really sure?”

“You’re the one sitting there, right? I’ll obey your decision.”

What judgement will Horikita make after seeing all this?

“Let me speak as the Student Council President, then. First of all, I would like Kiriyama-senpai to apologize deeply to Kiryuuin-senpai for this incident. Whatever the circumstances behind this, we should take seriously the fact that he tried to pin the crime on the unrelated Yamanaka-senpai and Tachibana-senpai. However, as we cannot avoid this becoming a big deal if reported to the school, I would like him to reflect on this by voluntarily suspending himself from school for a week.”

The Student Council has no right to suspend or expel a student.

Even with such a judgement, the school side must also confirm it.

That’s why it’s voluntary suspension.

You can pretend to be sick or do whatever you want, just stay in your dorm and reflect.

That’s what Horikita is saying.

“Further, there is no direct responsibility with Nagumo-senpai, but I think he has a certain amount of responsibility for making the contract. I think you are entitled to deprive Kiriyama-senpai of his right to move to another class, but please promise not to do so.”

“That’s a bold request.”

“You can refuse it if you want. You’re going to follow my decisions though, right?”

“I can’t really blame Kiriyama for this either. But is this really it?”

“No. If it ends like this, the same thing may happen again. From now on, please use the points you’ve collected from year-three students for their sake alone. I would like to add in that condition as well.”

Up until now, Nagumo would have done as he pleased from his own throne.

He must have used many private points without our knowledge and spent a lot of money playing around with Horikita Manabu and the other students.

The measure is to ban this from now on.

“If that’s the will of the Student Council President, then I’ll follow it.”

“That was very easy, I didn’t think you would accept these conditions.”

“What Suzune, rather the Student Council President is saying is fundamentally correct, so.”

Maybe he was a better Student Council President than I thought he was.

“Will you really accept this, Nagumo? You have the power to cause my downfall.”

“It’s the Student Council President’s decision. It would be foolish to go against it.”

Perhaps Nagumo was convinced by Kiriyama’s true character.

“Do you really intend to let this go with that?”

“I came to realize something as well. That I don’t have fate on my side.”

Nagumo said with an expression that looked like he had given up.

He did not continue talking, however.

Yet, Kiriyama doesn’t look convinced. He has something else on his mind.

He looks like he’s thinking about what’s ahead.

“The case is now resolved and closed. Please do not say anything else about this incident.”

With the declaration of the Student Council President, this series of incidents came to resolution.

However, it is not clear whether or not this really is the end of everything.

What was that meaningful expression on Kiriyama’s face at the end?

Part 2

The Special Test was over and the closing ceremony of the second term finally took place the next day.

After listening to the teacher's speech in the gymnasium, the students returned to the class for a brief presentation of awards to those who had achieved outstanding results in club competitions, etc., and we were given precautions about the winter break.

After that, Chabashira-sensei announced the results of the Special Test.

After everyone held onto their breath, we were told that our class had won.

In that moment, the students cheered a shout of joy that even echoed to the neighbouring classes.

Only 50 class points were awarded for each class win or loss.

However, we were able to gain a large amount of class points.

Two messages reached my phone at almost the same time.

One of them was a "congratulations" from Ichinose, and the other was...

"Winter break is starting tomorrow. Don't overdo it from the first day, it's important to cool down your head after all this work."

While still overjoyed, the students were told so by Chabashira-sensei and dismissed.

Chabashira-sensei also smiled as she left the classroom.

As previously noted, this Special Test is set up so that everyone can find out in detail who solved which questions and how many questions they solved correctly.

In addition, the order in which the test was taken and the amount of time spent are also disclosed.

Looking at this, not only can one see which students have worked the hardest, but you can also see each class' strategy.

It is sure to be useful as data both for allies and rivals.

We can check the information on our phones, so I should slowly check over all the details later.

I left the cheering students behind and exited the classroom ahead of the others.

Kei has been looking at me from the start.

I still haven't been contacted by Kei since losing my chance the other day.

The fact that she's been staring at me probably suggests that she is trying to make contact, though.

It would be hard to talk in a crowded place, so we should move somewhere else.

She doesn't know how I will move, so Kei is still indecisive.

It's no use continuing this estrangement as this will not cause her to grow up.

With that in mind, I was leaving the classroom, but...

"Are you leaving alone?"

It was Horikita, not Kei, who chased after me as I went out into the corridor.

"Are you sure you should be here? The person who played a leading role in our victory shouldn't leave so quickly."

"I'll go back in a bit. I wanted to talk to you for a little bit."

Saying so, Horikita caught up with me and started walking.

I can't see a bag in her hands, so I suppose she will be returning to the classroom after this.

"You used an interesting strategy in this Special Test."

"I don't know if my method was the most efficient one or not, though."

Horikita's strategy.

It was to make Keisei the first batter to challenge the problems.

He is one of the top students in the entire grade with A in Academic Ability.

He was asked to solve the minimum number of two problems as quickly as possible and to use the remaining time to read the remaining questions.

The aim was to have the waiting student with low Academic Ability solve the simpler problems.

A strategy to alternate between students with high and low Academic Ability.

However, this strategy normally cannot be used, as conversations were forbidden during the test.

Things like phones or not also could not be used.

But if you ask whether there were no gaps at all, the answer would be a no.

While a student was solving problems, the next student in line waited in the corridor.

This means that there is a short moment where they can meet when leaving the classroom.

There are two entrances into the classroom, so there is a distance when one of them is being used as an entrance and the other as an exit, but Horikita came up with a way to deal with it.

All they needed was to see each other for a split moment.

The question to be solved was conveyed with two-handed hand signs at that time.

For the 55th question, two hands with five fingers are shown, for the 69th question, six fingers are shown with both hands, and then nine fingers are shown again while raising your hands up.

Because of the rules, one cannot talk about the problems, but Horikita had confirmed beforehand that it wasn't a violation of the rules to use hand signs.

Using hand signs to show which problem to solve isn't rule-breaking conduct, and the rule of not talking was protected.

With this, the students with low Academic Learning were able to save some time and quickly get to solving the problems instead of searching for them.

"It was pretty close, though. Sakayanagi-san's class did great too... We have a lot of students with low Academic Ability, so they couldn't win, but they had more correct answers."

The Horikita Class had 72% of the questions answered correctly, while the Sakayanagi Class had 86%.

Under the same conditions, if it was a pure test of scores, this means that Horikita would have lost.

"I'm sure she's dissatisfied. She still lost, even though she did what she needed to do."

She always ranked first in the midterm and written tests, and she proved that again this time.

"Even if we had fewer correct answers, a win is a win. There's no need to be disappointed."

Horikita Class is the one that gained class points, and Sakayanagi Class is the one that lost them.

Besides, there's no mistaking the fact that 72% is still impressive.

"I'm not disappointed or anything, of course. It was just frustrating."

Looks like I didn't need to say that.

It seems that her sense of rivalry was far beyond her disappointment.

"By the way, Karuizawa-san seems a bit down lately. She has been studying properly, but did something happen?"

"Nothing. If I had to say something, it may be that we are in something like a cold war."

"I wouldn't call that nothing. It's rare to see you guys fight."

"These things can happen when a woman and a man have been together for a long time. This is a good experience too."

Perhaps not liking my answer, Horikita frowned with confusion.

"It's fine if she was able to get results in the studying sessions and the test in such an uncertain mental condition."

"I might say that she was so mentally driven that she devoted herself to studying, which she hates, but... Karuizawa-san's morale easily affects the class. You should make up with her soon."

She probably wants to see the class in a stable manner as the leader, but... oh well.

I saw Horikita off to the classroom and decided to leave.

Part 3

This Special Test and Horikita's victory over Sakayanagi would soon become a major topic of discussion.

Even though it was not a purely academic contest, but one that included an element of inferior students in the OAA overthrowing their superiors, the fact remains that we won a direct confrontation.

The gap between the Sakayanagi and Horikita classes was reduced by 100 points before the final test.

On the other hand, the Ryuuen Class had a tough time.

They tried to disrupt the competition since they could not win by Academic Learning, but Ichinose calmly accepted the situation and firmly got the win.

She looked mentally unstable, considering her resigning from the Student Council as well, but she did not break.

Still, I can't say that Ryuuen's judgement was wrong.

Unlike Horikita who had built up a solid foundation, the Ryuuen class was lacking in this aspect and it would have been difficult for them to catch up after a short period of studying.

After gaining this difficult victory, Ichinose Class still has a chance of making it to A Class, and the battle between the four classes will be carried over to the third term and beyond.

When I put on my shoes at the entrance and walked out of the school building, I already had someone waiting for me.

"I'm sorry for troubling you on the last day of school."

The person who contacted me directly after the results were announced. Sakayanagi from year-two Class A.

“I didn’t hear that Ichinose would be coming too.”

I didn’t think that the two people who messaged me would be in the same place.

“What is going on here, Sakayanagi-san?”

It seems that Ichinose hadn’t been told about me either, and had a curious expression.

“Let’s walk for a while, we’ll stand out if we stay here.”

There will be a lot of students passing by the entrance here.

“First, Ayanokoji-kun. Congratulations on your win in this Special Test.”

“Thanks, but we barely made it. We would have lost if it was a normal written test.”

“Are you talking about the percentage of correct answers? That’s another matter. There’s no changing the fact that I lost, so.”

She wasn’t being modest, but rather she earnestly accepted the results of having done everything she could have done. I can see the leeway of A Class here.

“And it was very impressive how you defeated Ryuuen-kun, Ichinose-san.”

“We just did what we should have done. I didn’t do anything special.”

“I was impressed by the fact that you did not yield to Ryuuen-kun and the others. To be honest, in my initial estimation, I thought it was 50-50. However, you actually ended up winning an overwhelming victory. It’s probably a result of the leader calmly giving precise instructions.”

Sakayanagi also seems to have read that Ichinose was fighting in a very focused manner.

She evaluated the win as not one brought just by the difference in Academic Learning, but also by her calm demeanour.

“Really? Well, I am happy to be complimented by you, Sakayanagi-san.”

“You’ve become very positive, Ichinose-san. I think that something happened to you recently.”

If she’s called me here, then it’s possible she knows something.

Sakayanagi can’t collect information herself because of her leg, so I’m sure she always has students under her control working for her web of information.

The day off we spent at the gym.

Our going and returning.

The day she waited in front of my room.

Any of these things could have been witnessed by someone.

“I told you about something similar on the boat, do you remember?”

Sakayanagi said to Ichinose, instead of me.

“That I might get a painful push back if I’m obsessed too much with one thing. Right?”

“That’s right. The reason I invited you both here today is to tell you that. I’m here to give an ultimatum to Ichinose-san, who has a faint crush on Ayanokoji-kun.”

It looks like she already knows Ichinose has feelings for me, but that in itself is not surprising.

“You should distance yourself from Ayanokoji-kun right now.”

“That’s your ultimatum?”

Normally, I would have expected to see some unrest after Ichinose was told this by a third party here, but she showed no such signs.

“That’s right.”

“I don’t get it. Why do I have to distance myself from Ayanokoji-kun? No matter what kind of feelings I have, there’s no problem with being in contact with him as a friend.”

“You may be right, if that’s really all it is. However, from what I’ve seen, it doesn’t look like you’ll be satisfied with that.”

“You can analyze things how you want. But, as long as Ayanokoji-kun doesn’t have any complaints, I’m not going to change my current way of thinking.”

“The erosion has already progressed. You’re almost under his control. Do you realize that if this continues, you will eventually destroy yourself?”

“Ahahaha. That’s a very funny thing to say.”

“I’m seriously worried. I can’t stand to see you fall into depths from which there is no saving you.”

“You don’t need to worry about me, Sakayanagi-san. I’m not being controlled or anything by Ayanokoji-kun.”

I never knew she could make such cold eyes.

Ichinose then came next to me with an expression I had never seen before.

“Sakayanagi-san. Your thoughts are transparent. You want to control me and use me for your own convenience, don’t you? That’s why you’re trying to restrain me like this.”

“I see. It can be analyzed in that way too, I suppose.”

“And one more thing. You actually think that Ayanokoji-kun is a special person too, and my presence has become an obstacle. Isn’t that right?”

As Ichinose smiled, Sakayanagi’s movement stopped for a moment.

It’s rare for Sakayanagi to be upset like this, who always stood one notch above Ichinose in every situation she’s faced.

“I certainly look at him in a special way too, but it’s not the same as you.”

“Who knows? I think it is, even if you don’t realize it.”

Ichinose confronted Sakayanagi’s denial head-on.

“Fine. If you’re going that far, there’s nothing else for me to say here. Don’t ask me for help if you regret this later.”

Sakayanagi concluded, but she must be even more cautious now after hearing Ichinose’s words.

She must have thought that it would be good for her if Ichinose starts acting rashly because of her love, but things have begun to change.

The virtue she directed inwards hasn’t changed, and the virtue she directed outwards has completely changed into evil.

The Ichinose Class which has been sinking up until now is strong enough to counter-attack.

Sakayanagi must have felt that. Why do I think so? Because I’m being made to think that way right now.

“We’re going to have a victory party at Keyaki Mall after this. Can I return to my dorm now?”

They’re probably going to meet up after changing clothes, so Ichinose replied so.

“Yes. It would be thoughtless to keep you here any longer, so.”

Ichinose waved at me and headed for the dorms.

I and Sakayanagi were the only ones left behind.

“I never thought I would be re-evaluating Ichinose-san in this way.”

It seems that Sakayanagi hadn’t noticed the change until now either.

A side-effect, no, a byproduct of a powerful medicine.

"It's a shame, because Ichinose-san, who has earned the trust of others, would have done excellent work for me."

"You missed the point."

I have a broad perspective and make calculations in moving people around, but there are still areas that even I do not fully understand.

The concept of love has the potential to affect someone's reasoning and nature.

In other words, it can easily cause the unexpected.

It's hard to believe, but it is certainly one of the most mysterious feelings there is.

Is Honami Ichinose suited to be a leader, or not?

Is she a good adviser, or not?

This is a different topic than that.

Ichinose's specs were never low in the first place.

I remember that the way she conducted herself during the Zodiac Test was also impressive.

She has the potential to oppose Horikita, Ryuuuen, and even Sakayanagi.

Depending on the situation, she might surprisingly even surpass them.

"I could not see what kind of hidden talent she had. However, that doesn't matter if she gets carried away by her own power. The consequences will be disastrous."

"So you thought you could stop that from happening?"

“No. I never had any intention of stopping her. The only thing that’s changed is who will break her.”

Sakayanagi naturally doesn’t see Ichinose as an ally.

She would have used her as a convenient pawn and gotten rid of her after her role was done.

“So, I will be visiting your room “too” soon.”

Sakayanagi, who had a grasp on information about Ichinose, deliberately revealed her hand, much like in a game of poker, in reply.

Epilogue

A Touch of Anxiety

Intro

The day after the closing ceremony of the second term.

The Special Test is over and the students' long awaited vacation is about to arrive.

Even though it isn't a long vacation like the summer vacation, it's still a happy time for most students.

Their hard work of studying day and night was rewarded with a direct win against A Class.

The students will certainly enjoy their winter vacation.

Everyone thought so, except one student in the class.

As she sighed with melancholy, Kei Karuizawa, the only exception, was at the Keyaki Mall with her best friend Satou Maya.

She's always been good at putting on airs, and remained calm at school and studied hard even after her fight with Ayanokoji.

Because of that, the people around had no way of knowing that she was still troubled.

Her best friend Satou was one of them, but she still noticed that the two were unusually distant recently.

However, she thought that it was to focus on studies rather than because of a fight, so she hadn't followed it up until this day.

“Haa...”

“You’re sighing so much. The studies are over, so we should be having fun now. What happened?”

“Hm? Really? Oh, it’s nothing, so.”

Karuizawa, who had been trying to avoid being noticed up to this point, found herself repeatedly sighing, perhaps unknowingly, as she relaxed after her studies, tests, and other areas she was not good at.

“...Really?”

“Really, really.”

Karuizawa firmly replied, but Satou still had her doubts.

“This is going to be a thoughtless question, but weren’t you intending on making plans with Ayanokoji-kun?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, our break is starting tomorrow. Normally, you’d be hanging out together, right? Shinohara-san and Ike-kun also happily told me arm in arm that they were going to the movies.”

She pointed out that it was strange for Karuizawa to invite her and not have any other plans.

While Karuizawa felt that she had failed, the reason she was showing this attitude was because somewhere in her heart, she wanted to ask Satou for advice.

Karuizawa nodded and walked past the café, which was starting to get crowded.

They sat down together on a bench near the resting corner on the second floor of the Keyaki Mall.

“Hey, Maya-chan. I need some advice...”

“Sure. Totally fine with me.”

She wasn’t displeased, but rather enthusiastic, as she had been waiting for this.

“I think my relationship with Kiyotaka is in a bit of a tough spot...”

“H-huh!?Really!?”

Karuizawa revealed her pent-up feelings after carefully checking that no one was around.

Satou was startled, not expecting this bomb to be dropped.

It seems that she didn’t overreact on purpose, and started composing herself again while clearing her throat.

“Your relationship is in a tough spot... You mean you could be breaking up?”

“I don’t think that’ll happen, but... but... These days, I can’t help but think that it might.”

Her expression was surprisingly serious, and Satou choked on her words, unable to hide her shock.

Still, she wisely tried to find the right words to avoid making the atmosphere even heavier.

“You and Ayanokoji-kun had a fight. But you couldn’t make up and it’s been going on for a while, was it really that bad of a fight?”

A minor quarrel would probably take a few hours at most to clear up.

Karuizawa had a serious expression.

Satou had been thinking that the two always got along, so she could not hide her confusion.

“I thought it was a small fight, but maybe it wasn’t so for Kiyotaka.”

Karuizawa sighed with melancholy and nodded quietly.

“You haven’t talked since that fight?”

Karuizawa told her that it wasn’t yesterday or today that they had the fight.

She did not want to talk about it just yet though, and didn’t touch on its causes.

“It’s winter break already, right? And I studied hard like Kiyotaka told me to and solved 3 out of 4 questions in the test. So, I thought that would be enough... That’s why I tried to talk to him after the Special Test yesterday, but...”

“What happened?”

“Horikita-san showed up. They were called by Nagumo-senpai. I wanted to talk to him after the ending ceremony today, but Horikita-san showed up again, so...”

The repeated pauses caused Satou to push her forehead.

“So, you didn’t get to talk at all in the end, and now we’re here.”

“Mhm.”

“Ayanokoji-kun didn’t look mad, though.”

“He’s always expressionless, and his attitude never changes.”

This also dulled Karuizawa’s judgement.

If he had shown a blatantly angry reaction, she could have apologized earlier.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but aren’t fights really common?”

This is a word that pops up regularly among girls who are particularly excited to talk about their own love lives, and is not that uncommon in and of itself.

Moreover, most fights aren't fights at all, but just minor problems that make things awkward.

Satou wanted to make sure that this fight did not fall under that category, but she could not step into it right away.

"Well, come on, everyone has fights. I can't even imagine Ayanokoji-kun being angry, but... Was he angry when it happened?"

She hesitantly asked, but Karuizawa quickly shook her head no.

"I was the one who got angry."

"Ah, yes, I see."

Satou thought that she was about to hear something unexpected, but she quickly dismissed that idea.

"So the situation is that you are one-sidedly angry at him?"

If that's the case, the way to end the fight is simple.

Satou thought that things would go back to normal if Karuizawa just forgives Ayanokoji with a smile.

"That's... not really it, but..."

"If you don't mind me asking... Can you tell me what the fight was about?"

She can't get a better understanding without knowing this point.

Karuizawa trusted that Satou was asking earnestly and decided to tell her how the fight started.

Everything started one Saturday night, when she invited him to go shopping for Christmas presents.

When she found out that Ayanokoji was going with Ichinose on their day off, she became irritated.

She couldn't believe that there was a good reason behind it. After hearing the circumstances, Satou quietly closed her mouth.

She then strongly tapped both of her knees with the palms of her hands.

"I see... It's definitely Ayanokoji-kun's fault!"

Satou put forth her genuine thoughts and opinions.

"R-right!?"

With Satou on her side, Kei's expression became a little more cheery.

"Of course. If he has a girlfriend, he shouldn't go out on the weekend with someone else, no matter the circumstances! Or at the very least, he should have you or another boy or girl with him!"

She's right to get angry.

In fact, she should be angry.

"He shamelessly met up with Ichinose-san... and didn't even tell you what they did..."

How uneasy did Karuizawa feel when she first heard about this?

Despite that, she was able to continue focusing on her studies.

"Ichinose-san isn't... she isn't dating anyone, right?"

A sense of unease that she cannot handle on her own.

Someone. Karuizawa said these words from the hope that Ichinose was dating someone else.

"...I don't think so. She's pretty popular in school, so it would be known right away if she was dating someone, but..."

"...Yeah."

Karuizawa cast her eyes down after confirming what she already knew.

“Uggh!”

Satou couldn't help but hug her.

“Hey, Maya-chan!?”

“It's not your fault!”

“...Thanks. But, I'm at fault here too. If I had listened to Kiyotaka and understood him better... things would have ended without a fight.”

She could have just smiled and said let's go shopping for Christmas presents next week.

She regretted not doing so.

From Satou's point of view, Karuizawa is cute.

She is one of the top girls in terms of pure looks.

When she first enrolled in the school, there was a time when she was an unimportant girl coveting Hirata's attention, and there was even a time Satou hated her for always trying to assert dominance with her annoying personality.

But, now that Satou fell in love with the same person, she can understand her.

Satou can now sense that Karuizawa has a cute personality behind her stubbornness.

Satou can confidently say that even if another girl were to aim for Ayanokoji, there is no way Karuizawa would lose.

However, it's a different story if the other girl is Ichinose Honami.

If Ichinose had feelings for Ayanokoji, there's no way to eliminate the possibility that Ayanokoji may switch from Karuizawa to Ichinose.

“Hey. Should we ask about it to the people in Ichinose-san Class?”

There's the scary possibility of seeing something she doesn't want to see, but as things are, even if she makes up with Ayanokoji after this, the same sense of worry and anxiety will be repeated again.

If she can learn that Ichinose has no such intentions-

“Let's g———, no, nevermind.”

Karuizawa's anxiety still got to her, and she declined Satou's offer.

She then vigorously stood up, as if to shake off this bad feeling.

“Mhm. I'm not gonna think about it anymore. Let's have some fun now, I'm going to see Kiyotaka tonight. We'll definitely make up then!”

“That's the spirit! I'm rooting for you!”

After laughing together, the phone in Karuizawa's hand vibrated.

For a moment, she thought it was from Ayanokoji, and she happily opened her chat.

“Eh!?”

“What is it?”

Karuizawa's expression froze as she stopped to look at the screen of her phone.



Satou quickly looked over at her with concern.

“Kei-chan?”

Karuizawa—— however, continued to look at the screen as if time had stopped.

Wondering what was going on, Satou stole a glance at the screen from Karuizawa’s side.

“...”

When she saw the screen, she was as stiff as Karuizawa.

“W-who is that from?”

“From Nene-chan...”

The picture that came along with the message from Mori Nene was the two that were being talked about just now.

It was from when Ayanokoji and Ichinose were chatting while leaving the gym.

The entrance to the gym, where the two in front of the bench can be clearly seen from the front.

“W-what date is this from?”

“...I’ll ask.”

When she hurriedly checked with Mori via chat, she found out that it was the evening before yesterday.

It’s when Karuizawa and the others were having their last study session with Horikita and the others.

“Why...”

“They, they were probably just in the same place by coincidence, right?”

Satou desperately replied, but it's obvious that they left the gym together.

"Does Ayanokoji-kun go to the gym?"

"I don't know..."

"Hello, Karuizawa-san."

"!?"

As if putting salt on the wound, she was called out to by Ichinose in front of the gym.

Ichinose is in her private clothes, probably having returned to change her clothes already.

"Wait, did you come to the gym?"

"No, umm... We just happened to be here... right?"

"Y-yeah."

Satou repeated herself while following up from Ichinose and said that they were resting on a bench.

"Oh. I thought you started going to the gym with Ayanokoji."

Ichinose replied with a usual smile, as if it was only natural that she would know.

"Eh!?"

"Huh? What is it?"

"...You already knew that Kiyotaka was going to the gym, huh?"

Karuizawa turned the screen off and put her phone in her pocket.

“Well, I’ve been going to the gym too, so. It looks like Ayanokoji-kun took a liking to it after I told him about it and we went together. He said that he’ll be starting too.”

“I see.”

Karuizawa muttered with an indistinct voice.

“Are you going to the gym now Ichinose-san?”

“We won the Special Test, so I’m going to celebrate with my classmates. I forgot something when I came to the gym the other day, so I thought I’d stop by and pick it up.”

Ichinose said with a smile.

“Hey, Ichinose-san. Is it true that you met up with Ayanokoji the other day with just the two of you?”

Figuring that she had to be the one to ask if Karuizawa wouldn’t, Satou boldly asked.

“Huh?”

“Ichinose-san… There’s nothing between you and Ayanokoji-kun, right?”

“No way. There’s nothing between Ayanokoji-kun and I.”

She lightly waved her hand and declined, saying that it was unthinkable.

“...Really?”

Satou’s suspicions were not cleared however, and she became more determined towards pursuing the matter.

Karuizawa tried to stop her by pulling on her cuff, but her opposition wasn’t strong enough.

“Mhm. I wouldn’t lie about something like that. He just gave me some advice about my class. ...Did I cause a misunderstanding?”

Ichinose was uncomfortable after seeing Karuizawa's uneasy expression and Satou glaring at her.

"I did think that you might be displeased about it, but... I'm sorry."

Ichinose bowed her head with an apologetic expression.

Seeing this, Karuizawa also came up with the courage to put her thoughts into words.

"...So, Kanzaki-kun?"

Karuizawa naturally put out the name Kanzaki.

Ichinose had no idea, but she could deduce the situation just by hearing that name.

"Yeah. Our class was down to D Class and we were up against the wall. We didn't have the strength to rebuild ourselves and suffered. Ayanokoji couldn't bear to see that happen, and said he would try to do something about it to help us. Maybe you've also heard the name Mako-chan?"

"You mean Amikura-san? I don't know about that, but... I did hear of Himeno-san."

As her suspicion of Ichinose and Ayanokoji started fading, Karuizawa's tone lightened as well.

"Yes, Himeno-san was also helping us rebuild the class. We discussed it together with her. Other people know about this too, so you don't need to worry."

Ichinose didn't seem to know much about it, but she told so to Karuizawato put her mind at ease.

"But, I don't understand why Kiyotaka wants to save your class."

"Yeah. He must have some weird reason for it..."

Still not completely clearing up their suspicions, the two faced each other and spoke their concerns.

Hearing this, Ichinose nodded and closed her eyes for a moment.

"It's an alignment of interests."

"Alignment, of interests?"

"We've been struggling lately because we haven't been able to win. We were in a pinch where the gap between us and A Class would grow even further if we lost against Ryuuen-kun. I think Ayanokoji thought it would benefit him more if the stronger class, the Ryuuen Class, lost, instead of a weak class like us."

This is the most convincing answer as to why Ayanokoji supported a rival class.

He momentarily aided them in order to defeat the bigger devil.

"There's really, really nothing going on between you and Kiyotaka, right?"

"I have nothing to be guilty of."

With straight eyes, Ichinose clearly asserted that there was nothing to be jealous of.

Seeing how honest her attitude seemed, Karuizawa and Satou could do nothing but nod again.

"I think it's also Ayanokoji-kun's fault for not communicating properly with his girlfriend, who should be very important to him. But if I'm the one that caused a rift between you two, I'll take the responsibility to make things right."

"T-that's okay. I understand the circumstances now, so I think we can make up today! Thanks for taking the trouble, Ichinose-san."

"Oh, don't worry about it. Let me know if you ever need help with something again."

Ichinose kindly said so and watched on as the two walked away from the gym.



“Don’t worry, Karuizawa-san. It’s true. There’s currently nothing between Ayanokoji-kun and I.”

A faint voice from behind that Karuizawa and Satou can’t hear.

Ichinose muttered so, and continued.

“Not yet, anyway.”

Ichinose firmly started walking, leaving behind the scent of her perfume.

Part 1

The first day of winter break.

The sky was covered in thick clouds and it's been raining since the morning.

About 10 minutes past the appointed time, Ryuuен approached with an umbrella.

Ichinose, who had been waiting from earlier, quietly stared at Ryuuен's face.

Ryuuен stopped at a distance where they could hear each other through the rain.

"The weather's always like this recently, huh?"

Without even a word about Ryuuен's late arrival, Ichinose started speaking.

"Aren't you gonna complain about me being late?"

"I don't care. I was ready to wait for 30 minutes. If you hadn't shown up, I would have left without hesitation."

Ichinose replied with a relaxed attitude, and seemed to care more about the weather than she did about Ryuuен.

She tilted her umbrella and looked up at the rainy sky for a moment.

"I think it'll be like this all day."

"How friendly and good-natured of you to go to the trouble of answering my call."

Ryuuен said, ignoring Ichinose's mutterings.

"I don't know if you understand the meaning of the word "friend", but it's normal to answer when you're called. I didn't have any plans right now anyway. So, what is it?"

“My plans got messed up a little. I want to know why.”

“The Special Test? Your harassment didn’t work as planned, huh?”

“You might think that it’s uninspired for me to do something similar again, but it suits my pawns. If it’s the easiest and most effective way, why not repeat it?”

Ryuuen instructed his classmates to relentlessly pressure and interfere with Ichinose’s classmates.

They would force their way into classrooms, libraries, karaoke rooms and other places where the students from Ichinose Class gathered for study sessions, and interfere with their studies.

Ayanokoji and the others had no way of knowing, but Ryuuen was also doing more dangerous things.

He would offer money to students with high Academic Ability and pay them if they got a question wrong, or threaten them that it would be troubling for their peers if they answered all the questions correctly.

The strategy was based on the idea that even a class with high solidarity can be penetrated if they are weakened.

“It’s true that it was annoying for everyone.”

“I’m sure it was.”

However, this did not result in a large amount of damage in the end.

In a match of Academic Ability where the gap is already large, Ryuuen has a faint chance of winning even with a frontal attack.

It’s precisely because he understood this that he planned to fight and defeat his opponents from another direction.

“But, did you actually think you could win that way?”

“Yeah, I did.”

When it came down to it however, none of his strategies worked on Ichinose and her class.

"I've come to give you my honest praise this time, Ichinose. I thought your class would collapse after something like that, but you've definitely grown up a lot since year-one."

The reports from Ishizaki and the others working under Ryuuuen said that their sabotaging of the Ichinose Class was a success.

Although no students had accepted the bribes or the threats, they still seemed to be agitated.

However, Ichinose and the other students were only showing outward signs of being troubled.

Behind the scenes, however, they were steadily making time for their studies and pretending to be frightened by the threats on purpose.

"Did someone give you some wisdom? In the past, you would have easily stopped the secret study sessions and shut yourself in. But you went to the trouble of making it look like our strategy was working."

Ryuuuen wouldn't have been surprised if this was Sakayanagi or Ayanokoji.

In fact, he would have considered making an even stronger move as a natural countermeasure.

The cornered rat bites the cat. Is this the counterattack of a cornered weakling?

Ryuuuen invited Ichinose out here to confirm this directly.

"No one gave me wisdom, Ryuuuen-kun. We just continued studying while suffering through the noise. The threats really were scary for everyone. We just happened to not fall apart."

"There's no need for modesty here. It's obvious something has changed in your class."

“That’s not the direct cause of your defeat. You should have taken the test seriously, like us and the other classes. You should have studied and scored points. That’s how Horikita-san and the others beat Sakayanagi-san.”

“You’re talking so high and might just because you picked up a win in an advantageous test. Well, this Special Test was an extremely tepid one. We just moved our arms with pen in hand, with no risk of anyone dropping out. The heat wasn’t high enough for me to get serious.”

“Couldn’t you have used the normal methods that everyone else did?”

“There would be no improvement even after teaching these idiots for a week or two. I just decided that it would be easier to bring the others down instead.”

As the rain continued, Ryuuken laughed while meeting eyes with Ichinose.

“That decision was a mistake though, wasn’t it?”

“We got done in by some fellows whose only saving grace is their honesty, but I’ll conduct a grander interference next time.”

“You don’t intend to change the way you do things even if the same test was repeated again, do you?”

“Yeah. I don’t. I’ll bring you down outside the tests.”

Ryuuken proudly replied that this was their way of doing things.

“I see. I guess we’re not going to agree on anything, no matter what I say.”

“You were able to temporarily return to C Class by a narrow margin. But don’t think you can win again just because of that. You’re a pathetic sheep, already stuck in the swamp. No matter how much you struggle in the mud, no, the more you struggle, the deeper you sink. That’s your destiny, isn’t it?”

“We’ve been losing so much lately, so that sounds painfully true.”

“I’ll say it again, but you were only saved by the content of this Special Test.”

“I won’t deny that.”

Ryuuen had his own aim in persistently clashing with Ichinose.

He believed that he could see through the other party by arguing in this way.

However, he could not.

The gaps that Ichinose would have shown in the past were not there at all.

“The class you’re going to face in the Final Test is Ayanokoji’s class. That class is a nuisance, you know? Even more so than Sakayanagi, whom I plan to destroy. In other words, defeat is inevitable for you. It’s not just me, I’m sure Sakayanagi and the others also think so. By the end of the school year, you’re going to be finished.”

Ryueen pressured Ichinose to give up her hopes by saying that this win doesn’t mean anything.

Without an immediate reply, Ichinose stood still and listened to him talk.

“It’s great for Ayanokoji and his class. They don’t have to deal with me or Sakayanagi, but instead get to fight the small fry and obtain a lot of class points. I can’t believe how lucky they are.”

Ignoring her lack of response, Ryuuen relentlessly attacked Ichinose, trying to push her into a corner.

“That’s true. If we lose in the final test, that may be it for us.”

If an even bigger gap than there is now opens up in a direct confrontation, it would be almost impossible to make up for it in 1 year.

“So, I’m gonna tell you the way to graduate in A Class.”

“Is there a way to do that?”

“By the end of the final test, the road to A Class will be closed for you. In which case, the only other option you have will be to collect private points to graduate in A Class.”

“It would take an unbelievable amount of money to save 40 people. I don’t think that’s possible.”

“You can’t save everyone, but what about just one? Just 20 million points. You can collect money from your class for a good cause. I’m sure they’d entrust you with 10 or 20 million. You can just use that money in the end.”

“It’s an embezzlement if I use the money that everyone entrusted me with to move to another class. The school won’t approve it.”

“Won’t they? It’s true that if someone like me or Sakayanagi does the same thing, we’ll be punished. We would be expelled without question. But, I don’t think it will be the same for you.”

“Why?”

“You’re a good-natured person, so they will sympathize with you and understand your feelings. Even if you’ve embezzled the funds, tell the school that they gave it to you on their own. If no one sues you, it’s not an embezzlement. I can’t say that it’s 100%, but it’s a good chance to get to A Class.”

“That’s very interesting, but I think I’ve had enough already.”

Ichinose, who now knew the reason for the invitation, had no reason to stay any longer.

“I think I should leave now.”

“I was going to play with Suzune or Sakayanagi after this, but if there’s a fight where expulsion is possible, your class will also be my target. I’ll erase all of your friends that you’ve desperately been trying to protect.”

This is a half-bluff.

From Ryuuen’s point of view, Ichinose is not yet recognized as an obstacle.

It was a threat with a warning to keep Ichinose in check.

Hearing the threat face on, Ichinose smiled.

"I'll just stop you before you can do that, then. I'll just get you expelled from school if I have to."

"Heh. You think you can get rid of me, or anyone else for that matter?"

Ichinose may be a good-natured person, but she hates it when others get hurt.

This has been the impression of her from not only Ryuuen but also everyone else around her for the past two years.

"I guess you've come a long way by just being able to lie shamelessly."

"I'm surprised that you're so chatty with me. I'm not someone you or Sakayanagi-san should be worried about. Just like you said, I have no future. You shouldn't care about me."

Thick clouds covered the sky and the sound of rain became stronger.

Before long, the smile on Ryuuen's face faded as he pondered Ichinose's words.

The woman in front of him was not worth the trouble.

He thought he was treating her as such.

After cooling off, he realized that he'd been rather insistent about her.

"I won't show anyone mercy from now on. I'm going to use any means to win."

"That doesn't sound like you at all, even as a bluff."

"I just realized that I have no time to worry about it any more. That's all there is to it, really."

A reckless idea quietly faded away from Ryuuen's mind.

“You won’t show anyone mercy, huh? It seems that you’ve been very attached to Ayanokoji lately. If that’s the case, isn’t the first thing you need to take care of Karuizawa’s existence?”

Just a joke.

A usual harassment from Ryuuen to upset Ichinose.

That was about it, but Ichinose continued to softly smile.

“Attached?”

“This school is a small place, rumours spread quickly.”

Ryuuen was already aware of the increase in contact between the two after gathering information.

He had some guesses about Ichinose’s one-sided feelings too, and he was sure that he was right.

“Why don’t you act more selfishly without restraining yourself? I’ll help you get rid of Karuizawa if you want.”

Impatience, rage, frustration or disgust.

Show whatever feelings you have.

This was the agitation Ryuuen was aiming for.

“So you know about it too. There’s no need to hide it then, I guess.”

Ichinose, still faintly smiling, looked into Ryuuen’s eyes and replied without hesitation.

“I don’t want to expel Karuizawa just because of my personal feelings. That’s a different matter.”

A good person, after all, despite the strong words.

Ryuuen then was about to continue his attack, but...

“But you’re wrong, Ryuuen-kun. I’m enough of a selfish person.”

Saying this, Ichinose put her hand on her chest and smiled.

“If you have a problem you can’t solve, just think about it. If you still can’t come up with the answer, try taking action. That opens up most paths.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, who knows?”

Ichinose thought back.

The night of the school trip.

Her destiny began changing that day.

A small chance.

No, it was a result drawn out by instinct, which does not even consider possibilities.

That night when everyone was at the inn.

A blizzard.

Herself disappearing.

How would her classmates move and what would happen if a big deal was made out of it?

It wasn’t anything surprising that Ayanokoji found her.

At that time, at that moment, everything was inevitable.

Something unpleasant clung to Ryuuen’s hand holding the umbrella, and then to his whole body.

“That’s enough, isn’t it? I’m going to the gym now. I don’t want to waste even a second of my happy time.”

Ryuuuen sensed that all the analysis he had made of Ichinose up until now had been negated.

Ichinose no longer showed even a hint of interest towards Ryuuuen.

She began walking, passed Ryuuuen by and headed for Keyaki Mall.

“I take back what I said, Ichinose.”

Ryuuuen turned around to Ichinose’s back and began speaking.

“We may be lucky after all that we’re not going to run into you in the final test.”

A premonition.

It was a remark to respect the fact that, even if for a single moment, Ryuuuen had felt more danger from Ichinose than he did from Sakayanagi.

A rain that won't stop. Ichinose Honami and Ryuuen Kakeru.



ANIME ANYWAY
FAN TRANSLATION

Afterword

This is Kinugasa. We're completely in the new year 2023 now. I'm looking forward to another year with you all. Last year was very busy in various ways, including the second season of the anime.

The third season is coming up this year, so I think it will be busy this year too.

This is a personal matter, but I've recently developed a routine in my weekday activities. I'm not getting enough exercise because of my desk job, so I'm either walking or riding my bicycle. I spend the rest of the day trying to come up with ideas for things to do until lunch time, and then I go home. I stay at my workplace until night, work, and sleep. I repeat this process five times a week. As for my weekends, I spend half the day working and half the day playing with my children. Weekdays pass in a flash, but the weekend days feel three times as long... But surprisingly, I come up with more interesting ideas on such days. As for a recent worry I've been having, it always takes a while for me to get better after catching a cold, but my cough and runny nose haven't gone away since before Christmas. Both over-the-counter and hospital medicine have been barely effective, and I still don't feel like I'm going to fully recover any time soon... The cough is especially bad. I feel especially bad when I have a coughing fit while shopping at a supermarket or something, even through a mask. Please let me get warm and healthy soon!

Now, let's talk about the main story from here. With this volume 9, the long second term arc is over. I want to thank all of you for being with me up until now. I would be very happy if you continue to keep me company. Ayanokoji, and the other characters also are preparing for the third term, and year three. I think that the contents of the third term arc will be a little harsher than of the second term, so please understand that in advance.

And, the next installment will be about the winter holiday as is the custom.

Considering that my recovery time will decrease for the meantime, the next volume loosely (probably) based on the winter holiday will probably be an important one. We will be apart for a little while again, but I'm looking forward to seeing you again before this summer.

Thanks...

Thank you, the reader, for reading this Translation of Year 2 Volume 9. I hope you had fun. This Volume certainly had some real shocker moments with some characters. Despite the special exam not being the focus of the volume, this exceeded expectations in other regards. So, overall, it was really enjoyable. Also as mentioned above in the afterword by the author, Season 3 will be this year too! And who knows how close it is? June? July? Or late in winters? There's no info yet but it will soon be announced, which I am looking forward to. Speaking of which... Also looking forward to the next volume which will be Year 2 Volume 9.5 (Release Date - June 25, 2023). With the way things are going these next couple of volumes might get dark and who knows Y2V9.5 could contain some unexpected events. Ah... Can't wait for it all to happen!

So, Look forward to it. I am really excited for Year 2 Volume 9.5 and for more updated information on it you can follow me [here](#). I will keep providing you with the best quality translation of Classroom of the Elite for as long as I can. Again, Thanks for the Support everyone!

Special Thanks to -

[Andrei-Vladimir Nedel] [Mark Ciemiega] [Podran] [Someone]
[Alexander Davis] [Juan Garcia] [Adrien Minne] [Anonymous]

For directly supporting me through [Paypal](#) and [Bmac](#).

Hope to see you all again soon!

Have a great time Ahead~