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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2
NOVEL
11

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
YEAR 2
NOVEL 11


I let Ibuki back off, and now Horikita stood before me.
"You can start anytime."
"I intend to."
I thought she might've paused for a moment to take a breath, but apparently not. She immediately tried to grab my left forearm, further up from my wrist.


"You're early."
It was still a little before we were scheduled to meet, and I didn't realize that she was already waiting.
"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."
"Morning. Sorry for asking you to come out so early in the morning."
"It's all right. So, what did you want to talk to me about? Is it something that would be difficult to say over the phone?"


RYUUEN KAKERU
SAKAYANAGI ARISU


11
WELCOME TO THE CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

NOVEL 11

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku



Seven Seas Entertainment

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POSTSCRIPT



Chapter 1:
Yamamura Miki's Soliloquy

BEFORE I KNEW IT, I found myself alone.

It wasn't as though anyone particularly disliked me.

I simply didn't catch anyone's attention, that's all.

I am a shadow. I have no presence.

Forget about getting people to like me, I couldn't even get people to *dislike* me.

So in the end, I've always been alone.

That's how it was in kindergarten, in primary school, and in junior high school. I didn't have anyone you could call a friend, and I spent a lot of time alone. I couldn't develop the ability to talk to people, so I just remained as I was, someone who doesn't stand out at all. Even after entering high school, that didn't change.

But I thought that was okay.

It was like I forced myself to accept the idea that this was a good thing about me...

I thought that, even when I became an adult, I could just live quietly and alone.

And so...I exist here, quietly.

"...I think that... I think that losing really doesn't...suit Sakayanagi-san after all..."

"You could try telling *her* that. No one has the right to condemn your actions."

What is this sensation, this feeling seeping into my heart?

I don't understand.

I didn't understand.

I simply didn't know.

...until that day.

Chapter 2:
The Elusive Student–Teacher Meeting

ONLY ABOUT A MONTH and change had passed since the Survival and Elimination Special Exam had ended. Although Kamuro being selected for expulsion came as a surprise to the second-year students, partly because of her position close to Sakayanagi, the shock had worn off. After all, it wasn't as if there were really any students in the other classes who had a close relationship with Kamuro to begin with. However, that wasn't the only reason why the surprise didn't last long. The effects of familiarization couldn't be ignored either. We students were becoming increasingly numb to the pain of losing our friends.

As soon as we February arrived, the date and details of the previously announced student–teacher meetings were provided to us. Meetings were to be held over a period of five days, with fifteen minutes allotted per student. To accommodate these meetings, the school made afternoon classes into self-study periods and took advantage of the periods of free time after classes. Students would be called into separate rooms as needed.

The landscape outside as seen from the classroom window was beginning to ebb significantly as the sun was setting. Today already marked the fifth and final day of meetings, and my meeting had been assigned the final time slot. As I was waiting in the classroom, I received instructions from the teacher via my phone to come to the career counseling office, so I headed over right away. There were hardly any students left in the school, and pretty much the only ones who I occasionally passed were the ones on their way back to the dorms after club activities. Arriving in front of the career counseling office, I loosely formed my hand into a fist and lightly knocked three times. As expected, I heard Chabashira-sensei's voice in response, giving me permission to enter the room.

"Please pardon the intrusion," I announced.

Pleasantries out of the way, I quietly opened the door and my eyes caught sight of the teacher sitting down, her fingertips gliding across a tablet.

“Ah, there you are. Please take a seat.”

After glancing at me for just a moment, she returned her focus to her tablet.

“You seem busy,” I remarked.

“As a homeroom teacher, you get busy around this time of year whether you like it or not,” said Chabashira-sensei. “That said, I do feel a little more relaxed knowing today’s the last day of the student–teacher meetings. Scheduling the two oddballs at the end was the correct choice.”

With that, I was instructed to take a seat, so I sat down in the empty chair across from the desk.

“The…two oddballs?” I asked.

“What, are you shocked to be lumped in with Kouenji?” she shot back.

“I would be lying if I said I didn’t think anything of it,” I replied.

Chabashira-sensei chuckled a little and then placed her tablet on the desk.

“You think that Kouenji is more of an oddball than you?” said Chabashira-sensei. “Well, I suppose I can understand why you’d want to think so, but from my perspective, there isn’t that much of a difference between you. You’re plenty odd yourself.”

So that was what she thought of me, with her teacher’s perspective. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to deny it, but I decided to just grin and bear it—like water off a duck’s back.

“Now, then, I don’t have that many opportunities to speak one-on-one with my students. Before we get into talking about your career path, I’d like to hear about your life here at school. If there’s anything that you feel the school has room for improvement, I’d like to hear it,” said Chabashira-sensei.

“There isn’t anything in particular.” I replied. “Personally, I’m satisfied.”

“I see,” said Chabashira-sensei. “And you’re not dealing with any interpersonal troubles or anything else that you’d like to talk about?”

“Nope,” I answered.

Chabashira-sensei gave a bit of a wry smile at my lack of hesitation. “Most students have an opinion or two to share, or even if they don’t have anything to share, they at least pretend to think about it for a moment or two. Then again, you’re not exactly the type to hold back just to be polite.”

She seemed a little perplexed by my faster-than-imagined responses, but that couldn’t be helped.

“It’s because I don’t have any actual complaints, honestly,” I replied.

If I had any requests for anything, I probably would’ve just been direct about it.

“I suppose it’s fine if that’s the case, but…there’s really nothing?” she asked again.

She reiterated her concerns as a homeroom teacher again, perhaps because she’d had some of her own.



“No, I don’t,” I responded. “I’m satisfied with my school life, and there’s nothing in particular troubling me.”

“I see… Well, that’s very good, then,” said Chabashira-sensei.

She couldn’t hide her concern, but for the time being, she seemed to trust in her student’s words. It seemed like she typed something to that effect into her tablet.

“I have to say, you’ve changed quite a lot yourself, Chabashira-sensei,” I remarked.

She sighed and gave a forced smile, perhaps because she’d heard that before.

“I don’t think I’ve changed,” said Chabashira-sensei. “Well, if anything, I think you could say that I’ve become more honest than before.”

She’d also experienced the Unanimous Special Exam as a student, and now she had also experienced it as a teacher. What had she gained, and lost, through those two experiences? Thinking back on how, when I first came to this school, I couldn’t even imagine the sight of the teacher before me cracking a smile made me feel a bit nostalgic now.

“…*Ahem*. Moving on. If you have any concerns about your life here at this school, please do not hesitate to let me know.”

“Understood,” I replied.

With that clear answer, the prelude to the actual meeting had swiftly ended, and we moved on to the heart of the student–teacher meeting.

“I’d like to know if you have any firm ideas about whether you wish to go on to higher education or find a job after graduation,” said Chabashira-sensei.

For high school students, this juncture was a major turning point in their lives, which was precisely why teachers needed to show students the correct path and prevent straying from it. However, in my case, I was sure that I wouldn’t be able to meet Chabashira-sensei’s expectations.

“I believe that my relatives will decide everything, as far as my future career is concerned. I don’t think there’s anything to discuss here,” I replied.

“Your relatives will decide,” asked Chabashira-sensei. “Meaning that you will follow what your father says?”

The fact that my mother wasn’t in the picture was something that Chabashira-sensei knew from my profile.

“Yes,” I answered.

“I see. It’s not as though there aren’t students out there who prioritize their parents’ wishes, but it is rare. However, most parents would say that they want their children to either go on to higher education or find work,” said Chabashira-sensei. “Even this school considers the input from legal guardians, and actually, there are many cases where the teachers relay the parents’ wishes to their children in these meetings. But thus far, we have not received any contact from your family regarding higher education or employment.”

It might be strange for a student to lack any set path, even if that was their parents’ wishes, but it wasn’t necessary for me, who wasn’t headed for the worlds of work or higher education. Therefore, it was unnecessary for anyone to contact the school and notify them, not that Chabashira-sensei had a reason to know that.

“Are you saying there’s no problem?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s right. It’s not a problem, but… Hypothetically, supposing that you do want to go on to higher education, now would the time to be working toward that. You would need to start practicing for university entrance exams that are on the level of your preferred school, and—”

Chabashira-sensei had started going off on a spiel, sounding exasperated, but then she suddenly stopped. Sitting upright and straightening her posture, she made direct eye contact with me.

“I don’t know much about your past,” she said. “And it was wrong of me to try to take advantage of you before by making it appear as though I did. But now, as your homeroom instructor, I want to have a firm understanding of the abilities of the students under my charge. That’s my duty.”

“I understand. I have no intention of interfering with that,” I replied.

I couldn’t see her tablet screen very well due to the reflective surface, but she’d be the one to get in trouble if the fields she was meant to fill in for each student were left blank this time. And while it depended on the school, in some cases, it was the teacher’s performance and evaluation that would determine whether a student’s career path was realized and whether they would enter a respected university or workplace.

“Then let me ask you this: If your parents do wish for you to go on to higher education, is it safe for me to assume that you will meet those expectations?” asked Chabashira-sensei.

The future wasn’t going to change no matter how I answered. However, it would be cruel to meaninglessly lower her evaluation because of impurities like me. The best thing to do here would be to give Chabashira-sensei an answer that was at least a little useful.

“I think that I can pass, no matter the university,” I replied.

“…Is that so? Normally, I’d warn you and say that was an idiotic statement, but coming from you, I’m sure it’s true. Even I understand that much.” Having accepted my statement, Chabashira-sensei continued, “It would seem that you’ve received quite an accelerated education. If you’re smart enough to be able to declare that without hesitation, then I can’t help but feel that I’d like you to contribute more regularly to the class, but… Let’s just ignore that matter for now.”

She finished typing something into her tablet and looked up at me.

“I understand the current situation. But Ayanokouji, what is your personal opinion? I know that you’re minding your family’s wishes, but don’t you have a vision of the future that you’d like to aim for?” she asked.

“I don’t. Even if I did, I unfortunately don’t have the authority to make that decision.”

Given that fact, this discussion was a waste of both of our time.

“My apologies. That might have been a rude question on my part,” said Chabashira-sensei.

“It doesn’t bother me. Truthfully,” I answered, “I just don’t have any plans for the future. If I do find something I want to pursue, I’ll consult with you about it, though.”

“Understood. Well, then, at any rate, you’ve said that you will be following your family’s wishes for now. In that case, could we say that we’ll officially decide on your career path at the parent-teacher meetings over spring break, after the end of the third term?” asked Chabashira-sensei.

“Yes, that’s correct,” I replied.

That being said, there was no way that a meeting between the teacher, myself, and my father was going to happen. The best I could see happening was a messenger coming on behalf of that man, and we’d simply have a pointless conversation with no substance. Nothing related to the White Room would be mentioned.

“Your parent-teacher meeting is currently scheduled for the first of April. Since it’s been quite a while since you’ve seen your father, we can take more time for the meeting, if necessary. I hope you’ll consider it a good opportunity to talk about your future plans, without hesitation,” said Chabashira-sensei.

She spoke as though she didn’t have any doubts that my father would be there. No, wait, hold on. Was this actually going to happen?

“...May I ask one question?” I didn’t think it was possible, but I decided to ask anyway, since it was worth making sure.

“Hm?”

“You’re sure that my father is coming? Not someone else, like a representative?” I asked.

Chabashira-sensei nodded with a puzzled expression, perhaps because she couldn’t glean what my intentions were by asking.

“Yes,” she replied, “that’s what I’ve been told.”

“That’s impossi—didn’t he immediately turn down the request for a parent-teacher meeting on the very same day it went out?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s true that when we first emailed your father about the parent-teacher meeting, he responded saying that he intended to

send a representative, citing his busy schedule.” Chabashira-sensei’s face showed a lack of understanding, but a degree of sympathy as well. “So what you said is technically correct. However, just the other day, when we gave him the specific date for the parent-teacher meeting with that initial plan in mind, things seemed to have changed.”

While checking on her tablet, perhaps just to be extra sure, Chabashira-sensei continued speaking.

“A phone call came for me, and I got a message that your father would be stopping by in person. I am absolutely certain that’s what was said, since I heard it from the man himself,” said Chabashira-sensei.

“Well, then…” I uttered.

What curious turn of events even led to this? That man wasn’t one to retract his previous statements. At least, that was certainly the case for us White Room students. So, even though he definitively stated that he wouldn’t be meeting me at this school, he was deliberately going out of his way to come to the parent-teacher meeting after all?

It must have happened how I was imagining it, because I just heard that he refused the invitation at first. Nevertheless, to do a complete reversal and say that he intended to come himself? It would be impossible not to think that there was a hidden side to this.

“You said that you talked to my father, but what kind of conversation did you have, exactly?”

“What kind of conversation did we have? We didn’t discuss anything particularly important, really. He had already arranged for a representative to come, but he said that he would attend the parent-teacher meeting because he was able to find the time. However, he did add that, in the event there were any changes in the schedule, no matter how slight, to let him know. That’s not so unusual for busy parents, is it?” asked Chabashira-sensei.

“I suppose not, no,” I answered.

Under normal circumstances, you’d assume that he originally couldn’t find the time to attend the parent-teacher meeting, but

after looking at his schedule again, he managed to free up some time and contacted the school. That sequence of events would be easy enough to understand.

"It's just..." Chabashira-sensei had been about to say something, but she stopped herself. "Oh, well, I suppose this isn't something I should tell you."

"It's just what?" I asked, trying to nudge her for any clue, no matter how small.

"It's nothing major. It's just...I thought it was a little odd. Normally, if there are changes to the schedule, parents would of course want to be notified. However, that would be limited to changes in the date and time of their own children's parent-teacher meetings. However, your father said to contact him if there was even the slightest change in the current schedule for the entire class," said Chabashira-sensei.

"Meaning, for example, even if the meeting for a totally unrelated classmate was changed to a different day?" I asked.

"Yes, exactly. I had thought he was being somewhat high-strung about petty things, but if he's just asking to be informed, there's no harm in that," said Chabashira-sensei.

So she was saying that she'd agreed to the request without thinking about it too deeply. However, if that man agreed to participate in a parent-teacher meeting, then there had to be a reason for it.

"If it's all right, would it be possible to show me the schedule for the parent-teacher meetings?" I asked.

"The schedule? Well, sure, okay. There shouldn't be a problem with showing it to you." Chabashira-sensei turned her tablet toward me so that the screen was visible. "Here's the list for the entire class's parent-teacher meetings. Essentially, it follows the same order as these student–teacher meetings. In other words, you're scheduled to go last, Ayanokouji."

March 26th, 28th, and 30th and April 1st. The schedule showed that the parent-teacher meetings were going to be held over a total of four days. Just as Chabashira-sensei had said, my

name was listed at the end of the day on the first, at six in the evening.

"As you can see," she said, "there's nothing particularly special about it. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, thank you very much," I answered.

"I'm not saying something like 'Don't be so worried about parent-child relationships' or anything." She turned the tablet back around toward herself. "The details of your relationship are none of my business. But there isn't a parent out there who doesn't love their child. If I had to guess, he probably felt he couldn't abandon you."

"You might be right," I replied.

There was no point in discussing that man with Chabashira-sensei, so I figured I'd just agree. But honestly, it was inconceivable that he would show up for a parent-teacher meeting just because he felt like it. Was it that he couldn't leave things to others anymore and decided to take matters into his own hands to get me expelled from school? Even if that were the case, he should have already learned from before that it was pointless to come here personally. As for why he decided to come to the parent-teacher meeting, right now, I still had no idea.

2.1

MY STUDENT–TEACHER MEETING ended, leaving me with some mysteries to think over. I headed back to the dormitory before it got dark out and got on the elevator. I had dinner plans with Kei at seven, so I needed to start preparations to have things ready in about an hour or so. The doors opened and I got off the elevator, still putting together a detailed list of things to do in my head.

First, I'll head back to my room and wash my hands, then—

Just as that thought was going through my mind, I noticed an unusual visitor waiting for me, leaning against the door to my room.

"Yo, Ayanokouji. You're sure back late."

It was Hashimoto Masayoshi, a student from Sakayanagi's class. He lightly brushed off his knees, as though he had grown tired of waiting.

"Seein' as how you're alone, I'd wager you weren't out on a date," said Hashimoto, peeking into the elevator to confirm it was empty.

"I had my student–teacher meeting today," I answered. "That's why I'm back late."

"Ohhh, gotcha... I didn't think of that," said Hashimoto. "Anyway, I wanted to talk to you. You got a minute?"

He admitted that he hadn't planned for me to be late, but he left out the reason he was waiting for me in the first place.

"This doesn't feel like a conversation to have standing around in the hallway," I replied.

"That's right," Hashimoto confirmed. "I'd really appreciate it if you could take that into consideration."

In that case, I supposed I couldn't just ignore him after all.

"If you're fine with having this talk in my room, you can come inside," I replied.

It seemed like it would eat into my time to prepare dinner, but I could accommodate him to some extent, at least. Without a reason to refuse him, I decided to invite Hashimoto inside.

"Sorry 'bout this," said Hashimoto.

"I can hear you out, but please don't expect too much from me," I replied.

"Honestly, I'm grateful to get even that right now," said Hashimoto.

With a faint, self-deprecating chuckle, Hashimoto gently patted my back while I inserted my key into the lock. As I opened the door to my room, I glanced over at the emergency exit for just a moment. I sensed something, like I was being watched, but I couldn't tell whether Hashimoto had the same feeling. I decided to just head on inside without paying any mind for the time being.

"Sorry for barging in... *Phwew!*" Hashimoto whistled at the traces of Kei scattered all about. "Huh, I guess getting a girlfriend

really does add a little somethin' to your room," said Hashimoto.

"Is it okay if I sit down on the bed?" asked Hashimoto. "Erm, wait, that's probably kinda awkward, isn't it?"

"Awkward?" I replied. "I don't mind; you can do whatever."

Then, after asking me permission to sit down on my bed, Hashimoto slowly did just that. Did Hashimoto have reservations about sitting on other people's beds? I was curious.

"So?" I prompted. "What did you want to talk about?"

"It's a pretty heavy convo," said Hashimoto. "I'm really agonizing over what to do with myself in the future, and I'm hopin' you could help with that."

It sounded like he was getting to the point right away rather than circling around, but I immediately felt like something was off. However it would've been insensitive to interrupt, so I just let him keep going for a bit.

"What to do with yourself in the future?" I repeated.

"You already heard what people have been sayin', haven't you? 'Bout what caused Kamuro-chan's expulsion?" asked Hashimoto.

"I've heard some rumors, but nothing too serious." I replied. "They said that someone connected with Ryuuen leaked information during the special exam. As a result, Class A ended up sinking into last place."

"Spot on. That's some good insight," confirmed Hashimoto. "The minute information was leaked during that special exam, there was no way to win."

As Hashimoto said, the decisive factor in Class A's defeat was betrayal in the form of an information leak. If it hadn't been for the leaker, it was highly likely that Class A wouldn't have come in last place.

"The very first one to be suspected was yours truly," said Hashimoto. "Now, day after day after day, I'm gettin' icy looks from lots of people in class."

In truth, it wasn't just limited to his class. The act of betraying one's class was something that shocking, that threatening.

“To be honest, I’d heard that too.” I replied. “I sympathize with your current situation.”

It was true that those accusing Hashimoto were the loudest voices right now. They were saying that he must have been in contact with Ryuuen and made a secret arrangement with him to betray his class. Although you could say that was a natural turn of events for people to suspect him, considering that Hashimoto had been seen engaging in a number of suspicious activities more than once in the past. However, none of those voices had any solid evidence. Currently, people were suspecting Hashimoto as the traitor just by process of elimination.

“So, do I just have no choice but to give up in this situation then? That’s what it feels like,” Hashimoto lamented. “They suspect me ’cause of the stuff I usually do,”

“If you don’t want to meekly accept the situation and cry yourself to sleep over it, then you can take action and appeal your innocence,” I replied.

“I dunno ’bout that. They say innocent until proven guilty, but I think it’s the other way around out there in the real world,” said Hashimoto. “If you clumsily stake your claim while you’re under suspicion, those suspicions only get stronger. People who have already assumed that someone is guilty will doubt every word from the person they’re doubting, even without evidence.”

It was the textbook definition of the echo chamber phenomenon. Students with similar opinions would get together, thinking that said opinion is correct. That tendency could be especially pronounced in an insular space like this school. The trouble was that, short of providing definitive evidence of his innocence, there was nothing Hashimoto himself could do about this.

“Maybe you’re right,” I replied. “Choose silence.”

“Yeah?”

As long as Hashimoto couldn’t clearly refute their claims and prove them wrong, the situation wasn’t going to change, no matter what he said. In fact, a poor defense might just create even more doubt.

“I’m gonna cry, dude,” said Hashimoto, raising his hands to cover his eyes.

Upon seeing that, I called out to him. “Don’t you think that’s enough of an act? What’s the reason behind your betrayal of Sakayanagi?”

Hearing my words, Hashimoto suddenly stopped, and the fingers which had been placed over his eyes slowly pulled away. “Hey, now, come on, let me at least keep up the charade for a little while longer,” said Hashimoto. “Now I feel like an idiot for making a show of being all ‘poor me’ and stuff.”

“I felt it was just a waste of time.” I replied. “It’s already late, and I’d like to get started on preparing dinner as soon as possible.”

I gave him a reason to spit it out, without mentioning the fact that Kei would be coming to my room later.

“What, you’ve got a date planned with your girlfriend or something?” he asked.

“Something like that,” I replied.

“Whaddaya mean, ‘something like that’?” said Hashimoto. “Come on, dude, our friendship should be a bigger deal than any girl.”

“Sorry, but that’s an impossible ask given the order the promises were made in,” I replied. “And besides, I don’t remember us having such a strong friendship.”

After hearing the facts, Hashimoto placed both of his hands on the bed and sighed.

“Well, if you calmly understand the situation, then that’s good,” he said. “That should make things easier.”

After a brief pause, he immediately touched on the heart of the matter.

“Why do you think I betrayed Sakayanagi?” Hashimoto asked me his own question before answering mine, wanting me to think about it.

“I don’t know that much,” I replied. “The only motivation I can think of is getting a large number of Private Points.”

I simply described the scenario that was envisioned by the general public. However, I was skeptical that something like that would be worth enough to commit an act of betrayal. Sure, it was true that he made Sakayanagi lose, with egg on her face, but it was just once. And on top of that, they lost 100 Class Points. Although the expulsion of Kamuro, someone whose position was close to Sakayanagi, was significant, that was nothing more than a byproduct of the situation; it was unlikely that was included in the negotiation stage or in the rewards. Five hundred thousand or a million? Even if it was more than that, that was too cheap a reward for betraying the class.

"I'm just asking for your opinion, Ayanokouji," Hashimoto said. "Not an answer anybody else would come up with."

So, he was fully aware that I hadn't answered him seriously.

"Sorry, but I don't feel like sharing my opinion," I answered.

"Huh? Why not?" he asked. "'Cause you and I got nothing to do with each other?"

"That's not it. It's because you're not taking this conversation seriously."

"Huh? Dude, I'm seriously coming to you for advice, y'know? I'm fighting for my life, here," said Hashimoto.

"If you really mean that, then you're too late," I replied.

"Too late, huh..." he replied.

"A person who is so lost that he can't decide his future course wouldn't betray his class from the start," I said.

Drawing his bow at Sakayanagi was the same as aiming for the head of a general. It was not an impulsive move, but a calculated decision made as a preemptive response to settle everything that would follow.

"I see. Yeah, true enough," said Hashimoto. "Guess it was stupid to say I was comin' to you for advice on my future course and all that..."

That was what had been nagging at me since we started this conversation. Hashimoto apologized repeatedly, and then he went back to the beginning and began to explain properly.

“The reason I betrayed Sakayanagi was because you’re here, Ayanokouji,” he said. “It started with me trying to persuade Sakayanagi to headhunt you for Class A, no matter what it took.”

“Persuade? I can’t say that was very persuasive,” I replied. “What you did was simply an act of self-harm involving the class.”

“That’s an interesting way to put it.” said Hashimoto. “Well, you’re not wrong, though.”

Hashimoto was laughing about it all, but did he have the leeway to be calm right now? It felt as though he was deliberately acting like he was hiding something so that I couldn’t pick up on his true feelings. It was probably because he didn’t want me to see his weakness. I had the sense that, while he was telling me a story that contained some truth, he was still hiding several secrets within it.

“The number of questions just keeps growing. First of all, did you betray Sakayanagi after comparing her and me on a scale, to find out what our respective merits are, or something?” I asked. “Don’t you think that if other students heard that, they’d be unable to understand it and would be greatly perplexed over the whole situation?”

“Anybody perplexed by it is incompetent, my dude,” said Hashimoto. “There’s no need for modesty when it’s just us. I’ve worked much, much harder than most at collecting information, in my own way, and I’m convinced that you are the most amazing one here. I could explain it to you from the start, but that’d be a waste of your precious time.”

“I take it even if I deny it, you won’t be convinced otherwise,” I remarked.

“That’s right, I won’t. You’re capable enough to upset the class rankings all by yourself,” he answered. “That’s why I threatened Sakayanagi that I’ll betray her again the next time if she doesn’t acquire you. If she complies with that, you’ll come over to Class A, and we’ll be rock solid. We’ll have completed the winning formula.”

Hashimoto clenched his fist tightly. This idea was far too reckless and unrealistic.

“I’m sorry to tell you this, but that’s an impossible dream. For the sake of argument, even if I did have the abilities that you

imagine I do, Hashimoto, it'd be pointless if you're making an enemy of Sakayanagi," I cautioned. "Besides, while it's true that I did say that I'd honestly consider it when you invited me before, I don't remember officially agreeing to go."

He was clearly getting ahead of himself, acting rashly of his own accord without getting any firm promises.

"In that case, you're saying that you won't go even if I make the transfer to Class A a reality for you?" he asked.

"As it currently stands, that's all I can say," I replied. "I absolutely do not want to antagonize Sakayanagi by any means."

Hashimoto seemed shocked by my instinctive reaction, but muttered, "Yeah, I figured as much after all," under his breath.

"I would've preferred a yes, but, oh well. Guess it ain't that simple."

The fact that Hashimoto seemed calm and composed when he said that must've meant that he had fully considered the possibility that I wouldn't choose Class A. If so, then what in the world was the purpose of his betrayal? It was difficult to clearly deduce that from the information at hand.

"Hey, do I really look like that much of a traitor to you? I was the very first person Sakayanagi suspected," asked Hashimoto.

"Well, yeah," I replied. "That's just your character."

"Dude, you gotta throw me a bone here..." said Hashimoto. "Nah, just kiddin'. Anyway, even though I was the one who initiated it, I got a declaration of war delivered right to my face. Normally, you wouldn't think that I'd stand a chance, not in a million years."

While Sakayanagi was remorseful that Kamuro had been abandoned, her feelings toward the traitor who had been the cause of that abandonment were probably even stronger than Hashimoto thought.

"But still, am I the only one in the wrong here?" asked Hashimoto. "I felt like I told her the best possible way for us to graduate from Class A right now. She wouldn't listen, so I just took a firm stand. Where's the fault in that?" asked Hashimoto.

"So you fought back. It's just... Your instincts aren't wrong. It is true that there's no guarantee that you'll remain as Class A in the

future simply by continuing to follow orders under Sakayanagi's leadership, with everyone's current abilities as they stand," I replied.

The fact that the gap in Class Points was gradually closing was a practical concern.

"Yeah," said Hashimoto.

"But you also made a big mistake," I added.

"Making an enemy out of Sakayanagi?" asked Hashimoto.

"Yes, but also, no. Making an enemy out of Sakayanagi itself isn't a bad thing," I replied. "Your mistake was taking action without a guarantee that you'd win, even if you made Sakayanagi your enemy. If there was only a slight possibility of winning, you should have taken a different approach."

"I thought about that, but I felt that this was the only way."

"So that's the answer you came to in the end. I can't definitively say whether it was the correct one."

Hashimoto didn't disavow that, but he gave a supposition of what was to come instead.

"It's not like I can undo what I did," he said. "Well, as things stand, do you think that I'll be devoured by Sakayanagi?"

"Yeah, most likely. If you don't want that to happen, then the only option left is for you to beat Sakayanagi," I answered.

"Do you think that I could beat Sakayanagi in a fight?"

"Just making sure, but when you say 'defeat,' you mean getting her expelled, right?" I asked.

Hashimoto nodded. In other words, there was no path for reconciliation. In that case, there was only one answer.

"No matter how you look at it, you're at far too much of a disadvantage," I said. "Though I can't say anything for sure, since it depends on the upcoming special exam, Sakayanagi must be even more eager to get you expelled right now than she is to expel Ryuuen. This is an extreme example, but even if you were to retaliate strongly and force Sakayanagi into expulsion, she'll likely even be prepared to sacrifice herself and bring you down with her."

If that happened, then Ryuuen wouldn't have to take in a troublesome person who betrayed his class like Hashimoto, and

since Ryuuen would be able to bury a powerful enemy by letting that play out, he'd be killing two birds with one stone. Well, no, even if Sakayanagi were prepared to bring Hashimoto down, it'd be difficult for Hashimoto to defeat her in the first place. As far as I could judge, the difference in strength between Sakayanagi and Hashimoto was overwhelming. Hashimoto's opponent was one or two levels better than him, and she even had a Protect Point. In other words, he would need to stab her twice in order to defeat her, metaphorically speaking.

Besides, Hashimoto was only thinking about fighting with Sakayanagi, but that line of thinking was naive. I could understand wanting to believe that once the game was settled, the problem would be resolved; however, even if he could defeat Sakayanagi, that would only be the beginning.

There would be the rebuilding of the collapsing class and those who would come looking for revenge. Problems would keep on coming, one after another, in abundance. He'd betrayed Sakayanagi without any definitive assurance that I'd become his ally, knowing that it would put him at a disadvantage against Sakayanagi. What could you even call that if not bizarre behavior?

"Your flaw, Hashimoto, from what I could see through this conversation, is that you don't trust people."

Hashimoto was the type to not tell you everything and then act on his own judgment. Which was fine when everything was going well, but he had absolutely no one to turn to when things began to take a bad turn.

"I won't deny that," said Hashimoto. "But that seems to be the case for Ryuuen and Sakayanagi as well. They don't trust other people either."

"That's because they've acquired the ability to fight without trusting others is all," I replied.

"Which brings us back to where this conversation started."

It wasn't as though Hashimoto was lacking in foresight. He had intuitively sensed that, in a situation where he made me his enemy, he would eventually lose. Things weren't that bad. However, his tendency to think and decide things on his own—how he'd done things up until now and how he'll continue to do things—was the

harmful effect of not being able to trust others. If Hashimoto did have other people that he could really and truly trust, then perhaps his current situation might've been a little more favorable.

"I don't want you to think that I raised the flag of revolt against Sakayanagi without any chance to win. I'm not that stupid," muttered Hashimoto.

I showed that I was ready to listen to what he had to say and lend him my ear, but he just looked at me in silence for a moment.

"...Before I continue," he finally said, "there's something I really want to confirm with you, Ayanokouji."

Then, Hashimoto posed a question to me. Why did he decide to take a huge gamble and betray Sakayanagi at this time? It was his way to get to what he was about to say.

2.2

APPARENTLY, my discussion with Hashimoto had taken longer than expected.

"Sorry. Karuizawa's coming by after this, right?" Hashimoto said. "I've made you spend an awfully long time talking about this."

"It is what it is," I replied. "It wasn't the sort of conversation that you could just cut off partway through."

"I hope you don't mind me interpreting that as saying it time well spent, then?" he asked.

When I nodded in affirmation, Hashimoto nodded back at me. The look on his face was a little brighter, a little more cheerful now than it was moments ago. It was as though a weight had been lifted. As I was sending Hashimoto off, I decided not to go back to my place just then.

"I think I'll buy dinner at the convenience store today," I mused aloud.

Hashimoto had just been about to press the call button for the elevator, but as I announced my intentions, his finger switched from the 'up' button to the 'down.'

"In that case, can I come along?" Hashimoto asked. "Without any more heavy conversation whatsoever, of course."

Naturally, Hashimoto seemed rather exhausted himself. Sympathizing over the desire to have something quick and easy, we decided to head over to the convenience store together. We got on the elevator and headed down to the lobby, where we happened to bump into Hashimoto's classmate, Morishita, who seemed to have just returned to the dormitory.

"This is quite a coincidence, isn't it, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka?" asked Morishita.

"Yeah, sure is," I replied.

In that moment, I could feel how our relationship was changing. In the two years I'd spent at this school, there were many instances where I had crossed paths with Morishita, and typically neither of us paid any real attention to one another. Now, though, bumping into each other meant that we would stop and naturally start a conversation.

"And then we have the traitor, Hashimoto Masayoshi. This is also a coincidence," said Morishita.

"H-hey, come on now, sayin' something like that right off the bat when you run into me?" protested Hashimoto. "What a way to start a conversation. Cut me some slack."

"My apologies. I have not yet discovered any evidence that would lead me to such a conclusion. I will respectfully correct myself," said Morishita.

Even if Morishita corrected her statements, it didn't change the fact that she thought he was the traitor. I supposed that, in a sense, Hashimoto must have been glad that I was here together with him, although he was, in fact, the traitor.

"Are you not surprised, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka?" asked Morishita.

"People have been gossiping about it for a long time now." I replied. "Besides, unlike the concerned parties in Class A, I'm actually not all that interested in the truth."

"I see. I was certain that it was because you had been consulted by the traitor himself," said Morishita.

Morishita came straight out and said what she suspected, prodding at me mercilessly. While I was admiring her pluck, Hashimoto intervened.

“Knock it off. It’s fine if you suspect me of being a traitor, but you shouldn’t drag outsiders into a situation when Princess hasn’t given the order to,” said Hashimoto, stopping Morishita with a bold way of speaking that made you think he couldn’t be the traitor.

“Yes, you may be right. At any rate, night will soon be upon us,” said Morishita, “Where are you going now?” she asked, turning to me instead of forcing Hashimoto to keep engaging.

“I’m heading to the convenience store right now, to buy dinner,” I replied.

“Me too,” added Hashimoto.

“I did not ask you, Hashimoto Masayoshi, but I see. However, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, I had thought you were someone who, generally speaking, prepared his own meals. Did you engage in conversation with someone, and it ended up getting late?” she asked.

It was true that I was cooking for myself especially often lately, but how exactly did she know that? Morishita’s suspicions only seemed to be growing stronger, and she confidently voiced them.

“I was just in the elevator together with Ayanokouji,” Hashimoto answered for us. “Apparently, his student–teacher meeting ran late.”

Perhaps because he thought it would’ve been bad to answer such a bothersome question, addressing the issue in a casual manner. However, it appeared to have only increased Morishita’s doubts, her suspicious expression becoming even more pronounced.

“That is strange. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka’s student–teacher meeting should have long since ended. It would seem the two of you conversed for quite some time today,” said Morishita.

Perhaps because Morishita was investigating the inner workings of Horikita’s class she had a firm grasp on things that even Hashimoto didn’t know. Was she pressing him out of resentment for trying to casually gloss things over?

“No, I mean, it had nothin’ to do with me,” said Hashimoto, “I have no clue what Ayanokouji was doing.”

“But you appear to have been together with him from the time he got onto the elevator on the fourth floor, yes?” asked Morishita, cutting off his escape route, before casually directing her gaze over toward the elevator monitor.

“Tch, guess we were being watched, huh…” said Hashimoto.

“If it were someone else, they might not mind so much,” said Morishita. “But for you, being seen was a bad thing.”

A bitter smile appeared on Hashimoto’s face as though he were saying, “*You got me*.” But he didn’t seem upset or flustered by this encounter.

“Is this how you conducted yourself, as a turncoat?” asked Morishita.

“Huh? Wait, what does *turncoat* mean?” asked Hashimoto.

“It means traitor,” she explained.

At her explanation, he slumped his shoulders exaggeratedly, as if disappointed.

“Give me a break, Morishita,” said Hashimoto. “We talked about a completely unrelated matter.”

“What unrelated matter?” asked Morishita.

“Can’t say. It’s not proper to share guy talk with a lady, y’know?” said Hashimoto.

Since he was looking for my agreement, I figured I’d just play along.

“You are saying that if it involves a difference in the sexes, I cannot press you. It is an easy method for you to escape questioning,” said Morishita.

“Man, whatever I say, it’s hopeless.” Hashimoto shrugged. Just like had told me not too long ago, the more he opened his mouth, the more he was suspected.

“Well, it’s fine. More importantly, may I accompany you to the convenience store?” asked Morishita.

“Uh, sure, I don’t really mind,” said Hashimoto. “But did you need something from there?”

“Yes. I am sure there must be something. If I go, I’m sure to think of something,” replied Morishita.

She openly stated that she didn’t actually need anything, but we didn’t have the right to refuse her. Besides, we wouldn’t be able to do anything if we turned her down and she simply followed behind us anyway.

“I see,” said Hashimoto. “Well then, all right. Guess the three of us will be going.”

“I suppose that means that it is all right for me to come along,” said Morishita, before quickly turning around and walking off, taking the lead.

“Okay, why’s she takin’ charge and goin’ ahead then?” said Hashimoto. “Man, she’s as incomprehensible as ever. Sorry, Ayanokouji.”

“It’s fine,” I replied. “It’s not a big issue.”

The thought just suddenly occurred to me, but I wondered how Morishita was perceived in Class A. Her Academic Ability score was well known through OAA. However, other than that, I honestly had no clue. Now seemed to be a good time for me to ask.

“What’s Morishita’s reputation in class? Like, as a student?”

“What is she like? She’s exactly what she looks like. Smart but a weirdo. And she’s always doing stuff on her own.”

“You’re saying that she doesn’t have any close friends?” I asked.

“Not that I can think of, no,” said Hashimoto.

Since it was a statement coming from someone so completely devoted to information gathering, I had to give it credence. While looking at Morishita’s back, Hashimoto placed his index finger and thumb on his chin with an air of curiosity.

“That’s exactly why this is so unusual, for her to come up to talk like this,” muttered Hashimoto.

After quietly murmuring that, Hashimoto cast a sidelong glance my way, so I went ahead and made the first move.

“Isn’t she just keeping an eye on the traitor?” I asked.

“Well… There’s a nonzero chance of that being it, sure, but… Anyway, man, you don’t hold back either, do ya?” asked Hashimoto.

“I do show proper consideration if I’m dealing with someone who I need to show restraint around,” I replied.

“Christ, man. Anyway, what I’m kinda curious ’bout is the fact that Morishita isn’t an extreme Sakayanagi believer, as far as I’m aware. Feels like she’s not attached, but not detached, either,” said Hashimoto. “Even so, she’s not the type to be proactive or solve problems on her own, so I don’t see any reason to probe her.”

Morishita wasn’t the type to be proactive? I had to wonder if that was really true. Even though we’d only interacted a few times, my impression of her was the opposite. If anything, I had a strong impression that she was the type of person who independently worked to solve problems.

Of course, it was possible that Morishita used to be like Hashimoto described and had changed her approach after Sakayanagi’s defeat. While Sakayanagi was offering reliable defense and continued winning, Morishita entrusted her with everything. But Hashimoto had to know all that.

Hashimoto wove truth and lies together in what seemed like similar proportions, but you couldn’t tell from how he spoke. Maybe even this situation, with the three of us walking together, wasn’t just a mere coincidence.

Hashimoto wants to make sure Sakayanagi knows that he’s contacted me and that it had been set up indirectly by coincidence. I could see that sort of ulterior motive possibly being at play here. If Hashimoto didn’t want Sakayanagi to be aware, then he wouldn’t have waited out in front of my room, where he could have been seen.

Since Sakayanagi and Hashimoto had each other’s contact information, they could communicate privately whenever they wanted. The goal was making Sakayanagi aware of the fact that the traitor had contacted me, either directly or indirectly. Of course, only Hashimoto himself knew the truth at this point, but I could still find out certain things.

Hashimoto’s truth and lies that he had shown in my room.

The belief that all of one’s actions were for one’s own benefit only.

They want to feel good about themselves and only themselves.

They want to be saved, and only them.

They want to win, and only them…

People don't care what happens to others in the process. That's what Hashimoto thought. If a pacifist were to find out about that, Hashimoto would likely be abhorred as the bad guy. The more I got to know Hashimoto, the more I sympathized with and identified with him. We both lived according to our natures. Essentially, to carry out such evil, you needed the power to do things peremptorily—a power Hashimoto did not have. That was why he mastered the technique of changing to match his environment, like a chameleon. He tried to blend into his environment and survive. That was exactly what he was doing at this moment and what he had been doing until now.

The three of us left the lobby and walked to the convenience store. Once there, I grabbed a basket and contacted Kei on my phone to ask what she wanted. I was going to grab that and combine it with whatever I saw that looked good. Even small bites from the convenience store can make a meal, after all. As we were shopping, we just so happened to bump into someone else who came to the food section of the store after us.

"Oh… G-good evening…"

The greeting had come from a girl in Hashimoto's class: Yamamura Miki.

"I didn't think that I'd run into you here," I replied.

"No, I suppose not," Yamamura agreed, with an awkward and uncomfortable expression.

It seemed like Yamamura's was the presence I felt monitoring Hashimoto from the emergency exit, then. Even after we left the dormitory, I couldn't detect anyone and didn't know who it had been, which was precisely why I thought it was probably Yamamura, and it turned out I was correct.

I didn't know if she was working alone or under Sakayanagi's orders, but it seemed likely that she was keeping an eye on Hashimoto, given the fact that she was on standby even before I got

onto the elevator. Actually, I didn't see any particular reason for Yamamura to be hiding and spying on me right now.

"Oh, hey, if it isn't Yamamura. What a coincidence, eh?" said Hashimoto.

Hashimoto noticed me and Yamamura talking and walked over with curry-flavored cup noodles in hand.

"Good evening…Hashimoto-kun," said Yamamura.

"This is the first time I've seen you stop by the convenience store, Yamamura," said Hashimoto.

Was he simply saying that out of habit, or did he actually catch a whiff of something? Since I didn't know whether what he'd uttered was actually true or not, I simply watched Yamamura for her reaction.

"Um, well, I actually stop by the convenience store quite often… Once or twice a week or so… It's just because I don't stand out very much… I'm sorry," said Yamamura.

"Oh, no, it's okay," said Hashimoto. "I'm the one who should be sorry…"

Hashimoto might have been trying to sound her out, but since he had ended up touching on her lack of presence, he got flustered and hurriedly apologized.

"This is unusual. For you to speak with boys, that is, Yamamura Miki," remarked Morishita.

"You're one to talk, Morishita," said Hashimoto.

"I am at a time where I am a touch interested in the betra—no, I mean in Hashimoto Masayoshi. Is it love?" said Morishita.

"Stop goofing around already, it's not even believable…" said Hashimoto. "Well, I'm sure Yamamura suspects me just the same, anyway."

Hashimoto gave Yamamura a probing look at that, his gaze seemingly saying, "*Isn't that right?*" and she cast her eyes downward to avoid his gaze. The silence, meant for the sake of creating an air of seriousness, didn't fit with the characteristics of the convenience store, creating a sense of dissonance with the light, cheery music. It

wasn’t Hashimoto nor Yamamura who broke the silence, but Morishita.

“While we have this opportunity, let’s shop together. You do not mind, yes?” said Morishita.

“Huh? Oh, uh, un, yes, that’s right… If you don’t mind…me being here, I suppose,” said Yamamura.

The fact that Morishita didn’t read the room from the start seemed to have paid off here. Almost forcibly and without room for argument, it was decided that Yamamura would be shopping with us. Well, a convenience store was, by nature, a place to shop, so it wasn’t terribly out of place.

I didn’t have many opportunities to see Yamamura talking with other students, but I had the impression that she struggled in conversation, even with her classmates. Morishita pulled her along by the sleeve, recommending a product so strongly that she was practically forcing her to take it. And, without being able to turn Morishita down, Yamamura had ended up putting three or four items in her basket.

“You know, it’d be better if you didn’t recommend stuff to her so aggressively,” said Hashimoto.

“Why is that?” said Morishita. “Yamamura Miki is happily accepting my sales pitches.”

“Uh, I don’t think she’s happy at all,” said Hashimoto. “No matter how you look at her, she’s making a face like she’s bothered.”

“Is that so?” asked Morishita.

“U-um…” stammered Yamamura.

Yamamura hemmed and hawed, perhaps because she didn’t know how to respond regardless of which side she took.

“You feel that I am forcing you into making a purchase?” asked Morishita.

“W-well, that’s, I mean…” mumbled Yamamura, swallowing her words at the little verbal push.

“You are saying you do not like this one?” said Morishita. “Come then, I will tell you my next recommendation. Keep this confidential.”

It wasn't like Morishita was working for the convenience store or something, but she tried to direct Yamamura to the next purchase. They went to grab some soft drinks from the cooler.

"Sorry to interrupt your friendly banter, but would you mind stepping aside for a moment?"

While Yamamura and Morishita were having their exchange, a familiar customer came into the beverage section. She seemed to notice me, but perhaps she had overlooked Yamamura, because she bumped into her shoulder, albeit just slightly.

"Oh, I-I'm sorry," stammered Yamamura.

Since the inside of the convenience store wasn't exactly spacious, even a small group of people could end up being in the way of another customer browsing the aisles. It hadn't been that great of an impact or anything, but Yamamura apologized and made way for the other person.

"No, I should apologize, I didn't notice you. Sorry."

Her long silver hair fluttered gently as she took a bottle of green tea out of the cooler.

"I like this particular tea company, Ayanokouji. It has the same kind of umami and fragrance as what you brew in a teapot, but you can enjoy it in a convenient way. Isn't that right?"

Looking at me and using phrasing that sounded like it would've come from an advertising shill from that beverage manufacturer was Kiryuuin Fuuka of Class 3-B.

"I can't really answer that," I replied. "Since I've never had that company's products before."

"That's unfortunate," said Kiryuuin. "You should try them when you get the chance,"

"Are you headed back now, Kiryuuin-senpai?" I asked.

"Yeah. It was later than I expected, so I decided to stop by the convenience store. This girl here, is she your new girlfriend?" asked Kiryuuin.

"No," I replied.

"Oh, um... I'm Yamamura..."

"I am Morishita."

“Yamamura and Morishita, eh? Are you in the same class as Ayanokouji?” asked Kiryuuin.

“No, they’re in Class A,” I replied.

“Oh ho? Having a wide social circle is a wonderful thing,” said Kiryuuin. “You should treasure your friends.”

“This is coming from you, Kiryuuin-senpai?” I asked.

It was a statement that didn’t really sound right from a person who stood out from the crowd among the third-years and was a lone wolf by nature.

“Hello, Kiryuuin-senpai. My name is Hashimoto. I’m also in Class A,” said Hashimoto, politely.

Hashimoto greeted Kiryuuin as she was looking at Yamamura, politely offering his hand, as though he were trying to wedge himself between them. While Kiryuuin casually brushed his hand aside, she nodded.

“I will remember you three,” remarked Kiryuuin.

After a brief conversation, Kiryuuin went on ahead and paid for her items and left the convenience store before we had finished our shopping. Even if it might have only been a token gesture, it was a little surprising that Kiryuuin would say she would remember the three of them, as she didn’t seem to be very interested in other people. But it might have just been a comment without any especially deep meaning behind it, though.

“Wow, so you’re tight with Kiryuuin-senpai too?” asked Hashimoto. “Ain’t she famous for never hanging with anyone else, though?”

“I wouldn’t say that we’re tight,” I replied.

Hashimoto continued staring at Kiryuuin’s back as she headed back to the dormitory.

Chapter 3:
Social Group Camp

THURSDAY MORNING, 9:30 a.m. A pack of buses were idling on the school grounds. The students hopped onboard with light steps and the scent of exhaust fumes in their noses. For most of the second-year students (excluding those in clubs that went on excursions for competitions and such) this was our third outing this year, following the Uninhabited Island Special Exam—and it was a camp event that all grade levels were participating in.

However, they'd already informed us that this was going to be very different from last year's Mixed Training Camp exam. And although you could call this a camp event, it wasn't like any of the ones we'd been to before, so we weren't calling it a special exam.

Something that caught my attention before we departed was the number of buses. Usually, there was one bus per class, which would make for twelve of them if all grade levels were to participate. However, this time, there were only nine buses parked on the school grounds.

Then I saw the students boarding the buses, and the mystery was solved: Only one bus had been prepared for the third-years. That seemed to be because there were an exceedingly small number of third-year students gathered—just twenty. Although it was impossible to be certain since I couldn't see everyone's faces, it looked as though five students had been called from each of year three's four classes, A through D.

Upon receiving our instructions and boarding the buses, we were told that there was no assigned seating, and that we could sit wherever we liked. When Kei heard this, she came over to me as fast her legs could carry her and hugged my arm tightly.

"Sit with me, Kiyotaka," she urged.

Despite the cold stares from some of the guys, I agreed and took the window side of the third seat from the back, to the right of the aisle. Kei sat down next to me on the two-seater right after.

"Wouldn't it have been better to stick with the girls?" I asked.

“I’ll do that on our way back. It’s fine for us to sit together on our way there at least, right?” said Kei.

We already spent most of our private time in each other’s company, but she even wanted to be together when we were on the bus. I wasn’t sure what was different, but she seemed happier than usual. By the time everyone had boarded their respective buses, Chabashira-sensei got on.

“This makes me think back to last year’s camp,” said Kei. “I think I remember talking to you a lot during that too, Kiyotaka.”

“Yeah,” I affirmed.

One year had passed since then. Back then, neither of us had thought that our relationship would’ve deepened this much. Not only with Kei, but my relationships with other people around me had changed greatly as well.

“Oh yeah, that reminds me. I just found out that a movie I like is gonna be playing soon. Let’s see it together when it starts, okay?” said Kei.

Her eyes creasing into a happy squint, Kei showed me an image of the film poster. This was just one casual topic of conversation that came naturally to Kei. However, there was one thing I had to ask.

“When is it scheduled to start playing?” I asked.

“Uh, let’s see, when was it?” She wondered aloud. “When I saw the trailer before, I felt like it said it was gonna start in spring, if I remember right.”

“I’d like to know the specific date,” I replied.

“Hm? What, is there something wrong?” asked Kei. “Uh, let’s see… Oh, they posted it here.”

Kei showed me the website, which said that the film would start playing on March 26th. Fortunately, that was just before the start of the new term, when we were on break from classes for spring vacation.

“Got it,” I replied. “Let’s go check it out.”

“Yay! It’s super interesting,” said Kei. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy it too, Kiyotaka.”

Kei said that with a smile, but that smile hardened as she looked at me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“It’s nothing,” said Kei.

Then Kei looked away from me and started humming a tune and mumbling to herself as she looked over a web page that seemed to be relationship chart of the movie’s characters.

The students were chatting away as they pleased while they enjoyed the view outside their windows. Approximately twenty minutes after the bus had departed, Chabashira-sensei stood at the front of the bus and looked down the aisle at the assembled students, microphone in hand.

“I suppose it’s about time I explained to you details about the camp,” she said. “As we mentioned briefly before we left, You’ll be spending three nights and four days engaging in a social function that will take the form of an experiential learning event, with all grade levels working together.”

Normally, this would’ve been the moment when everyone got tense, but the atmosphere didn’t change at all. The mood was different from usual, as the students were enjoying the scenery outside and relaxing while listening to Chabashira-sensei. She had already said that this wasn’t a special exam, but something different—a social gathering.

“I will reiterate that you should not perceive this social event to be a special exam,” said Chabashira-sensei. “There will be no increase or decrease in Class Points this time whatsoever. There will also be no danger of expulsion, unless you engage in obstructive behavior that is unacceptable for a student. You may receive some Private Points for participating in games, but that participation will not be mandatory this time.”

The fact that Chabashira-sensei was explaining things to us in this way, like she was giving us a thorough reminder, was only natural. The students were becoming more wary the longer they spent at this school. They’d developed a habit of suspecting that there would be something going on behind the scenes, even if they were told something was a social gathering. That was why Chabashira-sensei had announced that this was not a special exam,

that there wouldn't be any fluctuation in Class Points, and that no penalties such as expulsion waited in store. This allowed the students relax.

"It's unfortunate that Ichihashi had to be absent due to illness, but I suppose there's a silver lining there," added Chabashira-sensei.

While colds were common at this time of year, there were a surprising number of students who weren't feeling well.

"I'm sure that some of you have already noticed this, but even though we say that all grade levels are involved, only five representatives from each third-year class will be participating. This decision was made in light of various circumstances," explained Chabashira-sensei, without providing any further details about those circumstances. "For that reason, your main goal will be to socialize with the first-year students, but I'm sure you won't be able to become friends so easily by me just telling you, 'Go and make friends with everyone.' So, first, as soon as we arrive at the camp, we will divide you all into twenty groups. The twenty third-year students who will function as representatives for each of those groups have already been selected, based on the formations of the groups."

I supposed that meant that, rather than deciding the groups when we arrived, they had already been decided and we just hadn't been told yet.

"I will be distributing the group lists now, so please make a note of which one you will be in. While there are some slight differences in the gender ratios, the balance between grade levels and classes has been fine-tuned as much as possible. As for games, winners will be determined in group vs. group competitions," explained Chabashira-sensei.

Chabashira-sensei handed a stack of printouts to the students sitting on either side of the aisle. Those students took their papers and passed the remainder to the students seated behind them.

"The printout also lists little rewards that you can earn from the games, as well as the conditions for obtaining them. You should look over that information too, while you're at it."

"Well, it's not an exam, so I'm feeling pretty relaxed about that, but I still want Private Points. Whether we get a good group or not

will totally change our odds of winning, won't it?" asked Kei.

"Yeah," I replied.

It was natural to hope that you had as many exceptional students as possible in your group, even if it was only just one. Of course, what skills would be required in determining the winners remained to be seen. Hondou, who was sitting in front of Kei and me, stood up and offered us the stack of printouts. Kei took it and passed the remainder back behind her.

"I hope I'm with you, Kiyotaka," said Kei.

The printout included five sheets of paper bound together with a paperclip. They listed the group activities and the participation rewards, and at the bottom of the fifth page, the names of the students listed neatly in a row. As I flipped through, I noticed that a card about the size of a business card had been tucked in between the pages, folded in two. The printouts were made for this class, so the student names were marked up and it wasn't too much trouble to find your own. The names of the absent students were also listed, and while Ichihashi and Ichinose were the only two second-year names listed, there were quite a few absences among the first-year students, with four students out, including Ishigami. I thought it was a coincidence that he was out due to illness, but still, this meant that I wasn't getting an opportunity to interact with him.

"It looks like I'm in...Group 7, with Tanaka-senpai," Kei said. "I guess we're not together, then... But..."

I wondered why Kei, who immediately found her name in the middle of the page, seemed disappointed but also somewhat relieved at the same time.

"But, what?" I asked.

"Well, it's like, we're staying together overnight, and it looks like I'll be sharing a room with the rest of the girls in my group, and it's just, like, I mean, there's someone who I don't want to be around... I'm glad that a certain someone isn't here, I guess, is what I mean."

First thing in the handout, it was printed that, in addition to the fact that attending group activities would be mandatory, guys

and girls would be rooming together as well. I guess Kei noticed that, and that's why she reacted the way she did. Kei didn't specify, but I had no doubt that she was referring to Ichinose. Likely because, although it was actually part of a strategy, Ichinose had surprised Kei by relentlessly nominating her over and over during the last special exam.

"And it's not like I hate Ichinose-san or anything, okay? It's just, I dunno, I feel a little scared," said Kei. But as she muttered those words, she shot me a glare. "You're getting awfully close with Ichinose-san, Kiyotaka." She spoke in a small voice so she wouldn't be overheard. "I just, like, can't help but have a lot of suspicions."

"So that's why you sounded conflicted?" I asked in return.

"Well, I mean," she replied, "there was a possibility that you and Ichinose-san could be together, right?"

It appeared as though Ichinose's presence had unexpectedly grown in Kei's mind, in a bad way.

"My group is the last one, on page five. It looks like I'm in Group 20, with Kiryuuin-senpai," I remarked.

I just took a cursory glance at the list of the twenty total groups, and just as Chabashira-sensei had said, the male-female ratio was as balanced as possible, and in terms of the number of people distributed by class, groups were essentially made up of two people from each class in most classes, with a maximum of three in some and a minimum of one in others. That was probably done to make things as equal as possible.

However, I felt like there was still a sense of inequality to certain aspects of each group, and deviations that bordered on bizarre. The other students were still preoccupied with searching for their names, but it was probably only a matter of time before they erupted with questions.

Kei, who hadn't noticed anything yet, was still disappointed that she couldn't be together with me and was staring at the list aimlessly. So, once again, I directed my attention to the rewards noted at the top of the first page.

Group Rank Rewards

1st Place: 30,000 Private Points for Each Student

2nd Place: 20,000 Private Points for Each Student

3rd Place: 10,000 Private Points for Each Student

4th - 10th Place: 5,000 Private Points for Each Student

11th - 15th Place: 3,000 Private Points for Each Student

16th - 20th Place: 1,000 Private Points for Each Student

* Private Points obtained in Social Group are nontransferable.

* Usage is limited to shopping within Keyaki Mall.

* To receive your rewards, you must fulfill the requirements on your point card.

It didn't seem like we were going to be able to get huge rewards, probably because this event wasn't being categorized as a special exam. There weren't any systems in place where only certain classes would benefit, either. Even so, if a high school student could get extra income, whether that was only 1,000 or 2,000 yen, they naturally couldn't ignore the opportunity, and their fundamental desire would be to want to aim for the top spot. The nontransferability and limited use factors were a downside, but if you were to turn that around, there was an upside too, in that it was virtually impossible to use them for strategies, meaning that those points could be spent freely without reservation. The students continued to stare intently at the list for a long while.

"Um, excuse me… Chabashira-sensei?" Sonoda raised her hand once she had a general grasp of the group distribution. "May I ask a question?"

"Is there something on your mind?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Yes. If we're to play each game separately for each group, then…would this be fair? I mean, I suppose that even if it is impossible to make things completely fair, it does feel like the balance is a little, well, off… I feel that way about Nagumo-senpai's group, for instance."

"That is because the OAA standards have not been taken into account whatsoever in balancing." Chabashira-sensei gave a

forthright answer in response to Sonoda. “It isn’t surprising, then, that there are some instances of extreme bias.”

“Whoa, for real, though. Isn’t Nagumo-senpai’s group pretty crazy?” remarked Ike, having checked Nagumo’s group after Sonoda used them as an example.

Nagumo was impressive, as both the former student council president and a student who had scores of A or better in every OAA category. But what was astonishing was the overall remarkability of the lineup.

First-years:

Class A – Takahashi Osamu, Toudou Rin, Amasawa Ichika

Class B – Hagiwara Chihaya, Fukuchi Hinano

Class C – Namekawa Azuki, Iguchi Yuri

Class D – Tatewaki Aoi, Oosaki Noa

Second-years:

Class A – Sanada Kousei, Sawada Yasumi

Class B – Horikita Suzune, Hirata Yousuke

Class C – Kaneda Satoru, Katsuragi Kouhei

Class D – Kanzaki Ryuuji

In addition to the fact that all the students obviously excelled academically, the group was made up of students who were either highly athletic or, failing that, were otherwise able to follow instructions precisely. Although when it came to outstanding individual ability, there were students such as Sakayanagi, Ryuuen, and Kouenji, but there was no telling what kind of chemical reactions would occur if you threw any of those students together. Considering that this group looked stable, that meant this was probably one of the most versatile, all-around exceptional groups.

Given that, many of the other groups were probably going to be upstaged, whether they liked it or not. Now, if we were talking about a group to which Sakayanagi or Ryuuen belonged, like that

earlier example, they might've been able to make waves to win against this balanced group, but defeat was inevitable for every other group. If there was a game focused solely on academic ability, they would be the first to win on the basis of their overall strength.

"I'm sure that some may find these group allocations somewhat unfair, but it is what it is. The fact that exceptional students are pulled into stable groups is the natural order of things," said Chabashira-sensei, with a printout held in one hand and a hard look on her face.

That look made Sonoda, who had posed the question originally, shrink back in her seat. She just couldn't argue with such a plausible statement. Chabashira-sensei, perhaps thinking that she'd been a bit too threatening, relaxed her expression and smiled a little.

"But it's not as though those people will always win just because they're exceptional. Especially in this case," said Chabashira-sensei, pointing out that it wasn't totally hopeless. She continued her explanation. "We'll be holding games in round-robin competition format over three days during this Social Group camp. Groups will be competing against each other, one-on-one, and the competition order will not be publicly disclosed. Also, in every instance, games will be chosen at random from the list."

Chabashira-sensei verbally communicated detailed rules to us, but here is a summary of the Social Group rules.

Social Group – Overview of Experiential Learning Games

Duration: Held over a period of three days.

Five matches on Day 1

Seven matches on Day 2

Seven matches on Day 3

* Thirty-minute intervals for each game.

Method of competition: All twenty groups will participate in a round-robin tournament.

The competition order will be kept private.

Rules: For each game for each group, five participants will be selected by their third-year representative to play against each other.

Only first- and second-year students can be selected to compete as participants in games.

Games are one-on-one, and the group with three wins will be declared the winner.

Even if it has been determined a group will lose, all five participants must play.

There is no limit to the number of times someone can participate in games; they can participate as much as they like.

Game contents: The school will select from the list at random and announce the game contents as needed.

Victory conditions: Ranking order is determined by the number of wins.

* In the event of a tie for third place or better, additional games will be held.

Looking at the list of games, it became clear that the camp experience really was going to be light. There were activities that you would find at a camp, like pottery and pressed flower making, and there were activities that really were games, like playing cards and table tennis. I had to wonder if these were only possible because we were at a training camp. Of course, there were also some games that would involve academic ability and require you to use your head, but those were probably not important.

There were also creative cultural activities like flower arrangement and bonsai, making for a truly diverse selection. Plus, it looked like we could try them out when we weren't competing, on top of being able to compete two or three times in the same game. Our printouts had all the details: For three nights and four days, we'd be interacting with our classmates while making things, playing games, and competing in the rankings. This might have been boring for students who weren't interested, but honestly, I was very much looking forward to the experience of being able to tap into my creative side.

“Tucked inside your handout is your point card. You can collect stamps whenever you do the various experiential learning activities at the camp. Filling up your card is a condition for receiving the rewards, so be mindful of that,” said Chabashira-sensei.

So it was an item meant to encourage voluntary participation in those learning activities, huh? There were a few small rules, such as a limit on the number of stamps that could be collected in a day and that you couldn’t receive multiple stamps in the same game, but that didn’t seem to be particularly concerning. At any rate, I wanted to try a variety of things that you couldn’t normally do at school. Now that I had an understanding of the content, I could definitely see opportunities for even groups with low OAA scores to make it through. With these rules, you could say that there’s a chance to win, no matter what group you were up against.

“I’m sure that by now you all understand that there’s no need to be overly concerned with winning or losing on this trip,” said Chabashira-sensei. “Of course, it’s fine for you to aim for first place with its rewards, but as I’m sure you can see from the list of various games, the principal focus is on interaction through hands-on learning experiences. It’s even completely fine to interact with other groups and focus on deepening your friendships.”

Thus far, the school had given us various assignments with their various rules, like the special exams. This was the first time that we’d been given the stamp of approval that it didn’t matter whether we won or lost.

“Wow, this is actually, like, really laid-back, isn’t it? For real. Even if you come in last place, you can still get a thousand yen,” said Kei.

After hearing what the camp was about, many students felt relieved, including Kei.

“Yeah. The fact that nothing happens if we lose is pretty significant,” I replied.

After getting their explanations, my classmates began to spend their time congenially, some of them in such good spirits that they burst into song.

“Even though you have a certain amount of freedom, don’t forget that you still have to follow the schedule set by the school,”

warned Chabashira-sensei.

But just like that, the students were given a reminder that there were still some rules. Both Kei and I checked the schedule in the printout.

Wake up
7:00
Breakfast
8:00–9:00
Lunch
12:00–13:00
Afternoon break
13:00–14:00
Dinner
19:00–20:00
Bath times
6:00–8:00 & 20:00–22:00
Social Group
Morning session: 9:00–12:00
Afternoon session 14:00–18:00
Lights out
22:00

Basically, all of our time when we weren't competing was free time. This was an extreme example, but even if you wanted to skip out on lunch to take an afternoon nap or to immerse yourself in the experience of making something, that was left to your discretion. Of course, that wouldn't be the case in the event the leaders of each group ordered their people to participate in games, but there didn't seem to be any penalties if you refused. As for our first day, we would be arriving around noon, and then we would have lunch with our groups followed by the afternoon Social Group session.

“I would like for you to endeavor to behave yourselves in such a way that will not embarrass yourselves as senpai at this camp,” said Chabashira-sensei.

That must’ve been the end of the explanation, because Chabashira-sensei turned off her microphone and took her seat.

3.1

AFTER ABOUT TWO HOURS on the expressway, the view outside my window had changed completely, and we were now deep in the mountains. The bus stopped in front of a facility different from the one we were at last year, and the students began to disembark. The area out in front of the main entrance, where the buses were lined up, was much wider and more open than I had imagined. The building where the students would be sleeping was built like an old ryokan with a long history.

According to the explanation we received from the school, it was built during the bubble era as lodging and a space for events. Inside, the building was equipped with classrooms and other facilities for individual experiential activities. That was probably the reason there were so many different activities available.

“Assemble in your assigned groups. Now, for the next three days, make sure to follow your leader’s instructions while talking with everyone and getting to know each other as you engage in activities,” said Chabashira-sensei.

The twenty third-year students assigned to lead the individual groups put some space between themselves to help their group members spot them. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Kiryuuin standing there with her hands shoved in her tracksuit jacket pockets.

“Well, see you later then, Kiyotaka,” said Kei.

I watched Kei walk off toward her group for a minute before making my way over to Kiryuuin.

“I’m looking forward to working together with you over these next three days, Kiryuuin-senpai,” I remarked.

“Same here,” she replied.

The sixteen total first- and second-year students assigned to be in Kiryuuin's group, Group 20, were as follows:

First-years:

Class A – Toyohashi Garou, Kosumi Dan

Class B – Yanagi Yasuhisa, Eikura Mami

Class C – Tsubaki Sakurako, Shintoku Tarou

Class D – Obokata Kouki, Jitsute Misora

Second-years:

Class A – Hashimoto Masayoshi, Yamamura Miki, Morishita Ai

Class B – Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, Nishimura Ryuuko

Class C – Oda Takumi, Shiina Hiyori

Class D – Hatsukawa Maho

Added to that list of people was our leader, Kiryuuin. I had the impression that this group had a fairly equal mix of strength between academics and athletics. It was the kind of team balance that would make it difficult to win if we were in an even match, but I supposed that this wasn't really an issue in a relaxed social gathering where games were the main focus.

As for the members, there were many second-year students with whom I interacted on a regular basis, but I wasn't acquainted with any of the first-years whatsoever, except for Tsubaki. In that sense, I could understand the school's goal in implementing this Social Group camp.

"Yo. Man, never thought I'd end up bein' together with you like this," said Hashimoto, coming up to me and speaking frankly, just as our group was forming.

"Same," I replied. It was a strange twist of fate that the four people I talked to that day would be in the same group as me now.

"I'm happy, but also kinda disappointed. Given the choice, I would've much preferred if I coulda been with you for a crazy special exam," said Hashimoto.

It sounded like his expectations were high. I still hadn't said a word about being able to meet those expectations, but I figured I'd just let it go.

"Still," he continued, "even though this is just a social group thing, I'm grateful for the fact that we can get a ridiculous amount of cash if we get in the top spot. At any rate, we definitely have to exchange contact info with the first-years. I'll put together a group chat with everybody and invite you to it after."

Honestly, it was immensely helpful of him to volunteer to take on the time-consuming task of being the manager and organizing the group without even being asked.

"Though they might remove your name from their contacts next month, Hashimoto," I replied.

"H-hey, come on, man. Stop makin' jokes that aren't funny, that's Morishita's job!"

Come to think of it, what I said had indeed sounded a bit like something Morishita would say. I wondered if she might be affecting me in unexpected ways. Just as I had that thought, a soft voice reached my ears.

"Good morning to you, Ayanokouji-kun."

It was none other than Hiyori who called my name, as she strolled over to our group to approach me.

"Morning," I replied, "I'm looking forward to working with you. It's reassuring to have you in the group."

"I feel the same way. I was relieved when I found out that you're in my group, Ayanokouji-kun," said Hiyori.

Knowing Hiyori, I had a feeling that she'd be accepted by everyone right away, unlike me. However, no two people saw the world in the same way. I was honestly glad to have a reassuring friend here with me.

"I'm looking forward to working with you as well, Hashimoto-kun," said Hiyori as she bowed slightly.

"Hey, always happy to be with a cute girl. Y'know, I gotta say, seeing you standin' next to each other, Ayanokouji, Shiina-chan, you two look good together. Like, you fit," said Hashimoto.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Look, I really don’t want you to take this the wrong way or anything, but it’s just, you know, I don’t feel like something’s off when you two are together, compared to Karuizawa that is,” said Hashimoto.

Perhaps that was because I shared different things with Hiyori than I did with Kei; Hiyori and I both loved reading, for example. At any rate, there was no need to take Hashimoto so seriously about everything. While I mulled over his words, Hashimoto had already dropped the issue and turned his attention to the group as a whole. Kiryuuin basically abandoned the whole group to stare off at the wintry mountain landscape, which was probably why Hashimoto felt that he had to step in.

“Uh, let’s see here… Is this everyone? Oh, wait, aren’t we short one person? One, two, three…” He muttered as he quickly counted heads. “Fifteen. And including me, that’s sixteen. Yeah, looks like we’re short one person after all.”

Short? I thought everyone was here, but perhaps I was mistaken.

“We have seventeen. Yamamura Miki is here as well,” remarked Morishita.

“Oh, yeah, okay. Guess everyone *is* here…” It sounded like he considered it a serious oversight, because Hashimoto quickly corrected himself. “Sorry, Yamamura, my bad.”

“It’s all right… I’m the one who’s sorry,” replied Yamamura.

For some reason, Yamamura was even more apologetic than Hashimoto, even though he was the one who forgot to count her. I supposed that she was still as lacking in presence as ever, If Kiryuuin could overlook and bump into her and Hashimoto could completely omit her from a headcount, she was certain as lacking in presence as ever, but lately I’d been feeling that shadowy lack of presence had gotten to be even more distinctive.

However, once I’d become aware of her, I felt like I could pick up her presence more precisely, specifically because there was less there. It might have just been me, but I could feel her by the absence of anything to feel. When I asked Hiyori about Yamamura,

she said that she'd never talked with her before, so I decided to go over to Yamamura and give the two the chance to get acquainted.

"Guess we've had some kind of connection lately or something," I remarked, "considering we were together for the school trip before too."

"Y-yes, it seems that way. I'm...looking forward to being with you this time as well," said Yamamura.

"I'll be looking forward to working with you too, Yamamura-san," said Hiyori. She turned to Yamamura with a gentle, inviting smile, but she just stiffened up.

"Oh, uh, y-yes. Um, you are, um, Shiina-san?" Yamamura greeted Hiyori in a shy, reserved manner, but she seemed shaken and restless, like there was something on her mind.

"Oh? Is there something you want to ask me?" asked Hiyori.

"Ah! Well, uh, it's... It's just that I-I s-suppose that, um, well, you seem completely different from, well, the impression that I had of you, and..." stammered Yamamura.

"Of me?" asked Hiyori.

Hiyori cocked her head to the side, puzzled.

"It's because I thought that you were...more indifferent..." Yamamura muttered quietly in response.

I used to have the same impression of Hiyori, before I started talking to her and getting to know her better. Yamamura was observing from a distance, and it seemed like there was still a gap between her mental image and the reality of her schoolmate's personality.

"I'm sorry. I'm not good at speaking, so I might have said something rude..."

"It's perfectly fine. I'm not particularly good at speaking with people either, so I suppose that makes us comrades," said Hiyori.

"Yes... I suppose so," Yamamura agreed aloud; although from the look in her eyes, it didn't seem like she fully believed it.

"Do you not think so? Well, if I seem talkative, I suppose that's thanks to Ayanokouji-kun," said Hiyori.

"Thanks to Ayanokouji-kun...?" asked Yamamura.

Thanks to me? I thought that Yamamura and I might have the same doubts running through our minds.

“Yes. While I’m not good at it, I’ve come to really love talking with friends.” Yamamura was on her guard, but Hiyori took her hand as she spoke to her. “So I’m sure that you’ll come to enjoy talking too, Yamamura-san.”

Hiyori’s statement that it was thanks to me was an exaggeration, but I did hope that Yamamura would feel the same one day.

In any case, the entire Kiryuuin group was now present and accounted for.

“Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. I look forward to working with you,” said Morishita.

And there she was: Morishita, with her polite way of speaking and her habit of calling someone by full name but dropping honorifics.

“Same here,” I replied.

“You are…let’s see… Shiina Hiyori, yes. I am Morishita Ai. Hello, hello.” Morishita bowed head, adding, “It is a pleasure.”

“Yes, I’m Shiina. I look forward to working with you, Morishita-san.”

Starting with Yamamura, the second-year students exchanged casual greetings with one another. Then, we introduced ourselves to the first-year students, who were all clustered together and looking anxious. Kiryuuin, who had been waiting for the conversations to end without really interjecting herself, turned around.

“All right then, I think we’ve more or less finished with the greetings, so let’s have lunch, shall we? Let’s disperse for now,” said Kiryuuin.

“Please wait a minute, Kiryuuin-senpai. Don’t you think it would be better for everyone to have lunch together, to get started on that whole group bonding thing?” suggested Hashimoto, hurriedly speaking up on behalf of the group.

And it seemed like he had a point, given that when I looked around, it seemed like many groups were already acting as a unit.

“Well then, I’ll leave you to it,” said Kiryuuin.

She was giving him free rein, but it was because she wouldn’t be sticking around. Kiryuuin immediately left the group and disappeared into the building, alone.

“Hey, come on, seriously? For real?” Hashimoto sighed in frustration at Kiryuuin’s vanishing act. “Man, talk about one hell of a choice of leader.”

“You can just ignore her.” It wouldn’t be fair to leave everything up to Hashimoto, so I casually spoke up in support. “I’m all for the idea of having lunch as a group.”

“All right. Yeah, she said it was up to us, so it’s fine if we don’t want to disperse,” said Hashimoto.

He quickly took action, explaining the plan to our group’s first-years. Some of them may have been reluctant to share a meal with their seniors, but this event was supposed to be a social function. Unless there was a student with a bad habit of throwing their weight around like Housen here, objections were unlikely.

“Hey, wait a minute! Hey! Kouenji!”

Behind Hashimoto and the first-years, another nearby group was experiencing a bit of a problem. Apparently, Kouenji had been assigned to Group 6, which he was just arbitrarily walking away from without listening to his leader’s instructions. The other second-year students didn’t call after him, and they even looked like they felt somewhat nostalgic looking at the perplexed expressions on the first-years’ faces. My classmate Inokashira anxiously looked at his retreating form, but she ultimately had no other choice but to let him go. My and Inokashira’s eyes met for a moment, but the voice of her indignant leader made her turn toward him in a hurried panic.

“I wonder what’s going on with Kouenji-kun,” Hiyori muttered, watching his back as the subject of her wondering walked off. Apparently, she didn’t fully understand what was going on.

“He’s always doing things his way, on his own. He probably won’t be coming back,” I replied.

“Is that so?” asked Hiyori.

“Kouenji Rokusuke is a person who cannot act in a group. I have come to understand that.” Apparently, she fully understood what Kouenji was like, because Morishita put her hands together as though in prayer for Group 6 and their breakdown. “My sincere condolences.”

After her moment of silence, she turned to me to ask, “Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, if you had been in the same group, could you have stopped that person, as a member of the same class?”

“It’s precisely because we’re in the same class that I would’ve looked the other way, convinced that it’d be pointless,” I replied.

Being from the same group or not wasn’t important. If someone called out to him and he actually stopped and listened, there wouldn’t have been any difficulty.

“Okey dokey. All the first-years are on board. Let’s head this way,” said Hashimoto.

With Hashimoto’s order, Group 20 started walking, even without our leader. I noticed a damp smell in the building as we entered without taking our shoes off, so it likely wasn’t a place that was used often nowadays. As more students poured in, they formed a line headed toward the cafeteria.

In the absence of our assigned leader, it seemed inevitable that Hashimoto would take over her duties, since he was the one taking initiative. He took the lead directing the group’s lively conversation while they enjoyed lunch. He gassed up the more reserved first-years and made sure that there was a wide range of topics, but he also didn’t fool around or get too rowdy. Frankly, he was an immense help to students like me, who were often stuck listening in silence.

“Um, excuse me… Hashimoto-senpai? I know that it says in the rules that this is a social event, but we don’t all have to be present during games, right?” asked one of the first-years.

“Yeah, that’s right. The max number of participants is five people, plus the same people can participate as many times as they want. Feels pretty relaxed, doesn’t it?” said Hashimoto.

All you would need would be the required number of people and the leader present at the given time.

“From the looks of things, Kiryuuin-senpai doesn’t appear to be interested in the Social Group camp. I guess that’s all well and good, but…I just wish she would’ve at least told us what her plans were, in any case,” added Hashimoto.

Since the leader had appointive power, Kiryuuin should’ve been the one making decisions about participation once the games were determined. Hashimoto seemed bothered by the fact that Kiryuuin didn’t ask any questions that might help with that, such as who was good at what.

“At any rate, we’ll just have to do what we can for now, and take it seriously,” said Hashimoto.

“People say that Kiryuuin-senpai is an amazing person. Maybe she already understands everything there is to know about us, or something like that?” said Jitsute, a girl from Class 1-D, offering her theory to Hashimoto.

It wasn’t surprising that people knew about Kiryuuin’s skills even without having spoken to her themselves.

“Yeah, no, that’s not likely. Besides, there’s no way she’d know stuff like who among us is good at makin’ pressed flowers.”

The exasperated Hashimoto was exactly right about that. No one could know what our individual strengths and weaknesses were.

“That’s one reason why I said that we should all eat a meal together,” Hashimoto said, “So, for the games mentioned in your handouts, let’s have everybody rate themselves on a scale of one to five on how confident they are at each. With a rating of one being not confident at all.”

Normally, the leader would perform this simple but necessary action, but Hashimoto stepped up again and asked everyone to give themselves a score for each game. Hashimoto asked everyone to use their phones to give a self-evaluation for each game, but he started running into difficulty with the sheer variety of unusual activities. Basically, you could probably only put a one for the things that you didn’t have any experience with, and a maximum of two or three for things that you felt like you could manage to do. Moreover, many of these activities were things that we hadn’t prepared or

practiced for in advance. Anything that required artistry or improvisation would be particularly difficult.

Everyone tapped their phones while they ate. As there was a huge amount of information to go through, some people finished their meals by the time they were done inputting everything. At any rate, we collected enough data on everyone to have some rough estimates, more or less. Hashimoto then immediately shared in the group chat he'd already made.

"...Well, this ain't good," said Hashimoto.

The first words out of Hashimoto's mouth after he scanned through the information were grave. Just as I had feared, most of the students had generally rated themselves with ones or twos for most of the games, with hardly any fours or higher to be found. As far as I could see, Hashimoto had no hope of us winning.

"Well, I s'ppose it'd be fine if we just give up on winning and just try to have fun," he said.

But it was too early to make that call, especially since I was sure that other groups were going through something similar.

"I feel like there aren't many groups that'll take this seriously, but... Well, anyway, for the time being, I'll go ahead and show this information to Kiryuuin and let her decide on our strategy," said Hashimoto.

Ultimately that was what this Social Group camp came down to. If Kiryuuin was motivated to aim for the top, then the juniors just had to do as she said. On the other hand, if she wasn't motivated to do anything, they would only participate at a reasonable level and spend most of their time relaxing at the camp. Personally speaking, I would've preferred to take things easy.

3.2

BY THE TIME I finished my lunch, there was a message on my phone from a certain someone. It was just before 1 p.m. when I got up from my seat, so I had roughly an hour to spare before our first game of the day.

“Sorry, but I’m going to step away for a bit. Do you mind if I meet back up with you in the room?” I asked.

“Yeah man, no worries. I’ll take the first-years around and see if we can do some experiential learning,” replied Hashimoto.

I was grateful to Hashimoto for taking on the hassles of our responsibilities as upperclassmen. I headed over to the lounge. When I arrived, the person who had called me was sitting alone on a two-seater sofa, gazing out the window with a bored expression. There was one more person standing nearby as well, also looking out the window. Looking at this combination of people, I determined it was likely not a coincidence they were together.

“Is there something you need from me, Nagumo-senpai?” I asked.

“Need? No, it’s nothing so much that I’d call it a ‘need,’ really.” As he said that, he gestured lightly with his fingertips, beckoning me over. “I wanted to talk to you.”

I did as he instructed and sat down on the empty sofa. Asahina, from her position by the window, turned to look at me.

“Hey there, Ayanokouji-kun,” said Asahina.

She then moved away from the window, practically forced Nagumo to move over to the right end of the sofa, and sat down next to him.

“I was expecting some kind of special exam, but I never imagined that this would just be a social gathering. To be perfectly honest, I’m disappointed.” The first words he said to me as he sat facing me were about how he was let down by this camp. He sighed and shook his head lightly, a small smile on his face. “Man, I am really, really unlucky. Don’t you agree?”

Exasperated, Nagumo rested his elbow on the armrest of the sofa and then rested his cheek lightly on his fist.

“It is certainly true that, compared to last year’s Mixed Camp, this event is significantly scaled down. I can’t deny that. That’s probably why it’s being called a social event rather than a special exam, though,” I replied.

We’d gone from the risk of expulsion to no penalties at all. I could understand Nagumo’s feeling of intense disappointment.

“But Miyabi, you already kind of knew things would be like this, right? This is the time of year when we have camp stuff,” said Asahina, pointing out that it was hard to imagine having a difficult special exam involving all grade levels now, in February.

“...Well, yeah,” replied Nagumo.

“It would have been virtually impossible for all the third-year students to participate like they did last year anyway, right?” I added, with a mutter.

“Yes, that’s because many of us third-years are dealing with entrance exams and job hunting around this time of year.” Nagumo had to acknowledge that I was right about that. “Only the students who had already decided on their career path a long time ago already could afford to take the time to participate in this camp. Even if you tell them that they could get a number of Private Points as a reward, many of them don’t want to spare a single second.”

The third-years had their Private Points collected and managed by Nagumo, through unique rules that they had come up with. If 20,000,000 points were accumulated, then someone could be pulled into Class A. However, the rewards this time were non-transferable, and could only be used within Keyaki Mall. On top of it all, the amounts weren’t even that large. Although I was by no means an expert and couldn’t tell you when a single college’s entrance exam was scheduled, generally, entrance examinations were held in January for private universities and late February for public universities.

Given that it was now February, many students were probably busily preparing themselves for those exams, so spending four days and three nights to watch over their juniors came at far too great a cost.

“Last year’s Mixed Training Camp was held about a month earlier, but I imagine that must have been pretty tough for the third-year students regardless, wasn’t it?” I asked.

“I think so too. It looked like more than a few of the third-years brought their textbooks with them. And I think that’s probably one of the reasons why they’ve gotten more lenient this year,” replied Asahina.

Thinking about that, I supposed that Horikita Manabu's generation might have struggled quite a lot in ways that I couldn't see. Or I supposed it was possible that the school had some sort of relief measures in place as well, but there was no way of knowing about them until we reached our third year. Even though Asahina said they'd gotten lenient, it was a busy time. It was safe to assume that the third-year students participating in this Social Group camp were those who had set prospects for higher education or employment.

"Can I assume that the third-year students who are here to participate came voluntarily?" I asked.

Asahina nodded in response to my question, chirping, "Yep, yep."

"They wanted five applicants from each class. Even if they didn't get exactly twenty though, I guess that they would have made adjustments," said Asahina.

It seemed that the school showed proper consideration to the third-year students too.

"By the way, I haven't asked before, but what are you planning to do after graduation, Nagumo-senpai? Asahina-senpai?" I asked.

Nagumo looked up, perhaps because he was surprised to suddenly hear that question in the flow of the conversation.

"You want to know?" he asked.

Was he happy that I was interested? I felt that if I replied with something like, "More or less, I guess," he might sulk, so I decided to just give an honest nod.

"I'm going to college. And just FYI, I'm not going to be using the Class A privileges at all, okay?" said Nagumo.

Which meant that he was convinced he would be able to pass the entrance exam on his own merits.

"I'm going onto higher education too, like Miyabi. Though, I'm going to a different school than he is. I took the Common Test for University Admissions the other day and scored it myself, but I only just barely got a passing score. Plus, I think it'd probably be impossible for me to go where he's going. If I can graduate from Class A, then I might be able to force my way in with help from our

school and all, but... Yeah, I probably won't be doing that," said Asahina.

Although Nagumo hadn't specifically mentioned the name of the university he was going to, it sounded like it was an especially high-level one. Asahina's plan to not force herself and reach beyond her ability was probably the correct course of action. Forcing your way into a university that is higher than your own level with the help of ANHS came with various risks after admission. Just like Keisei had said before, it was best to utilize the privilege of Class A for employment-related purposes.

"I don't find any value in the privilege of Class A itself, personally. You know why that is?" asked Nagumo.

"Because you have the power to seize your goals with your own two hands, yes?" I replied.

"Yeah, that's one of the reasons why I rule over the third-years now and how I built up my presence. I figure that, even if I graduated from B or D, I could just get into the college of my choice or land a job at a company on my own merits," said Nagumo.

Asahina deliberately shot a look at Nagumo that seemed to say, "*Wow, what a jerk*," but what Nagumo said was probably true.

"I suppose even if a lot of people banded together to try and drop you to Class B, Nagumo-senpai, the end result would be obvious to everyone. That wouldn't increase their motivation—they wouldn't even maintain it. That's what led to the current results," I remarked.

Nagumo nodded. Of course, it was still better to have the privileges of Class A. The difference was whether you considered it the main lynchpin of your plan, or simply as an insurance policy.

"By the way, Horikita-senpai is at the university that Miyabi is going to. You have to wonder just how much he likes him, huh?" teased Asahina.

Was the presence of Horikita Manabu the deciding factor for Nagumo in choosing that university, rather than it being the college that he wanted to go to himself?

"Come on, lay off," Nagumo shot back. "Anyway, Ayanokouji, take the entrance exam for my school next year and I'll welcome

you with open arms."

"If you want to go, though, you'll have to try really hard to do well on the Common Test, since it's a pretty tough place to get into, y'know?" added Asahina.

"In that case, I'd best decline," I replied, "I think that would be pretty difficult for me with my academic ability."

Asahina listened earnestly and seemed to believe me, but Nagumo wasn't buying it. He snickered at me for not having answered seriously and shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's cut to the chase," he said. "Frankly, the only thing there is to gain from this social event is Private Points, and there's nothing to lose. Which is why not many people will take things seriously. It's not very stimulating for me, but I've decided to look on the bright side: It's better than nothing."

A showdown was still a showdown, even if it was just a game. And with graduation looming, this would be his last opportunity.

"I figured that was the case. So then, you want to have a competition against me here at camp?" I asked.

"Bingo," said Nagumo.

This Social Group camp had little to offer the third-years, which meant that Nagumo had purposefully taken the time out of his schedule to make a competition with me a reality. Asahina, after hearing what Nagumo said, quickly leaned in closer to Nagumo.

"So that's what this is really about? Do *not* do anything awful to Ayanokouji-kun, okay?" snapped Asahina.

"So, you joined us for this meeting to protect Ayanokouji then, huh? Wow, aren't you exceedingly kind?" said Nagumo.

"I mean, Ayanokouji-kun hasn't done anything wrong. I feel sorry for him, with you zeroing in on him like this, Miyabi. Besides, why are you so obsessed with him, anyway?"

Sitting next to Nagumo, Asahina could get right up in his face, moving fast enough that it seemed like she was going to give him a shove on the shoulders. However, that must've irritated Nagumo a little bit, because he got right up in her face too, a faint half smile on his face.

“Nazuna, do you know why Horikita Suzune joined the student council?” asked Nagumo.

“Why? Probably because she wanted to follow in her big brother’s footsteps or something, right?”

“Wrong. I don’t know about right now, but at the very least, that wasn’t the case when she joined the council.”

“Huh, really? Okay then, in that case, what was her motive?”

“This guy here, in front of us. Ayanokouji has been using Suzune to monitor me,” said Nagumo.

Asahina’s mouth hung open, flabbergasted, with a “Huh?” like she didn’t understand.

“I’m sure you’ve been judging me, thinking I’m a bad student council president, but in the end, I wasn’t like that after all, was I?”

Of course, while some of Nagumo’s behaviors and actions had been overkill, he hadn’t caused so many problems as to make Horikita Manabu wary of him.

“Yes, you’re right. If anything, I think that what you did brought about positive changes in the school, Nagumo-senpai,” I replied.

“Guess you were influenced by Horikita-senpai too, for better or worse, weren’t you?” he answered.

Horikita Manabu’s presence had certainly affected me more than I had imagined, because I had no social interaction with other people before I entered this school. Manabu, who preferred stability, and Nagumo, who preferred change. These two ideologies were supposed to be constant from the very beginning.

“Because Horikita-senpai had passed the baton, in a manner of speaking,” I said.

“So, you admit it?” asked Nagumo.

“Even if I denied it now at this stage, it wouldn’t do any good.”

“W-wait a minute, hold on. Huh? What? So, I had it wrong?” asked Asahina.

Asahina was flustered, glancing back and forth between me and Nagumo with her mouth open.

“He’s got this quirk where he’s got dead-face going on, but under the surface, he’s pulling lots of different strings. Anyway…” Nagumo trailed off, pausing briefly before he spoke again. “Am I correct in assuming that you’re willing to accept a match against me?”

“Do we need to attach any conditions, apart from the rules and rewards already provided for the Social Group camp?” I asked.

“I’ve given it a lot of thought, but no, there’s not. Hypothetically, even if I were still acting student council president, it would cause offense if I somehow trapped you for personal reasons,” said Nagumo.

It was true that the school wouldn’t look kindly on it if two students from different grade levels put up stakes against each other, especially with a big penalty.

“At any rate, calling it a ‘match’ is overstating things. I’m just talking about a little wager,” said Nagumo.

“A wager?” I asked.

“Yeah. If you win, I’ll reward you with a nice gift.”

“Does that mean it’s safe for me to assume that I don’t have to hand over Private Points even if I lose?”

“Yep. Easy, huh?”

So then it wasn’t a match or a wager, but more like an extension of play. However, the fact that I apparently had no disadvantages made me feel a little uneasy.

“In that case, I don’t have any reason to refuse, but there’s truly little either of us can do considering the rules. After all, my senpai are the leaders, so they can’t participate directly in the games,” I answered.

My group’s leader was Kiryuuin, no one else. In short, the third-year students were the ones who lead while the first- and second-years competed. The stages we were standing on were different from the very beginning.

“Or perhaps you want to ignore the Social Group rules and have a contest in some other fashion?” I asked.

This experiential facility was well equipped with the tools to make that a reality.

“An off-the-field battle ignoring the Social Group activities wouldn’t be so bad, but in that case, we wouldn’t really need to hold it at this camp then,” said Nagumo.

“Indeed. If it was something at school, then we could even have a real showdown,” I added.

“If the school is telling us to participate in this social event, then I will act in accordance with the rules,” said Nagumo, before continuing with, “Formally, at least. At first, I thought about having you be the leader and have you direct the first-years and second-years,” said Nagumo.

On the surface, our third-year Kiryuuin-senpai would be the leader, but I would be the one making any actual decisions, then. And it sounded like I could expect that him not to participate in the game directly.

“I don’t think that’s a bad idea,” I replied.

“Yeah. But to make that work, you would have to be given authority over your group’s personnel, otherwise we couldn’t call it fair, could we?” said Nagumo.

Nagumo could decide upon all his group members himself. On the other hand, it wouldn’t be fair if I got stuck with a formation of group members that Kiryuuin had decided on without my input. In truth, we underclassmen weren’t told anything until we got on the bus.

“Besides,” Nagumo said, “once this exam gets started, there’s a rule that it’ll be a round-robin format. Which means that after three days of doing things slowly and leisurely, we’ll only get to compete directly against each other once at the very end, which wouldn’t be terribly exciting, would it? That’s why I decided to stop being so hung up over having the same conditions.”

With that, he pointed his index finger at me.

“You will participate in every game. And if you lose three times, you lose the contest,” he announced.

“You’re saying it doesn’t matter if the group as a whole wins or loses?” I asked.

“That’s right. Even if Kiryuuin’s group loses nineteen times in a row, as long as you don’t lose to anyone personally, you still win,”

A total of nineteen games. Which meant that I would need to get seventeen wins as an individual.

“So it’s fine even if I lose twice? You’re very kind,” I replied.

“Well, if I made the win condition that you had to be undefeated and you lost in your first game, wouldn’t that spoil all the fun?” Nagumo couldn’t be more clear about setting the three-loss threshold for his own enjoyment. “It’ll be more fun if I can have you ride it out as long as possible.”

“Huh? Aren’t you putting Ayanokouji-kun at way too much of a disadvantage? Stuff like playing cards would be completely up to luck,” Asahina said.

“There’s nothing for him to lose even if he fails, right? Obviously, I would have the right to set the rules,” said Nagumo.

“O-oh, I see… Well, I guess that might be true, but still,” said Asahina.

Asahina seemed dissatisfied, but it was true that no matter how much effort Nagumo was demanding, if there was no risk for me, there was also no reason for me to refuse.

“All I want is Ayanokouji’s defeat. It’s only natural for me to make a request that gives me a high chance of winning. And I’m even willing to pay Private Points in exchange,” said Nagumo.

“Are you sure you’re fine with toying with and defeating one of your juniors from a distance while you’re on the verge of graduation?” I asked.

“That’s perfectly fine, if I’m dealing with you,” said Nagumo.

It was a good idea to respond one way or another, and I decided I might as well react as expected. Because after all, come March, Nagumo would graduate.

“Understood. In that case, I will accept your thoughtful consideration, without reservation,” I replied.

Nagumo lightly nodded his head to show his acceptance.

“I’ve already informed Kiryuuin as well, of course. She said that you’ll be participating in all the games.”

It sounded like there were some behind-the-scenes negotiations held with the assumption that I was going to accept the offer.

“Look, I know that I’m speaking as an outsider here, but if you don’t like this, it’s okay for you to say no, nice and clear, all right? Even if he’s saying that you won’t have to pay anything when you lose, the fact remains that you’ll have lost,” said Asahina.

That was exactly what Nagumo wanted: the fact that there would be a “winner” and a “loser.”

“Ayanokouji said that he accepts, so there’s no need to say anything unnecessary.”

Asahina puffed out her cheeks in apparent discontent over Nagumo’s unkind treatment, but she backed down when she saw that I consented to it.

“Besides, my seniors appear to have been rather unreserved in their selection of people. The other groups were a little taken aback when they saw the placements,” I remarked.

Far from appearing disgruntled, he smiled in response, as though it were only natural.

“A contest is a contest, even if it’s some stupid social camp. And as the former student council president, I have to show some dignity,” replied Nagumo.

Apart from his battle with me, he apparently also intended to win the Social Group activities that he’d be participating in as a leader. That was none of my concern though, so Nagumo was free to do what he wished.

“Even in the unlikely event you get on a winning streak, it’ll be easier to stop you because I can give commands directly,” said Nagumo.

“Whoa. You really are merciless, Miyabi,” remarked Asahina.

“No, that isn’t true. I believe that Nagumo-senpai’s approach is correct,” I replied.

That would also assess whether someone could create a situation where they had the advantage and then drag their opponent into that arena. Due to the nature of the competition, where you would only be competing against each group once in a

relaxed manner, it was safe to say that it would be virtually impossible to count how many times a particular individual had participated in games.

That was also a desirable windfall. As a second-year student, it would be far too conspicuous if I had to take on group battles, but it would be possible to avoid the spotlight if I was just fighting individual battles. While Nagumo had been setting the stage to give himself an advantage, he had given me consideration as well.

"It seems like you're misunderstanding something, Nazuna. Winners and losers aren't necessarily determined by whether someone is exceptional. To make proper use of competent people, the person in charge must be even more capable, otherwise their competence won't be utilized to the full potential."

Nagumo was right. No matter how many shoji pieces you had, you still might not be able to win with unpolished skills.

"Sorry I'm late." The voice was Kiryuuin's, butting in as she appeared in the lounge. "Has the discussion reached a conclusion yet?"

"Yeah, settled without incident. Just as planned, Ayanokouji and I will be having a showdown. Ayanokouji," he addressed me specifically, "Kiryuuin had gotten wind of me trying to have a contest with you and volunteered to take on this role."

Kiryuuin nodded to indicate he was telling the truth.

"If necessary, I'll even hand over leadership authority to you. Of course, on the surface, I'll act as though I was the one who selected the participants. If I do that, then you can have your showdown, even if it's as a group," said Kiryuuin.

Kiryuuin made that proposition, which would be killing two birds with one stone, but I suspected that, more than anything else, she simply wanted to have a good seat to watch events unfold.

"I see. That was the part I was somewhat stuck on. Now I understand why I'm in a group with those three from Class A," I replied.

I bumped into Yamamura when I went to the convenience store with Hashimoto and Morishita, and then by sheer coincidence Kiryuuin happened to drop in. That had probably been the deciding

factor in choosing them for my group, to save me the time and hassle of having to develop a relationship with someone from scratch if I took over from Kiryuuin.

"Well, I don't know about your current relationships in depth, after all. They were the ones I happened to encounter by chance, and the rest were chosen at random. It would be difficult to demonstrate your real ability if you're not comfortable within your group, no?" said Kiryuuin.

Hashimoto and Hiyori already seemed to be helping things along.

"I appreciate the consideration, but I think I'll have to pass on your offer. Unfortunately, I'm not good at socializing. If anything, I'll have my hands full just getting to know my juniors, forget about properly making use of them," I replied.

Kiryuuin responded by saying that was unfortunate, though her words fell flat.

"Although I have to say, I hadn't imagined that you would've been involved in this matter, Kiryuuin-senpai," I remarked.

Nagumo and Kiryuuin weren't exactly good friends. Rather, they stood at opposite ends, in conflict with one another. Kiryuuin smiled at my comment.

"At any rate, I bet you're glad this contest is going ahead, eh, Nagumo? Though it's just a pity that the third-year students can't participate in the games directly," said Kiryuuin.

I had no way to know if Kiryuuin's words reflected her genuine feelings regarding the Social Group camp.

"If the rules allowed us to participate directly," said Nagumo, "would you have taken it seriously?"

"It would have been a rare opportunity to work with Ayanokouji, so of course I would have met expectations," she replied.

"Hah. Sounds like you think highly of Ayanokouji too. If you want, although we both know that this is a social event, how about you and I have a little contest of our own, separately? Since we're both third-years, there's no need to go easy on each other. I'll even put up a ticket to Class A, as a wager," said Nagumo.

“Sorry, but I’m going to have to turn down your offer. That ticket is soaked with the blood and sweat of our entire grade level. That’s too significant a thing for me to accept when I wasn’t involved in the first place, wouldn’t you say?”

Nagumo and Kiryuuin were both confident, but Kiryuuin didn’t seem to even consider that she might lose. She was good at getting the last word in—and this time, those words said that any contest would be a formality and her victory was assured.

“That’s too bad,” was all Nagumo said.

However, Nagumo was used to it. It sounded like he didn’t take her very seriously after spending three years with her.

“Well then, I have some things to do as the leader, so I’ll be excusing myself now. See you later.” Her business with us taken care of Kiryuuin pardoned herself and left.

“Fuuka-chan is as cool as ever, isn’t she?” said Asahina with admiration in her voice.

“Sure, but she’s still just a woman,” said Nagumo.

“Ugh, Miyabi,” Asahina replied, “that comment was just horrible. You’re the sort of person who can’t complain if he gets canceled in this day and age.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m just trying to rise above the people of my own gender, that’s all. Discrimination is bullshit,” said Nagumo.

Which meant that he couldn’t get passionate about competition with anyone but another man.

“Even so, the way you said it was kind of problematic,” replied Asahina.

She had a point there. It wouldn’t have hurt if he had expressed his thoughts a little more delicately, so as not to offend. I got up from the sofa before Nagumo and Asahina followed suit, and the three of us left the lounge.

“After this, you’d better practice or do whatever to prepare for what’s to come,” said Nagumo.

“Yes, I will,” I replied.

“Ahh, you finally came out! You’re done talking now, riiight?”

Moments before Nagumo and I were going to part ways, Amasawa approached us, apparently having gotten tired of waiting at the end of the hall. At the sight and sound of her, Nagumo scratched the back of his head in annoyance, like *Ugh, you've gotta be kidding me.*

"Did you not hear what I said? I told you *later*, didn't I?" said Nagumo.

"Come oooon, it's fine, isn't it? I work twice as hard as other people during exams," said Amasawa.

"At the moment, I can't trust anything you say. The next time you do something selfish, you won't get any time on stage. Remember that," said Nagumo.

"Jeez, so strict. Fine, I get it. I will do as I'm told."

"Miyabi, this girl... Um..." began Asahina.

"Amasawa. Class 1-A," said Nagumo, finishing her thought for her.

"Ah, yes, of course. Amasawa-chan, that's right. You must be really amazing to be invited to be part of Miyabi's group, huh?" said Asahina.

"Well, enough, I suppose," said Amasawa.

Both her Academic and Physical Ability scores were As, so it was no wonder she was selected. However, taking into account factors like group integration and simple tact, Amasawa wasn't exactly the first candidate to come to mind.

"It's not like I evaluated her myself. I don't know if she heard talk about it somewhere, but she already knew about the Social Group camp," said Nagumo.

"That's why I promoted myself, to be part of the group. I told him that I'd contribute to getting first place," added Amasawa.

"To be honest, I agonized a little over whether or not to let her in."

Nagumo neglected to specify whether that was due to Amasawa's personality or his suspicions about my relationship with her. If he ultimately appointed her to the group, it was likely because he determined those things to be trivial.



“You need to bring your own group together too, Nazuna. Even if you are a Class A student, go for the win. It’s not like you can stand around hanging with us here forever, can you?” said Nagumo.

“Huh? Oh gawd, you’re right! Is it already that time?!” Nazuna checked her phone. “Hey, I’m going to get going now, but you can always come and talk to me if there’s any trouble, okay?!” .

Practically falling over as she ran off in a panic, Asahina rounded a corner and disappeared from view.

“Sheesh, that Nazuna… Is she going to be okay leading a group like that?” said Nagumo.

As Nagumo let out a sigh of exasperation, Amasawa grinned and leaned in close.

“Are you perhaps dating Asahina-senpai, by any chance?” she asked.

“Huh? We’re not, no,” replied Nagumo.

“But even though you told me ‘later’ because you had something important to discuss with Ayanokouji-senpai, you had Asahina-senpai by your side, didn’t you? That’s something special, isn’t it?”

While I felt like it was too much of a leap to assume that being close and being together were the same, I had to wonder about these two.

“It’s none of your business,” said Nagumo.

“Huh? Oh, but it is. See, if I’m after you myself, Nagumo-senpai, that means she and I will be rivals,” said Amasawa.

“You’d go after a guy who’s going to graduate soon?” asked Nagumo.

“I’m a *very* patient woman, you see,” said Amasawa, “and I’m open-minded when it comes to long-distance relationships.”

“Sorry, but I hate women who play innocent and try to butter people up,” replied Nagumo.

In response to Nagumo shutting her down so fast, Amasawa overreacted as though she were gutted. Perhaps Nagumo had a strong prejudice against that sort of thing. He blatantly averted his gaze from her.

“I’m going to get going too. Give it your best shot, Ayanokouji,” said Nagumo.

Once Nagumo left, it was only myself and Amasawa in the hallway.

“I guess he hates me now, huh?” said Amasawa.

“Well, that’s what happens when you say something to purposefully make someone hate you,” I replied.

“But it’s like, you know, you’re hated too, Ayanokouji-senpai,” said Amasawa, “so I wanted us to be comrades, in a way.”

What kind of camaraderie was that even supposed to be?

“Maybe they aren’t dating,” added Amasawa, “but still I feel like there’s something special there.”

“Yeah, I guess so. They look like they go beyond the category of friends, at the very least.”

I agreed with Amasawa there, since Nagumo hadn’t really denied that there was something, convincing me that something was.

“By the way, he mentioned that you knew about this Social Group camp already,” I remarked.

“Yeah, we were told the details in advance about what kind of event was going to be held.”

By “we,” she also meant Yagami, who had been prepared by that man and managed by Tsukishiro. It sounded like they were told about the schedule for the year when they were enrolled in this school. I supposed that it was better to give them advance information if they were going to get me expelled, after all.

“I don’t know why you went through the trouble of teaming up with Nagumo, though,” I told her.

“Huh? I mean, because it seems like that’d simply give me the highest chance of winning. Don’t you agree? Besides, I’m a girl of a certain age, I want Private Points too.” Her initial answer was obviously a lie, but she must not have particularly wanted to hide her feelings, because she went on to correct herself. “I was thinking that you and Nagumo-senpai would probably be having your competition around now, Ayanokouji-senpai. I briefly kicked around

the idea that it'd be nice to become your ally and support you, but that wouldn't be very fun, would it?"

"That's why?"

"That's why. I thought that if I sided with Nagumo-senpai, then I could make the competition a little better, but..." With a sigh, like *haaa*, Amasawa covered her cheeks with her hands. "I could see the disappointment in Nagumo-senpai's eyes. The list of activities the school prepared really are all just games. Obviously, even if I beat you in a game of rock-paper-scissors or cards, it wouldn't make him happy. He'd be like, 'there's no need for you to go through the trouble of being his opponent,' or something."

"It's just how things are," I replied.

"I already heard about this from Nagumo-senpai, but about your competition, you'll lose if you lose three times, right, Ayanokouji-senpai? I could tell that he really wanted to see you lose, no matter how. I'll be looking forward to seeing how things turn out," said Amasawa.

"Hopefully you'll enjoy it, then. Though, there's a good chance that I could get three defeats in a row early on and lose right off the bat," I replied.

In truth, depending on which activities we got, there was a significant possibility that I would be entirely outmatched and lose without being able to do anything.

"At the very least, me and Nagumo-senpai don't think that'll happen," said Amasawa.

"Do you know how Nagumo feels too?" I asked.

"I do—so much so that he prevents me from coming to meetings because I tend to butt in and tease him."

"And yet you came all the way here to say hello after he said to talk to him later."

"Was that bad?" asked Amasawa.

While it wasn't exactly "bad," there was no reason for her to force contact with Nagumo to the point of antagonizing him. In order to be part of a group and get more opportunities to have turns for games, it would seem that it didn't just come down to your abilities, but also whether you were liked.

“Anywhooo, I’ve been called by my group too, so I’m going to head back. See you later!” said Amasawa.

Quickly turning on her heel, Amasawa left, cheerfully. Our conversation had been casual, but just one thing stuck out to me. Amasawa had mentioned that she’d been informed of this Social Group camp beforehand, but if that were the case, then there was a slight contradiction in the conversation that had taken place moments earlier.

“I wonder what she’s plotting,” I thought aloud.

I figured that it might be a good idea to do a bit of investigating.

3.3

SHORTLY AFTERWARD, the details of the first round of activities for Social Group were given out, and the games would begin. I decided to tell Hashimoto as a preliminary step, since he would immediately notice that something was going on if I was participating in every game. It was pointless to spy on your own allies. So, having decided to tell him and avoid any drama, I went to his room and found him fiddling around on his phone.

I told him that I was just having a bit of fun with Nagumo. Even though I said that the arrangement was casual, it didn’t change the fact that it was a competition against the former student council president, and Hashimoto couldn’t hide his surprise the entire time I talked. When I finished explaining, it seemed like he understood what was going on, but he still sighed repeatedly.

“Man, you really zig when I expect you to zag, dude,” said Hashimoto.

“I didn’t plan for this, though,” I replied.

“Even so, still. Man, the fact that Nagumo-senpai is gonna be your opponent is crazy. On top of that, the group results don’t even matter, just your individual results. I can’t seriously believe he’s wantin’ you to win seventeen out of nineteen.” Hashimoto sounded strangely happy, even though it was sure to be a challenge for me. “I guess that just shows you highly valued you are. My discerning eye was correct after all.”

“It’s still a selfish thing for me to be engaged in, since this is supposed to be a casual social event. It falls under the category of something that disrupts the group’s harmony. That’s why I want to ask you to engage with and include everyone, so that the group’s cooperation doesn’t fall apart,” I replied.

“So that’s where I come in, eh? I get what you’re tryin’ to say, but you probably don’t even have to worry about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. If we’re talking about a fun game, then sure, people might try and compete for the chance to play, but do you think that all high school students want to compete with each other in makin’ pressed flowers or doing embroidery an’ stuff? No way,” said Hashimoto.

Though I was exceedingly interested in it all, apparently, not everyone felt the same way.

“That’s why, if anythin’, I expect your participation in every game will be welcomed with open arms,” said Hashimoto.

It would be great for me if things turned out that way.

“So does this mean we’re gonna go for winning first place overall? I’m not so sure how motivated Kiryuuin-senpai is about it all, though. I can assume that she knows about this, as a matter of convenience, right?” said Hashimoto.

“Yeah, she knows. But I have to wonder about her. I don’t think she’s completely lacking in motivation, but I don’t think she’s as in high spirits as Nagumo. If we’re unlucky, she might just leave all the decisions to us, her juniors,” I replied.

The only thing Kiryuuin cared about was competing with Nagumo through me. She got her ticket to the show, and now she was going to enjoy watching the games before she had to worry about graduation.

“Personally, even if the prizes are only good as spending money, that means I could put the Private Points I already have to better use. So, honestly, I’m hopin’ we place as good as we can and win some prize money.” Having made enemies both within and without, funds for the war chest were definitely important to

Hashimoto. “At any rate, you should try and get to know the first-years too, Ayanokouji,””

“Get to…know them, huh,” I replied.

“Feelin’ like it’ll be a high hurdle to be on friendly terms with the first-years?” asked Hashimoto.

I thought about it for a bit before nodding, which prompted Hashimoto to slap his knee and stand up.

“All righty then. In that case, I guess I’d better get a move on. First, I’ll try to get the first-years to relax and get on friendly terms with ’em by nighttime,” declared Hashimoto.

With that announcement, it sounded like he was confident about getting close to the first-year students.

“I’ll try and get as much information out of them as possible by that time, but if Kiryuuin-senpai isn’t gonna do anything, then I’m gonna need your help for sure, Ayanokouji. So, when night falls, I’ll ask you to cooperate so we can get to be friends with the first-years, okay?”

You couldn’t just make requests without offering anything in return, so it made sense that he would ask me to help. It felt like it would be better to at least support Hashimoto, who wanted us to win together as a group.

“Sure, okay… If there’s something I can do, then of course I want to do it,” I replied.

I figured it would be better just to let him know early on that I wasn’t confident, though. That’s what I had thought, but Hashimoto quickly saw through that sentiment.

“Leave it to me, dude. I’m pretty good at this sort of thing. Also, personally speaking, I’m grateful to be put to work as your pawn, Ayanokouji. It’ll serve to rein in Princess, and I’m sure that not even Ryuuen could ignore it, either,.” Hashimoto was willing to work with me, and was seizing the chance to pursue his own goals, which wasn’t a bad thing. Obvious self-interest is much, much better than taking an offer with nothing but good intentions. With that calculating mindset, he wanted as much information as possible. “By the way, about how much of a prize will you get when you win against Nagumo-senpai, anyway?”

“Dunno. I didn’t dare ask for a detailed figure,” I replied.

“Considerin’ he’s the rep for the third-years, it wouldn’t just be, like, a few paltry thousands or ten-thousands, ya think?”

He probably wanted to know the intended use of those points, rather than how many there might be.

“I understand. If I win, you can rest assured that the whole group will get their fair share,” I replied.

“I’m glad to hear that. However, I’d like it if payment was based on the amount of work put in, instead of a flat amount,” said Hashimoto.

It was clear that even if it wasn’t mandatory, Hashimoto would prefer to be paid for taking initiative and contributing his own time and effort.

“Welp, I’m gonna head out for a bit. I can take care of a conversation or two during free time,” said Hashimoto as he quickly walked out of the shared room, like he didn’t have a single second to spare.

3.4

AND THUS, came time for the first game of the first day of the Social Group camp. The school had told us about the game and the rules, and our first match was against Group 9. Two members of Horikita’s class, Ike and Keisei, were participating. The game was Flower Pressing, and would be held in the flower pressing classroom. Some of the students might have snickered when they heard about the details.

However, I was extremely serious. There was the question of how we would compete via pressed flowers, but presumably, a degree of perfection was required. One had to select and appropriately combine the many varieties of flowers provided for the task, find petals with the appropriate amount of moisture, and complete their project without tearing or damaging any of the delicate materials. Winners would be determined based on total points in these areas.

Between the fact that we hadn't been there long and that I'd been called away to talk, I hadn't yet been able to experience a single thing at this experiential camp. That meant that I was thrown straight into a new activity without any rehearsal, only a brief lecture before the game began. This was all a bit more in-depth than I had thought. The work would be performed simultaneously by all participants, and the judging would be one-on-one. Therefore, all five participants were decided by their team in advance.

The ten participants and two leaders from both groups had gathered at the designated location, along with a crowd of several spectators, which included Hashimoto. Also among the spectators was a student from Nagumo's group, Takahashi Osamu from Class 1-A. As for me, I'd be participating as worker number three this time.

"Do you do flower pressing on top of everything else, Ayanokouji-senpai?" asked one of my opponents on the other team, Nanase Tsubasa of Class 1-D, as she walked toward me.

"Nope, I've never done this before. I was just given some brief coaching by a friend," I replied.

Incidentally, the friend in question was none other than Hiyori. Apparently, she had ample experience in this area, because she'd made bookmarks using pressed flowers for a long time.

"I see. So that's it. I thought maybe you had a knack for it, given that you're the only male participant, Ayanokouji-senpai."

Just as Nanase had said, nine out of the ten participants were girls, perhaps because it was a job that required nimble fingers. As the only male participant, I ended up looking a little out of place. I was here because of a competition with Nagumo, so... Well, Nanase had nothing to do with it, so there was no need for me to get into the details.

"I've only done this about once or twice myself, so I don't know how good mine will be," added Nanase.

"Well, still, take it easy on us," I replied.

I had feared that the scoring criteria might be somewhat ambiguous, but it turned out that both the person in charge of the pressed flowers game and the facility were well-versed in this craft

and judged harshly. Fortunately for me, the third person on the other team was a first-year girl who wasn't exceptionally good at this herself, so I was able to take her head-on and win. On top of that, my group managed to take the win at the last minute, with the fifth person's evaluation earning us three wins and two losses.

"That's great, Ayanokouji-kun. I think you did very well for your first time," said Hiyori.

"Compared to your workmanship though, Hiyori, mine's nothing worth mentioning,"

While both of our projects were lovely at a glance, there was a world of difference in quality.

"You have an artistic flair, Ayanokouji-kun. If you'd like, let's make some together sometime," said Hiyori.

"Sure. I'd like to get better at this too."

While I was relieved that I had a strong ally, the important thing was that I was able to get my first win as an individual. I would have liked to stay in the classroom and work quietly at pressing flowers after this. If anything, I'd be fine with making them for the whole three days, but I had to seal away that desire.

Sorry, pressed flowers. See ya later...

"Well then," Kiryuuin privately called out to me after that first match ended, "looks like you're off to a winning start. I didn't feel like you were nervous at all."

"More or less, I guess," I replied.

I responded casually to try and cover up the fact that I was taking the situation quite seriously. Also, there was the fact that, because we were free to do things like talk among ourselves while working, it was understandable that the spectators watching the game might have found it a bit boring.

"Still, in a competition based on experiential learning, it wouldn't be surprising no matter who won or lost. If you consider the school's goal, it's honestly an interesting way to determine the outcome. Simply gathering together students with high OAA scores is meaningless, after all, since every group has a chance to win," said Kiryuuin.

I didn’t think even Nagumo could have foreseen or ascertained whether Horikita and the others in his group were good at making pressed flowers. However, the same could also be said for our group. What could or couldn’t people do? One should be using the available time to experience as many activities as possible and enhance their skills. Normally, the leader should be in charge of that, but…

“Hashimoto stepped up and produced this list, so things will be easy. He’s a surprisingly useful guy,” said Kiryuuin.

She seemed to welcome his initiative, since it meant that she had less hassle to deal with as the group leader. Well, that was fine too. It would be good to enjoy the three days without being all worked up about winning.

“If things continue like this, then you’ll hardly factor into the leadership at all, senpai,” I replied.

“I’m thankful for that. All I want is to watch the competition between you and Nagumo, with my own two eyes,” said Kiryuuin.

Which basically meant that she wasn’t planning on doing anything, just as I had predicted.

“I can’t imagine that my performance will live up to your expectations, though,” I replied.

As Kiryuuin and I were talking, I noticed Inokashira standing alone, looking over at me. If I remembered right, she said she was good at sewing and might like making pressed flowers. It didn’t seem like she’d participated in this first game, so I thought that maybe she stopped by to learn how to press flowers in her spare time, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“What’s up, Inokashira?” I called out, curious.

Once she heard me, she approached us timidly, and Kiryuuin stepped back to give us space to talk.

“Um, excuse me… A-Ayanokouji-kun, um, you’re close friends with K-Kouenji-kun, right?” asked Inokashira.

“Well, not really,” I replied immediately. *If I’m close friends with Kouenji, that’s news to me.*

“Is that so…? I see…” said Inokashira.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Well, i-it’s just Tatebayashi-senpai told me, rather firmly, to bring him back, and…” said Inokashira.

Tatebayashi was from Class 3-D, and the leader of Inokashira and Kouenji’s group.

“I’m guessing he’s really angry.”

“Yes…”

It sounded like the timid Inokashira was forced to take responsibility, as a member of not only the same group, but the same class.

“I thought that maybe you might be able to do something, Ayanokouji-kun, but…” she added.

I figured she must have been watching me from nearby earlier, and then our eyes met, so she thought to approach. I was sure she came to ask me desperately hoping against hope that I could deal with him, but unfortunately, I was far too ill-equipped for the task.

“What about asking Yousuke?” I asked.

I tried suggesting the most reasonable solution to the problem, but Inokashira shook her head.

“O-oh, I couldn’t possibly ask H-Hirata-kun to do something like that… I would just feel too guilty,” said Inokashira.

But it’s okay to ask me…? I thought. Well, actually, it would be rude of me to compare myself with the caring Yousuke. That guy would take on nearly any request if you asked him, and if Kouenji didn’t come back, chances were high that Yousuke would just keep trying to persuade him until he did. It was no wonder that Inokashira would feel guilty asking him.

“Sorry, I can’t help you. There’s nothing I can really do.”

“I see… I’m sorry. I’ll try and f-figure something out…”

After giving me a slight bow, Inokashira trudged off, dragging her feet.

“Is it really okay for you to just leave her be?” asked Kiryuuin.

“I feel bad for her, but that guy just doesn’t work how I expect he will. I’ve been trying all sorts of things over these past two years,

and that's the conclusion I've come to," I replied.

"It's your decision, of course. Anyway, putting the minute details aside, the fact that she came to you first for help is significant."

"You sure are serious about strange things," I observed, then got back on topic. "Well, I won't deny that, but I just can't make myself very eager about the idea of trying."

My approach with Kouenji had been consistent since that time Mii-chan and I made contact with him. Right now, when there wasn't a special exam with a looming threat of expulsion, it was pointless for me to communicate with him carelessly.

"There's still a little time before the next game, so why don't you try going in and seeing what you can do? From the looks of things, Tatebayashi's group is full of nothing but minor players, and their chances of winning are slim. But if Kouenji is capable, he might be able to turn their situation around a little bit. Don't you think so?" said Kiryuuin.

Kouenji really didn't seem like the type who cared about other people, but I supposed that trying to tell her that would be barking up the wrong tree. I wanted to try lots of activities, but it didn't seem like I was going to be blessed with many opportunities to do so.

"I understand. I'll try reaching out to him, for now. Kouenji might respond favorably to the fact that he can receive Private Points if he wins," I replied.

"Good."

In fact, that was the only factor that could properly motivate Kouenji. While I thought about how troublesome a task I had been asked to handle, I figured I'd try tackling it as hard as I could.

3.5

I HAD A THIRTY-MINUTE interval in which to find Kouenji—not an easy task. I tried stopping by Kouenji's room, but of course he wasn't there, and there wasn't any sign of him in the lobby or the lounge either. I wandered throughout the building for about five

minutes, occasionally talking with any acquaintances that I came across and gathering information, and around the time that I had a lead that sounded promising, there were only about twenty minutes until the next game.

Still searching for Kouenji, I took a little mountain path from the back of the building, which led me to an open field that must have been a dog park a long time ago. Perhaps it had long since fallen into disuse, because the area looked like to be completely abandoned and overgrown.

“There he is. Took long enough to find him,” I remarked.

I saw Kouenji running around merrily, kicking up the rough terrain with his powerful legs, just like a horse. I couldn’t help but wonder what he was doing here all alone, but this was Kouenji, so trying to figure him out was a lost cause. Kouenji, after discovering he had an unexpected spectator, slowed down and came closer to me. I had thought he would’ve continued to ignore me, so I was a little surprised.

“Ayanokouji Boy. What do you want with me?” asked Kouenji.

I’m sure that he approached me simply on a whim, but I couldn’t waste this chance now that I had it.

“I saw you pulling away from your group, without consulting anyone. I just thought I’d try checking in with you and see about your state of mind,” I replied.

“I see,” said Kouenji. “I hope that no one has come calling me back because they’re expecting my help.”

I supposed that things like a politeness filter weren’t necessary for him, after all.

“Inokashira was going around looking for you, looking quite worried,” I remarked.

“And?” said Kouenji.

“Why don’t you go back and make nice a little?” I asked in return.

“You already know full well the answer to that question, don’t you?” said Kouenji.

“No, I don’t know. Why don’t you cooperate?” I asked.

“I will make an exception and tell you. 1 + 1 = 2. No matter how many times you solve that problem, the answer will never change,” said Kouenji.

“It depends on how you look at it. If it’s decimal, you’re right, but if it’s in binary, 1 + 1 = 10,” I replied.

“Heh heh heh. I see you have a sense of humor too.” His smile never faltered as he chuckled, as though I had replied with a ridiculous joke in response to his own. “But that solution is nonsense. That’s what happens when you look at things with a twisted mind, a mind biased toward mere logic. 1 + 1 = 2 is the answer. The world is always plain and simple.”

But he didn’t let me respond before speaking again, as though telling me that he had absolutely no intention of playing along.

“They can achieve victory through their own efforts, without any help from me. No?” said Kouenji.

“No, they can’t. That’s exactly why you were taken into consideration. You’ll also make a better impression if you make your presence felt here. Won’t that make things easier for you later?” I answered.

“I pride myself on being the single best and most powerful person. I don’t need to show that off to everyone. All your questions are nonsense.” With a scornful snicker, he turned his back on me. “I am going to be sitting this one out completely. In other words, I will not be involved in Social Group in any way whatsoever. The games can proceed so long as there’s five people, yes? Please let the group know.”

It was true that there was no obligation for the entire group to be together for the Social Group activities. If Kouenji didn’t want to participate, it would be a waste of time to try and force him to.

“I understand that I’m not one to talk,” I replied, “but I guess there’s nothing anyone can do about that incomprehensibly uncooperative part of you.”

“Hmph. Incomprehensible, eh? Do you wish to know the reason I am uncooperative?” asked Kouenji.

Just as I was about to give up and turn back, Kouenji called out to me, stopping me in my tracks.

“Will you tell me?” I asked.

“I don’t mind. But before I do, may I ask you a question of my own?” Once I turned around, he continued speaking. “Hypothetically, if we were given a written exam here without warning…hm, yes…an exam focused on basic academic skills. Who do you think would win, you or me?”

If I were speaking to anyone else, I probably wouldn’t have answered seriously. But I had a hunch that it would be best to be honest with him.

“I would probably win,” I replied.

He wasn’t surprised, even though I had answered immediately and without hesitation. Actually, Kouenji responded immediately in turn, as if the answer was exactly what he had expected.

“Your elevated level of self-confidence is not bad. All right then, in that case, let us assume that the answer is ‘yes’ for the moment. Do you think that alone would determine your superiority, your excellence, your worth as a human being?”

“No. That alone does not determine those things.”

That was because it would only reflect academic basic skills via a written exam, nothing more.

“All right then. Next: If you and I were to fight seriously, what do you think the outcome would be?” asked Kouenji.

A question about strength, clearing away things like intellect and the like. After having watched Kouenji Rokusuke for two years, I already had my answer to that.

“If it’s a fight based on specific rules, I think you would have the advantage, Kouenji,” I replied.

In terms of physical superiority alone, with things such as build and muscle mass, then Kouenji would most definitely be the winner. If I were forced to fight within the category of something that has determined rules, such as boxing or judo, then I would have a tough time if Kouenji’s skills were equal to or more advanced than my own.

“What a funny expression. Your answer is different from my own, but I will factor your thoughts into my estimation.” From Kouenji’s point of view, he saw absolutely no possibility that he

could lose, regardless of whether there were rules or not. Of course, there was no way to know without actually fighting. “Do you believe you can determine which of us has higher or lower value based on this information alone?”

“That’s a difficult question. But, if you were trying to judge comparative value, only an objective third party could evaluate both sides fairly and from a holistic perspective. In this case, the written exam and the physical competition results would be quantified and compared. But even then, it’s not as though one can make the value of a human being relative,” I replied.

“That is correct. No matter how objectively you try to look at it, one cannot determine a person’s worth so easily. Even from what you described, ‘a holistic perspective’ or some such thing, one cannot see everything, after all,” replied Kouenji.

“Still, if we have to try to rank people, then I would endorse the method I just described,” I answered.

“I do not, Ayanokouji Boy,” said Kouenji.

“In that case, how do you judge a human being’s value?” I asked.

The corners of Kouenji’s mouth curved upward into a sly grin, as though he had been waiting for me to ask him that very question.

“The answer is extremely simple. Is that person me? Or are they not me? That determines superiority or inferiority,” said Kouenji.

Even though I had said something rather thought-provoking, this was what the whole thing was about. Huh.

“On what basis do you think so highly of yourself?” I asked.

“Very well then, I shall tell you,” said Kouenji. “It all stems from my adaptability. Regardless of the environment, I have the confidence to survive, and I will not yield. Whether I am in a large corporation or in a jungle filled with ferocious beasts, I have the ability to adapt completely and perfectly. That is something no ‘third party’ or whatever can measure.”

I understood all too well his belief that completeness and perfection is preeminent.

“I guess there wasn’t any point in repeating this whole back and forth question-and-answer thing, then. None of it had anything to do with the reason why, even though you’re perfect, you won’t cooperate,” I replied.

“Then you simply didn’t get it,” he said. “Can you take things seriously, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with kindergarteners who can’t do anything at all? That’s how vast the gulf is between myself and those around me, which is why went through the trouble of placing first in the Uninhabited Island Special Exam, so that I could distance myself from those kindergarteners.”

So, he had absolutely no intention of competing side-by-side with the people around him because he looked down on them. That was the reason for Kouenji’s uncooperativeness.

“You’re not suited for this school, are you?” I remarked.

“You and I are completely different, but I have seen that we have somewhat similar perspectives, so I’m surprised that you would say something like that. Personally, I would find it more worthwhile to visit China once again to devote myself to training, rather than attend this school. There are circumstances that have prevented me from doing so.”

This was going to be a stalemate no matter how I approached it. When you got down to it, cooperation had to be the individual’s choice. I couldn’t argue that Kouenji was wrong for sticking to his own way.

“That’s too bad, Kouenji. You could have attracted a much better kind of attention than you have been.”

“You mean that those around me would begin to depend on me, like they do with you now?”

“I’m not really getting all that much attention, though,” I answered.

We each said what we had to say. Strangely enough, I seemed to have been blessed with many opportunities to speak with Kouenji like this, just the two of us. I wondered if last year’s camp event had a similar atmosphere, and was once again reminded that for all intents and purposes, the subject standing before me was an incomprehensible entity.

“You already understand that you cannot control me, yes?” said Kouenji.

“Yeah. I do,” I replied.

“Then why are you bothering me? I am not even in your group in this event,” said Kouenji.

It certainly was strange. Anyone else in my situation right now would say something like, “Why not just leave him be?” It would only be a waste of time and it might even affect my wager with Nagumo.

“I know it’s pointless, but I suppose I just couldn’t help but try __”

“Because if you step away and separate from the class, you can’t protect Horikita Girl. That’s why, no?” said Kouenji, finishing my sentence as though he could read my thoughts.

I saw Kouenji as an obstacle that would hinder Horikita in her future battles, and he saw that I thought of him like that. This man’s extraordinary instincts were something I couldn’t calculate for. Did he intuit what was coming even with a lack of hints?

“In that case, there’s no need for you to hesitate. You can always try and see if you can eliminate me, any time,” said Kouenji.

“Didn’t I already tell you that I had no intention of doing so, though?” I replied.

“Heh heh heh. Well then, in that case, I suppose there’s nothing to be done.”

Kouenji had no doubts that he was the best. Thus far, I had spurred several people on to improve, for the future of Horikita’s class. And I had even done the same for the other classes when I thought it would be beneficial. This young man, who had impeccable ability but a difficult personality, wasn’t so different.

However, the reason I hadn’t spurred Kouenji to improve was because I’d determined that the risks and the hassle involved in doing so would’ve been too great. It was the same as how you couldn’t make an incompetent person competent by simply flipping a coin. The young man standing before me wasn’t going to change significantly with one or two steps. It would be easier to eliminate

him before he became an obstacle rather than trying to change him and make him into an asset—that was my conclusion.

“Well then, until we meet again. I shall return to my self-improvement time,” said Kouenji.

Kouenji ran off once again, as if saying that any further discussion would be useless. After staring at his back for a little while, I decided to return to my own activities.

3.6

I RETURNED TO THE SPOT near the camp building to report on the matter of Kouenji. However, the very person I was hoping to see, Kiryuuin, was nowhere to be found, and I had no idea where she went. I asked around and found out that she’d been seen walking near a little park on the eastern side of the building. There wasn’t much time until the next game, so what was she doing in a place like that?

They said that the park had a handmade feel to it, and I saw that there was some wooden playground equipment placed throughout. Unlike the rusty dog park, this must’ve still been used on a regular basis, because the teeter-totter, balance beam, and other equipment all looked to be perfectly usable. Now, for Kiryuuin, the person I was looking for... There she was, on a swing set with two swings.

She wasn’t alone, either. Asahina, who was also a third-year student, was with her. From a distance, it looked like Asahina was chatting away happily, while Kiryuuin was listening intently with a warm look on her face. While I thought about what an unusual pairing this was, I approached to tell Kiryuuin about the matter of Kouenji.

“I don’t usually have many opportunities to talk to you, so this is, kinda...how do I put it? Really refreshing, honestly. It’s rare that I get the chance,” said Asahina.

“Are you really that happy to be able to talk to me?” asked Kiryuuin.

“Yeah, I am! It’s like, you’re just always so *cool*, Fuuka-chan, really. There are lots of girls who admire you, y’know.”

Perhaps Kiryuuin was the type that was more popular with girls than with boys, because Asahina's eyes were sparkling.

I guess that also went to show that there were students who didn't interact much, even when in the same grade. While I thought that Kiryuuin was a special case, I could see instances of these sorts of interactions emerging.

"Ah, you're back, Ayanokouji," said Kiryuuin.

"What were you talking about?" I asked.

I asked her about their conversation, thinking that it would be better to tell her about Kouenji later.



“Lots of stuff,” Asahina replied, “but we were just talking about our futures. I was wondering about Fuuka-chan’s career path.”

If I remember correctly, the last time we spoke, Kiryuuin had said she was planning to go to college on a scholarship.

“So, which college are you going to?” asked Asahina.

I supposed that they’d only just started on this topic, given what Asahina asked. Kiryuuin just came right out and gave the name of the university that would be her path, without any attempt to hide it. It was a famous school, the kind that even I’d heard of over the course of natural conversation.

“I’m going to the law department there. That being said, I don’t intend to get too hung up on which undergraduate program I go into yet,” said Kiryuuin.

Asahina trembled with fear when she heard what a prestigious program Kiryuuin was going to enter, saying that something like that would be impossible for her.

“What are you planning to achieve, Fuuka-chan?” asked Asahina.

“Hm? I’m not planning to achieve anything. I don’t intend to be anything,” said Kiryuuin.

Kiryuuin had told me once before that she wanted to live her life as an exceptionally ordinary person, and it seemed like she was saying essentially the same to Asahina.

“Huh. Don’t you think that’s kinda a waste? I mean, Fuuka-chan, knowing you, you could be anything you wanted,” said Asahina.

A have-not was understandably envious hearing from a have-much declaring that they had no intention of demonstrating their talents. The have-nots would probably see that as a huge, pointless waste.

“I could be anything, eh? Well, I’m definitely proud of my abilities, but I suppose it’s like they say, different strokes for different folks. There are lots of reasons.”

“So you don’t have a dream or anything?” asked Asahina.

“I have a dream of not being anybody. Is that answer not good enough?” said Kiryuuin.

“Yeah, I suppose that is a dream too, but it’s like, if we’re talking about dreams, I think it’s good to dream big, y’know? Like, even putting aside whether you can really do it or not, it’s something you think about, right?” said Asahina.

I supposed that was especially true for Asahina, who was expecting to graduate from Class A. Although Kiryuuin understood this, she chuckled.

“I guess you’re right. It’s not like I’ve never once thought about a dream like that,” said Kiryuuin.

“Well, all right then, let’s hear it! Maybe it’s something I’m dreaming about too!” said Asahina.

Kiryuuin must have been compelled by Asahina’s sparkling eyes to come out and say it.

“I suppose if I had to choose a career to make it big, then I might become a politician.”

“A politician?! That’s awesome… But I don’t think you usually hear about people wanting to become a politician, come to think of it… Like, even Miyabi, he’s never said anything about going into politics, and I don’t think I’ve heard it from anyone else,” said Asahina.

Maybe Asahina wanted more details, because her eyes were still focused on Kiryuuin as she visibly perked up.

“Do I have to elaborate?” said Kiryuuin.

“Have to? No, of course not. It’s just I don’t think we’ll have the chance to really sit and chat like this again, and…I’d like to hear about it.”

Upon hearing Asahina’s request, Kiryuuin told her it was special, and revealed the reason.

“When I was little, I used to meet lots of politicans and pundits due to my family’s connections.”

“Oh, so is that why you wanted to become one?” asked Asahina.

“No, not exactly? I actually thought that a politician was the one thing I would never become, precisely because I had those meetings. I listened to what they had to say and let it go in one ear and out the other.”

“Ah, yeah, this might be my own bias talking, but…it does seem politicians tend to be bad people, don’t they?” said Asahina.

“Exactly,” Kiryuuin said. “I had the impression that many of them were completely corrupt people, like those you saw featured on TV and in the news. It is not a profession to aspire to.”

So there must have been something else that led to Kiryuuin considering politics as her dream.

“It’s precisely because the world is so corrupt that some people are bathed in light. There are a few that I admire,” said Kiryuuin.

“Ooh, so what kind of politician do you mean? Is it someone I know?” asked Asahina.

“I think Kijima-san has become quite the great leader,” said Kiryuuin.

“Wait, Kijima? Huh? Whoa! You mean the Prime Minster?” said Asahina.

Kiryuuin affirmed that yes, that’s what she meant. Asahina looked quite surprised.

“I thought it wouldn’t be so bad to aim for the same stage as Kijima-san, who is active at the forefront,” said Kiryuuin.

“But you’re…not going for it?” said Asahina.

“I don’t currently have any plans to do so, no,” said Kiryuuin.

“I think you could become a politician though, Fuuka-chan,” said Asahina.

“I already told you, there’s lots of reasons. Remember?” said Kiryuuin.

Kiryuuin had told me that she didn’t want to be followed by her family name, and the more prominent she became, the more she would. So that was likely one of those reasons.

“In any case, why don’t you take over that dream on my behalf and aim to become a politician, Ayanokouji?” said Kiryuuin.

“That is astoundingly out of the question,” I replied, “I’ve never even thought about a career in politics.”

“My gut is telling me that you’d be a surprisingly good fit for the job, though,” said Kiryuuin.

“I’m fine with just being normal. I’ll go on to a decent university somewhere and get a decent job,” I answered her.

“I see. Since I’m striving for that same path,” said Kiryuuin, “then I suppose that means we’re fellow dream chasers, eh?”

“Ayanokouji-kun, you’re being invited by both Miyabi and Fuuka-chan, don’t you think that makes you pretty special?” said Asahina.

“I’ve just attracted their idle curiosity, is all. Anyway, the next game is about to begin.”

If we talked any longer, we would inevitably be late.

“Oh wow, already? I gotta hurry!” She leaped from the swing and waved at us as she started off. “See ya later!”

“Don’t rush, or you’ll trip and fall,” said Kiryuuin.

“I know! O-oh, whoops!”

Just as Asahina started to take off into a run beside her, she almost fell over. I never expected to see such similar scenarios play out twice in one day, and in such a short time at that.

“Did you see Kouenji?” asked Kiryuuin.

“I tried to have a serious conversation with him, but it was a waste of time,” I replied.

Telling her that I couldn’t get Kouenji to participate was what I came up here to do, after all.

“I see. Young Master Kouenji is impossible to control after all, eh?” said Kiryuuin.

“I tried to find some kind of starting point, more or less, but seems I was powerless to do anything,” I replied.

“I’m glad that there are things even you can’t do, Ayanokouji” said Kiryuuin.

I wasn’t used to being praised for failing to do something.

“Did you perhaps have me talk to him because you wanted to see this result?” I asked.

“I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t want to see it,” replied Kiryuuin.

I had thought it was odd that she was offering support to another group. How mean-spirited.

“Still, Tatebayashi’s got a sharp tongue. Sometimes I find it a little unbearable that he continues to mistreat his juniors,” said Kiryuuin.

“It would be fine if he directed that tongue of his at Kouenji, but even that won’t get through to him at all,” I replied.

Besides, there was also a huge gap between their capabilities. Though it was unlikely, Kouenji wouldn’t have any trouble if he decided to turn on Tatebayashi. Since they both knew this, it wasn’t surprising that Tatebayashi would take out his stress on other classmates or groupmates.

“It is what it is, I suppose. Anyway, let’s both head to the second game for now,” said Kiryuuin.

After that, this is how the games unfolded:

Pottery

This wasn’t a high-level battle, since all the participants were beginners. I managed to pull a step ahead and win, thanks to my dexterous hands.

Table Tennis (Times Two)

It was quickly decided that we would be playing the same game twice in a row, but I had managed to effortlessly score the win thanks to the fact that I had played table tennis plenty of times before.

Accessory Making

Because this was similar to making pressed flowers, I was nervous about how things would go. Luckily, my opponent was also

inexperienced and we were able to compete on equal terms, with me coming out on top.

Takahashi followed me to every game, probably following Nagumo’s instructions, seeing whether I won or lost. I had been expecting to be forced into more battles with luck-related elements, but it was a good first day overall. Also, perhaps my personal five-in-a-row winning streak had an impact on this too, but my group won all five games, without a single loss.

Chapter 4:
A Request from Horikita and a Request from Ayanokouji

IT WAS THE FIRST NIGHT of Social Group camp. Probably the thing that was most different from last year's camp was that rooms were assigned by group, and divided by gender, but not by age, which meant that both first- and second-years would be sleeping in the same room, and depending on their personality, this was the time that they dreaded most.

This was exactly why Hashimoto had taken action earlier, doing things to create an environment where people could feel at ease with each other and open up. It seemed to have paid off, seeing as the first-years were already comfortable enough to talk to Hashimoto with a smile. Out of the eight people in the room, I was overwhelmingly the one that people were least open with.

"Winning every game on our first day was a major development! Don't you think so, Hashimoto-senpai?" said Toyohashi.

"We didn't know who we were going to play against until the games started, so I honestly couldn't predict what was going to happen," added Yanagi.

Both had taken a turn playing table tennis, and both sounded happy as they spoke. Shintoku and Obokata appeared to feel the same way, nodding shyly but repeatedly.

"I'm sorry. We still haven't participated even once yet…"

"Hey, don't worry about it, 'kay? From what I've seen today, all day, about half the students haven't participated anyway. To be perfectly honest, this whole game aspect is really, like, a bonus, y'know? Or like, for the students who don't participate in the games, it's like their job to get hands-on experience instead," said Hashimoto.

There were still the point cards where we were meant to collect stamps through the experiential learning activities. I was skeptical about how much use this system would see, but it seemed like more than I had thought. This was a good opportunity to invite friends, upperclassmen, and juniors here and there, to make time

and deepen ties of friendship, to the fullest. In the five games that were held today, I hadn't seen a single group that had been greedily trying to win, perhaps thanks to these freedoms. That was not to say that we could take first place without effort, though.

Considering the way today's games had played out, slightly tougher battles were likely in store for us tomorrow onward. There were four groups total that hadn't lost any of their games today, including ours, and there were three groups that had only lost once. There were also four groups that had lost every game they played. So based on the polarization of wins and losses, we could assume that there are extremely different perspectives developing about this Social Group camp.

While there might've been some groups with one or two wins that were taking things seriously, I wasn't sure what they'd do if they didn't claw their way into top spots tomorrow. From the second day onward, we'd effectively be competing with roughly half of the groups in the struggle for the top spot in the rankings.

"I figure Nagumo-senpai's group is the safest bet to take the win though," muttered Oda Takumi, a student from Class 2-C, as he thought back on the five games so far.

"I thought so too. And it looks like they won all their games today, apparently," added another student.

The strength of that group was that so many of its members were serious, after all. It was safe to say that none of the students in that group would let themselves cut corners in this event, which was demonstrated by their win ratio. It was easy to imagine that they were exposed to a variety of hands-on activities and accumulated lots of experiences. Although the fact that this wasn't a contest of academic ability allowed for equal competition, it could also be said that, because there seemed to be games that many students had no experience with, that it would be easy for gaps to widen between groups through those games.

"Oh yeah, that reminds me, Hashimoto-senpai. This is about my class, but—"

The conversation didn't just revolve around Social Group. Unrelated, casual, or private topics came up too. I watched the conversation between the seven of them from a distance, as though

I were something of a stranger. It had only been a few hours since our group assembled, but I could see that the first-year students already adored Hashimoto. Even now, the conversation had naturally centered around him. He had said himself that he was good at it, that it was his forte, and all I could say was that it was truly impressive to see in action.

He was beginning to build relationships with them like they were close friends, like they had known each other for a long time. There were people like Yousuke, who were good at blending into their surroundings, and what I said could also apply to him, but Hashimoto was a different type of person. Although it was a little disconcerting that the cunning Oda was getting to be relatively friendly with people as well…

“Anyway though, for real, this day had pretty much gone as expected,” Hashimoto said. He had a notepad in one hand, where he’d recorded with the wins and losses for each group when those were reported by the school. He gave a low hum as he checked those scores. “Ryuuen’s group had two losses, and Sakayanagi’s had three. If they ain’t careful, they’ll drop out of the running for the top spots in the rankings tomorrow.”

We hadn’t played against either of those two groups today, so the details were unclear. Hashimoto probably would have gathered more information if he had not taken on the job of bringing the first-year students together, but it seemed as though he wasn’t just going to leave things undone.

“That’s kind of surprising, isn’t it? I’ve always had the strong impression that Sakayanagi-senpai doesn’t lose. I wonder if it’s because of the third-year student in charge of her group, perhaps?” said one student.

According to the information provided by OAA, that third-year was a Class 3-D student named Iki who had poor scores across the board, especially in terms of Academic Ability, which was currently an unsatisfactory D+. This suggested that Iki would not likely be moving on to higher education.

“Normally, if Sakayanagi wants to win, she’ll take command, whether that involves taking leadership rights from a third-year or whoever. Even against someone like Nagumo-senpai or Kiryuuin-

senpai, she wouldn't budge an inch. And besides, this is Iki-senpai we're talkin' about, y'know? No matter how you slice it, Sakayanagi would steal leadership rights as fast as she... Actually, no, Iki-senpai is the type of person who'd want to leave everything to a capable ally, anyway," said Hashimoto.

It sounded as though Hashimoto knew what type of person Iki was, more or less.

"Then that simply means that the group as a whole isn't performing to standards, right?" muttered Kosumi, who hadn't said very much at all before this point.

However, Toyohashi quickly spoke up to reject the notion, saying, "They have a fairly good lineup of first-years in their group though, at the very least. And the same can probably be said for the second-years too."

Toyohashi was right about the general skill levels in Sakayanagi's group. Considering that Iki would have chosen group members with the possibility of winning in mind, the lineup of students from both grade levels comprised of reasonably talented people. Therefore, it was only natural for Hashimoto to have doubts about the fact that Sakayanagi's group had lost today, paticularly against opponents that were supposedly lower in level.

"Whether we're talking about a special exam or this Social Group thing, Sakayanagi is someone who always aims to win," said Hashimoto.

Hashimoto said that he knew this fact better than anyone else, because he had been by her side all this time, doing all he could in service of that. I'm sure that seeing Sakayanagi's group lose three times today made Hashimoto stop and think, *"What if...?"*

"I agree. She's probably plotting somethin'," added Oda.

Oda also seemed to be hung up on the fact that Sakayanagi had lost three times and looked to be lost in thought. That being said, with the information available, we weren't going to get any answers regardless of how hard we thought about it. Soon, the seven of them had moved on to completely unrelated topics. They were talking so lively that they didn't notice Hashimoto distance himself and walk over to me, the odd one out who'd been watching from afar. On his way over, he picked up the remote control and

deliberately put a variety show on the TV so that it would fill the room with noise.

“I was wondering, what if the damage from losing Kamuro is that huge?” asked Hashimoto. Having come up with a theory as to why Sakayanagi lost three times, Hashimoto looked to me for confirmation.

“Maybe,” I replied.

It was hard to say for sure based on the evidence we currently had, but none of that evidence disputed the notion, either.

“If she really is growing weaker, then that’s all the more convenient for me. If we head straight into final exams in that situation, I’ll have a chance to seize victory,” said Hashimoto.

He was exactly right, but Hashimoto wasn’t so naive as to base his actions off of preliminary results and taking the idea without questioning it.

“Ayanokouji, I was wondering if you could find out what the situation actually is with Sakayanagi and her group,” said Hashimoto.

“Finding out things like that is your area of expertise, though. It’s none of my business,” I replied.

I tried to immediately refuse, but Hashimoto leaned in close and whispered in my ear, just for caution’s sake.

“Come on, dude, cut me a break just this once, will ya? I’m basically public enemy number one in Class A right now, y’know? Especially with Kitou, he seems super pissed off. It’s good that Sakayanagi doesn’t seem to have said anything, but I’ve gotta wonder what Kitou’ll do when he finds out for certain that I’ve betrayed the class,” said Hashimoto.

Hashimoto made a gesture of hugging his body, adding, “Just imagining it…” in a quiet murmur. But a faint smile remained on his face.

“For all that, you don’t look very frightened,” I replied.

“Hey man,” Hashimoto said, “if you can’t at least put up this much of a tough front, then you don’t got the qualifications to betray your class.”

He had a point there.

“Besides, thanks to you, I was able to blow off some steam and feel better. And I’m grateful for that too,” said Hashimoto.

When he’d visited my room on the day of the student–teacher meeting, Hashimoto had laid bare everything about himself. Now, thanks to that visit, he was able to face forward properly, but that effect was probably temporary. In truth, that would no longer be the case once the full impact of his betrayal hit. Hashimoto did not have much time left.

“And in your case, Ayanokouji, you’ve basically got a free pass to get face time with Sakayanagi, right?” said Hashimoto.

It was nice that I could lend him an ear and take a load off his mind, but this was something totally different.

“Hashimoto, you can hope for whatever you want, but since when was it decided that I’m taking your side? I don’t intend to stick my neck out and get involved in any trouble,” I replied.

“Yeah, dude, I’m trying to keep this and that separate. But at least here at Social Group camp we’re on the same team, right? Even though she’s lost three times, if Sakayanagi’s around, we should be wary of her as a contender for the top ranking. It’s not a bad idea to do some reconnaissance now, since we’ll be playin’ them tomorrow too,” said Hashimoto.

He was a man not strongly fixated on group contests, yet he spoke so gallantly.

“That is a very sound reason. But as long as you and I are in the same group, I’m sure that Sakayanagi will be more wary of me than usual. I don’t want you to expect any useful information out of it,” I replied.

“I know that. I’m just saying that I’ll just think of it as a bonus, is all. Okay?”

“...All right. For the time being, I’ll just try whatever I can.”

“I appreciate it, dude.”

Personally, I also wanted to know why she lost three times—whether or not I would honestly share the information I obtained to Hashimoto was another matter.

4.1

IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING that the quickest way to get in touch with Sakayanagi was to just contact her. However, it would probably be difficult to learn the details of her current situation as, while she might be honest about some things, I expected she'd intentionally leave out the bulk of it.

My other option would be to indirectly extract information from someone who had better knowledge of Sakayanagi's current condition. Of course, that approach carried its own risks. Namely, it was inevitable that Sakayanagi would find out that I was asking around about her. Hondou and Shinohara, students from Horikita's class, were assigned to Sakayanagi's same group, but neither of them were the type that you'd call tight-lipped or good at acting. For the time being, I decided to slowly gather my thoughts in the lobby. Depending on the timing, I might even be able to see Sakayanagi passing through.

"Ayanokouji-kun."

As I headed for the lobby, a lone student noticed me and approached. It was Sanada, from Sakayanagi's class. His hair was wet, and I could just barely make out a droplet of water on his glasses, so I assumed he was fresh out of the bath.

"I was wondering if perhaps I could have a moment of your time, to talk. There's something I wanted to ask you, if it's all right with you," said Sanada.

"I don't really mind. What did you want to ask?"

For my part, I was also grateful to bump into Sanada, since he played a game against Sakayanagi's group and won against her on our first day.

"It's regarding someone in your group: Hashimoto-kun. I'm sure you've likely heard all sorts of talk going around," said Sanada.

"I've heard stuff like he had a hand in Kamuro's expulsion from school, yeah," I replied.

"Nothing has been made clear yet, so I won't try and ask about that, but I am curious about how he's doing, regardless of whatever

the truth may be… I suppose I was wondering if he seems okay."

Sakayanagi wasn't the only one attracting attention from people in Class A; Hashimoto was getting a lot of it himself. It wouldn't be surprising then that some students, like Sanada, were concerned.

"I haven't seen anything especially out of the ordinary. Even if he's just putting up a tough front, he looks like he's doing well," I replied.

"I see… That's good, then."

"I understand the situation with Hashimoto, but is there anything unusual going on with Sakayanagi?"

I tried touching on the matter of Sakayanagi while keeping with the flow of conversation.

"From what I have seen of her at school, she seems the same as ever," he replied.

"It's just that her group lost three times today in Social Group stuff, and I thought maybe something was going on with her," I replied.

"I am not so sure about that. But you may be right. I haven't seen her since we've arrived, so I am afraid I don't know anything in detail."

"But didn't you play a game against Sakayanagi's group today?"

I tried prodding him, but Sanada quietly shook his head from side to side.

"She didn't participate. I didn't even see her giving orders from the sidelines, either."

It was possible that she just happened to be absent from the game by chance, but at this point, it seemed more likely that she was just not getting involved in Social Group at all.

"What about you, Ayanokouji-kun? Do you know something?" he asked.

"Nothing, unfortunately. Guess the information I have is the same as yours," I answered.

If anything, it'd be fair to say I actually had even less than he did.

"All that aside, I would be happy if you could be mindful of Hashimoto-kun, even if only a little," said Sanada.

"As a member of the same group, I plan to keep an eye on him as much as I can. But, while it's not my place to stick my nose into things when I don't know the details about the situation, what do his classmates really think? Do they think that Hashimoto is the traitor?" I asked.

"That's..." Sanada didn't answer the question immediately and couldn't find the words to finish his sentence. "I haven't spoken to any of my classmates about it directly, so I can't say anything definitively. However, there are certainly those who assume that is the case," said Sanada.

Given my conversation with Hashimoto moments earlier, Kitou immediately came to mind. He didn't say much, but his behavior carried a sense of obedience toward Class A. Moreover, Kitou probably had good compatibility with Kamuro, since they were often together. I talked with Sanada for a little bit longer, but then I noticed Horikita staring at me in the distance. It looked like she wanted to talk to me about something or another, so I wrapped up my conversation with Sanada.

Once I was alone, Horikita approached me. Even though there were only twenty third-year students here, that was such a large number of people that chances were high you could coincidentally bump into one.

"It seems I've caught you at the perfect time. I have a small favor to ask of you. Do you mind?" asked Horikita.

Horikita was extremely polite as she approached me with her question, but I couldn't imagine that her favor was related to Social Group. We all knew that Nagumo's group had maintained its position in first place, untarnished, with five consecutive wins on our first day.

"What's the favor?" I asked.

When I responded with a question, Horikita tugged on my sleeve and physically pulled me to the end of the lobby.

“This isn’t something we can talk about too loudly. It’s about Amasawa-san,” she said.

“You’re in the same group, yeah? Did something happen?” I asked.

Considering she was trying to speak to me in private, the first thing that came to mind was that there was some kind of trouble. But her answer immediately contradicted that assumption.

“She talks a bit too much, but she hasn’t done anything problematic. So far, she’s been a good girl,” said Horikita.

I was relieved to hear that, and waited for her to continue speaking.

“Did you know that she is quite physically capable? She seems to be very well-versed in martial arts too.”

“Martial arts aside, I have a general grasp on things from looking at her OAA,” I replied.

I responded with a safe answer to keep the conversation going, and urged Horikita to keep speaking, because I couldn’t see where she was going with this.

“I think that this might be the first you’re hearing about it if Amasawa-san hasn’t told you about it herself, but I owe her something of a debt. It’s something that I can’t repay her during our normal school days.”

Martial arts and the word “debt.” Although Horikita had avoided expressing it directly, it sounded like she and Amasawa had fought each other at some point. In retrospect, it felt like the only time that could have happened was during the Uninhabited Island Exam, without even needing to give it too much on thought.

“It’s hard to imagine the details here,” I remarked.

I decided to just throw out a statement that most people would probably say if they heard what I just heard.

“Well, this and that happened,” said Horikita.

She was being vague, and it sounded like she had no intention of sharing exactly what this debt entailed. This wasn’t something worth forcing out of her though, so I figured I’d just move things along.

“And so?” I asked.

“I try to be diligent in my training in my own way, every day. But still, I don’t know if I’m at a level where I can compete with her. That’s why I want you to be my opponent, and evaluate my current abilities.”

“Okay, I get that you want to pay back your debt to Amasawa, but that is a pretty disturbing thing to say,” I replied.

“Normally, yes. But her strength isn’t normal.”

“Even if you say so, I don’t even know what Amasawa’s abilities are. I won’t be any help to you.”

If I didn’t know exactly what her opponent’s strengths were, then there was no point in using me as a metric.

...Well, in truth, I do know, but still.

I decided to keep that part to myself.

“It’s fine; you can just judge my strength in your own way,” said Horikita. “Of course, I would also appreciate it if you could give me a little advice, if possible.”

Judging from the way she was speaking, it sounded like the advice was the main thing she was looking for.

“You’re free to want a revenge match, but did Amasawa agree to one?” I asked.

“Not yet,” she answered quickly, “and if she rejects my proposal, I have no intention of forcing her to agree.”

Despite what she said, I was sure that Horikita thought that there was no way Amasawa would refuse. She even went through all the trouble of confiding in me about this and asking for special training, after all.

“So, what do you say? Will you accept my request?” asked Horikita.

“There’s something I want to know before deciding whether I will accept,” I replied.

If Horikita were going to take on Amasawa, she would be at a considerable disadvantage. Even supposing that Horikita had been trained after her earlier defeat, I couldn’t imagine that she could close the gap in their abilities so easily.

“Ibuki’s standing right there, why don’t you ask her for help? If it’s for something like this, I’m sure she’d be more than happy to be your opponent,” I added, calling over to a certain someone who was probably listening as she hid nearby.

“*Tch*, so you noticed,” she huffed.

Ibuki clicked her tongue as she emerged around the corner of the hallway, sounding well and truly irritated. It was obvious that the two of them had conspired beforehand, because Horikita wasn’t surprised by her appearance.

“Unfortunately, I’m already tired of doing that with Ibuki-san,” Horikita said. “Besides, you don’t see real results when fighting with the same opponent all the time.”

I figured that Ibuki standing beside her must similarly owe Amasawa a debt, judging from her similar reaction. That must’ve meant that they’d done all they could on their own and were now asking for my help.

“You’re strong, so fight at least a little,” Ibuki demanded.

“Does this mean that you’re going to be doing this too, Ibuki?” I asked.

“Obviously. There is no way in hell I can let things stand after losing to some little first-year girl,” said Ibuki.

After a few thrusts with her fists, she showed off a clean high kick. She looked like she was very, very eager to start fighting and land some real hits. It was all well and good that she was so enthusiastic, but even though Ibuki called Amasawa little, she wasn’t any bigger. Actually, when it came to size and just about everything else, Ibuki was smaller...

“I take it that, since you’re doing this now at camp, you’ve determined that you won’t have any trouble finding a place to fight, right?” I asked.

“Holding a revenge match would be far too conspicuous at school,” said Horikita, with a small nod.

Her determination seemed firm—Ibuki’s as well.

“So, what do you say? To be honest, there’s no benefit in it for you, but...” said Horikita.

“You’re certainly right about that,” I replied, “I’m wouldn’t get anything in return for this.”

“But, if you do accept, I would be willing to give you Private Points as compensation.”

It sounded like she was prepared to offer me payment, but there wasn’t any point in accepting something like that.

“I don’t know how much help I’ll be, but if you accept my terms, then I’m willing to go along with this,” I said, interrupting her before she could finish her offer.

“R-really? I honestly wasn’t sure what to expect…” said Horikita.

“Whether both parties agree to it or not, there would be more disadvantages if you were to let sparks fly and fight at school. If you want to pay back a ‘debt’ or whatever, you wouldn’t want to let a terrific opportunity pass you by, I suppose. That said, it’s not like you can just walk around in the middle of the night, either,” I replied.

“Thank you. This is the best kind of cooperation I could’ve hoped for. So then, what are your terms?” asked Horikita.

There were certain conditions that needed to be met for her revenge match against Amasawa.

“First, talk to Amasawa about this before the end of the day. You’re in the same group, so it shouldn’t be difficult for you to find an opportunity to talk to her.” Chances of that happening were low, but this training would be pointless if Amasawa didn’t accept the invitation. “Of course, to avoid causing any fuss, you need to do this in such a way that outside parties won’t take notice. As for the time, it will absolutely have to be early in the morning on the last day. Have Amasawa accept to holding your fight then.”

“That all sounds reasonable, okay. I understand. What are your other conditions?” said Horikita.

“I’ll tell you after you take care of that part. If Amasawa doesn’t accept, the training session will be meaningless. Besides, it’s not like you can fight in the middle of the night in the building we’re staying in, right?” I replied.

Since the offer we were discussing had to be accepted, I'm sure there won't be any objections before hearing all the terms and conditions.

"As for me, I'd just go ahead and do it right now, to be honest," said Ibuki.

"You be quiet," snapped Horikita.

Unlike Ibuki, Horikita had some common sense and immediately showed that she had an understanding.

"If Amasawa-san agrees, I'll send you a message," said Horikita.

"Please do. I'll make sure I'm ready to go in the morning," I answered.

Knowing her, Amasawa wasn't the type to refuse a fight when someone was fixing for one. If these two were out for revenge, she'd probably happily accept. The camp had little supervision, so it was the perfect place, and I was sure that Amasawa also understood that. Horikita nodded and was about to return to her room, but I stopped her, seizing the good opportunity.

"This isn't related to the training, but there is one thing I'd like you to look into for me," I added.

"What is it?" she asked.

If Horikita was preparing to propose a revenge match, then she might be able to fool Amasawa's keen sense of smell. I made a small request of Horikita.

"I don't really understand, but you're saying I just have to be mindful of it, right?" said Horikita.

"Yeah. Without telling Amasawa," I replied.

"Okay then. If that's all, then it's no big deal," said Horikita.

I casually thanked Horikita for accepting my request, and then we went our separate ways.

"Now then…"

Let's investigate the matter of Sakayanagi a little more, shall we?

However, though I tried wandering around the camp building at random, I didn't see Sakayanagi. The crowds began to dwindle as 9 p.m. approached, as one would expect, so I decided to wrap

things up. When I returned to the room, I saw that Hashimoto, Toyohashi, and Shintoku were waiting for me, ready to hop into the bath, so I decided to just head on over to the large baths with them.

4.2

AFTER THOROUGHLY ENJOYING a soak in the shared bath for about an hour, I returned to the room with the three others in our band of bathers. It was then that I spotted the third-year student Tatebayashi, standing out in front of the room, looking like he was in a foul mood, bouncing his leg repeatedly and irritably.

“You finally came back…” he huffed.

Tatebayashi turned his gaze toward us…or not. Actually, he was looking past us, directing his gaze at Kouenji, who had selfishly been doing whatever he pleased all day today. I had already known this would happen, but judging from how Tatebayashi looked, it seemed like he hadn’t been able to contact Kouenji once in all this time. I headed to my room, paying no mind to the very irritated upperclassman.

“Would you kindly move? You’re in the way,” said Kouenji.

“Look here, you! I don’t know what the hell you’re thinking, but __”

Before Tatebayashi could launch into his lecture, Kouenji shoved him aside by pushing his shoulder, and went ahead into the room. It wasn’t like Kouenji had forced his way through or anything, but rather, he simply made way with the overwhelming difference between their physiques and strength. Rumors about Kouenji must have circulated well enough even among the third-year students, but without having the experience of actually having to deal with him, he simply came off as maddeningly irritating. Without even bothering to close the door behind him, Tatebayashi ran after Kouenji.

“D-do you think there’s going to be a fight?” asked Shintoku, looking to Hashimoto for guidance.

“That Kouenji’s a real difficult one, for sure. For now, let’s just have a look at what’s going on,” said Hashimoto.

We could have overlooked the situation if the door had been closed, but it was wide open. All of us nonchalantly peeked inside the room. Kouenji, having entered already, was on the futon at the far end. Surprisingly, it looked like three of the first-year students and…all the second-year students other than Kouenji were out of the shared quarters.

Kouenji started stretching, as though he wasn't even aware of Tatebayashi, who was looking down at him from his full height in a show of intimidation. I wondered how Shintoku and Toyohashi felt watching this unfold.

"I really don't want anything to do with Kouenji-senpai…"

"Me either…"

I didn't even need to wonder, because they were too taken aback by what they saw to stop themselves from vocalizing how they felt.

"What the hell have you been doing all this time?!" snapped Tatebayashi, pressing him for answers as the leader of his group.

"Me? It's obvious, isn't it? Self-improvement," said Kouenji.

"Huh? Self-improvement? Don't spout that nonsensical crap!" shouted Tatebayashi.

No matter how loudly he raised his voice; it was a waste of effort. Nothing he said was going to reach Kouenji.

"You are going to cooperate tomorrow. Properly! Our group is already at the edge of a cliff!" shouted Tatebayashi.

"That is an impossible ask," said Kouenji, replying without so much as even looking at Tatebayashi.

Fixed on Kouenji, the eyes of the first-year students peering into the room began to take on an icy coldness. It was difficult to adapt to this man in an abbreviated period of time. The other juniors inside the room were silent, seemingly unable to move. There was a somewhat heavy feeling in the air.

"An impossible ask?! What do you think a group even is?!" huffed Tatebayashi.

Tatebayashi, not giving up, continued laying into Kouenji. Kouenji, paying no heed whatsoever to his fellow groupmates,

rolled out his futon and got ready to go to sleep.

“Well then, I shall sleep on the far end,” he announced.

“Don’t just decide that on your own! *I’m* the one who’s decides where people sleep!” snapped Tatebayashi.

Hashimoto quietly entered the room and talked to the first-year students inside, requesting that they stop Tatebayashi. They hurriedly got to their feet and rushed over to their leader’s side in a flustered panic, speaking words meant to pacify him. Tatebayashi, his shoulders heaving with every breath, noticed his juniors and slightly regained his composure.

“Listen. You absolutely must follow the leader’s instructions, okay?” said Tatebayashi.

However...

“I refuse. I loathe adhering to useless protocol. Will you kindly shut up now?” replied Kouenji.

That remark from Kouenji was the last straw. Pushing aside the juniors who had been consoling him, Tatebayashi screamed at Kouenji.

“Hate it, huh?! The hell is that?! There are first-years here too, y’know! You’re setting a bad example, and making us both look bad as senpai!” he shouted.

“Do you not know the saying, ‘What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’? One must struggle in their youth, even if they must invite that upon themselves. In times like these, young people take the initiative and work hard for their superiors,” said Kouenji.

“A-ah, y-yeah, um, he’s right. He can sleep there, we don’t mind, so, uh... Yes,” said one of the first-year students.

Once told to hand things over by a second-year student, most first-years would have no choice but to comply.

“Okay then, in that case, I, a third-year student, am giving *you* an order. Invite that suffering upon yourself!” shouted Tatebayashi.

“Hey, come on, senpai, please calm down,” said Hashimoto, gently placing his hands on Tatebayashi to stop him from raising his fist in anger at Kouenji.

Hashimoto then turned to look over at me and the first-years and appealed to us to go ahead and head back to the room first.

“Let’s head back,” I announced.

“B-but will everything be all right?”

“Hashimoto should be able to get things under control here well enough,” I replied.

We left Hashimoto behind and returned to our room. About ten minutes or so passed before Hashimoto returned to the restless first-years.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, he calmed down. He said he got desperate; he really, really wanted to win,” said Hashimoto.

Class 3-D didn’t have much money at their disposal because of their offerings to Nagumo and their low Class Points. And since they only had a brief time left at school, they wanted to get a little extra money, no matter how small an amount it might be.

“Most of the really good students were taken by third-years like Nagumo-senpai, so there wasn’t much selection. That’s why, when presented with what was left, he picked Kouenji and tried to see if he could turn things around. But the result is as you can see, pretty much,” explained Hashimoto.

It was understandable that someone would be angry when their faint hopes that they might be able to effectively handle their team were dashed.

“Things must be tough for you too, Ayanokouji-senpai… Being in the same class as someone like him, I mean.”

I didn’t really think anything of it myself, but I had gained a bit of newfound respect from the first-year students.

“Now then…”

At this point, we started to get ready for bed, but Hashimoto still had to solve the problem of sleeping arrangements. It may have seemed trivial with the way Kouenji and Tatebayashi were fighting about it, but it couldn’t be ignored. I remembered that when it came to students sleeping together, there were often small disputes over who would sleep where. That was especially true

during the school trip, when Ryuuen and Kitou got into a pillow fight and there was a big kerfuffle.

“Let’s decide with a fair-and-square contest. That way, we can avoid a situation like Kouenji’s,” said Hashimoto, stepping up to deal with it himself.

“No, no, we’re really fine anywhere. Right?”

“Yes. Actually, if you wouldn’t mind, please let Ayanokouji-senpai decide next!”

“Wait, hold up, why Ayanokouji? Am I the bad guy here or something?” asked Hashimoto, with a slightly wry smile.

“Oh, no, it’s not like that, it’s just…we admire Ayanokouji-senpai!”

“Me too, Ayanokouji-senpai! I respect you!”

Shintoku and Toyohashi looked at me with their eyes twinkling to offer their admiration.

“…Well, well,” remarked Hashimoto, “it seems like you’ve become quite adored in a short period of time,”

“I have no idea how to respond to that,” I replied.

I was more perplexed than anyone else. Nothing like this had ever happened to me until just a few moments ago. Fellow first-year students Obokata, Yanagi, and Kosumi simply cocked their heads in apparent confusion at their classmates’ attitudes taking a sudden change.

Chapter 5:
A Curious Feeling That Something Is Out of Place

THE MORNING OF THE SECOND DAY. It was still before six o'clock in the morning. It was just starting to get light outside, but it was hard to say that visibility was great yet. I moved to a space a little further away from the building so as not to be seen. There wasn't anything to worry about though, as I didn't think that there would be many people who would bother coming outside at this time of day. Shortly afterward, Horikita and Ibuki showed up, as promised.

"Aaaaah... So sleepy." Ibuki yawned and stretched, her body shivering. "Also, jeez, it's cold."

"If you don't like it, you can feel free to head on back to your room, okay?" replied Horikita.

"You've gotta be kidding. There's no way I'm gonna let you be the only one to get revenge," replied Ibuki.

It sounded like the main driving force behind Ibuki being here was not wanting to let Horikita have her way, rather than her issue with Amasawa.

"It seems like Amasawa has graciously accepted your challenge," I observed.

"Yes. She immediately agreed to it. I was met with some resistance on a surprising point, though," said Horikita.

"A surprising point?"

"I had asked her to do it on the morning of the fourth day, just as I had promised you, but she tried to negotiate with me on that, saying she wanted to change it to the morning of the third day."

"She wanted to move things forward a day?" I asked.

"Of course, since the conditions for your cooperation included holding our fight on the morning of the fourth day, I told her that I could not compromise on that. She backed down, but even so, it seems like it didn't resolve the fact that it was inconvenient for her. I wonder if she has plans or something."

"Early in the morning? It's hard to say. Anyway, it's probably best not to worry about it if she accepted, right?"

If Amasawa didn’t like to get up early in the morning, it wouldn’t make much of a difference whether it was the third day or the fourth.

“At any rate, I have a request of you, in that regard,” Horikita said. “I didn’t press her on it because it’s a private matter, but there are some issues specific to women. If you’ll take that into consideration, I was wondering if I could get your permission to change it to the third day.”

It was certainly true that, with respect to the physical makeup of our bodies, there did come periods of time where women could be put at a disadvantage. But that would apply to Horikita and Ibuki too, so I couldn’t imagine that Amasawa would use that as an excuse.

“If she’s accepted the offer even though it’s inconvenient for her, then you should just continue with the arrangement as is. You shouldn’t reduce the number of times you’ll be training,” I replied.

“You’re quite merciless,” said Horikita.

“The match is going to be on the morning of the fourth day. If you can’t abide by that, then I can’t help you with the training.”

“...I understand. I’ll stick with the current plan, even if I feel a little guilty. Are we good, then?”

“Don’t even think about holding back against your opponent, understand?”

Horikita gave me a difficult expression, like she was still hung up on something.

“I understand that. I’m sure that she doesn’t think it’s even remotely possible that she would lose to us. So much so that she was even worried about our health,” said Horikita.

Horikita didn’t seem to like that, but since she was on the side asking for a revenge match, there was nothing to be said.

“I am gonna beat the ever-loving crap out of her,” huffed Ibuki.

Ibuki, standing beside Horikita, was raring to go, her desire for vengeance blazing hot. Personally, I didn’t care how fired up she might get, but it would be a problem if she overdid things.

“Don’t wound her face, okay? It’ll be trouble if people find out that you got into a fight,” I cautioned.

“Say what? If an opponent has a weak point, I’ll aim there, no matter where it is. In fact, I think the very first thing I ought to do is drive my foot right into Amasawa’s face,” said Ibuki.

It sounded like she was going to kick her without mercy when the time came, regardless of any warnings I could give now.

“It’s good that you’re motivated,” I said.

I decided to just end the topic there, praising her proactiveness, since we were here to train.

“I’ll get straight to it. Would you please tell me your additional conditions for accepting my request?” asked Horikita.

“Ah, yeah. There’s just one more condition. Promise that, if you determine that it’ll be difficult to win against her, you will not hesitate to fight her two-on-one, instead of one-on-one,” I replied.

I told them that other condition that I had decided upon beforehand, but both of them seemed to have trouble grasping it.

“I’m sorry. When you say two-on-one, you’re saying—”

“You and Ibuki would be the ‘two’ in that scenario, yes,” I answered, cutting her off. “If you can’t accept that, then I have no intention of helping you.”

At my clarification, Ibuki kicked the ground and clenched her fist at me.

“Huh?! A two-on-one revenge match?! What the hell is up with that? That’s so freakin’ lame. It’s unbelievable,” she huffed.

“I didn’t say ‘don’t fight one-on-one.’ I said if you find that it’s difficult,” I replied.

“Which sounds exactly like you’re saying that we don’t have any chance at winning,” replied Ibuki.

“I wanted to put it to you delicately, but, yeah, that’s true. I’m sorry, but the chances of you winning in a one-on-one fight against Amasawa are pretty much nil. I don’t intend to play along with something that’s just a waste of time.”

To be honest, even if they went against Amasawa two to one, chances were high that it would just be a repeat of their previous

encounter.

“I don’t like it. That is not a condition I can accept,” said Ibuki.

“I certainly don’t like it either,” said Horikita. “To begin with, judging from the way you talk about it, I can interpret that to indicate that you actually know quite a lot about Amasawa-san’s abilities, right?”

“Yeah. Though to be honest, I haven’t fought her myself, but I have seen enough to know what she can do,” I answered.

“…And you think that there’s *that* much of a difference between her and us?” said Horikita.

I nodded, and it seemed to put Ibuki in an even worse mood.

“Forget it.” She clicked her tongue and averted her eyes. “I don’t need Ayanokouji’s help; I’ll do this alone. Horikita, you should just forget about him too.”

“I agree that…we’ve been offered a condition that is very hard to swallow,” said Horikita.

The previous conditions had all been met with immediate approval. I understood their resistance to this one, but meaningless training would just waste everyone’s time.

“If that’s the case, that’s fine with me. It’d be much easier for me not to help with this, anyway,” I replied.

“Let me ask you once again. You have an understanding of Amasawa-san’s abilities, right?” asked Horikita.

“I believe I understand her better than you and Ibuki do, at least. And while I will only do so as reference for you, I can also fight at a level similar to Amasawa’s strength,” I answered.

I think that Horikita had merely been hoping for a hand-to-hand match, but she couldn’t help but feel attracted to the idea of sparring with someone at the same ability as her target opponent.

“…Very well. I’m fine with accepting your condition. But what if Ibuki-san refuses?” asked Horikita.

“Then the discussion is over. My help is contingent on the premise that the two of you cooperate,” I replied.

“Can you make your judgment after you’ve seen how strong I’ve become?” asked Ibuki.

“Sure, okay. In that case, let’s test it out.” Slowly pulling my foot back, I proceeded to draw a circle roughly a meter in diameter with it. Then, I stood in the center of the circle and put my left hand out in front of me, putting right hand behind my back. “I won’t step outside the circle. And I’ll only attack with my left hand.”

“Say what?” huffed Ibuki.

“If you can make me struggle in this situation,” I said, “then you should be able to put up a good fight against Amasawa.”

“Are you makin’ fun of me?” answered Ibuki.

“You’re free to interpret this however you want, but you’re the one who said you wanted to show me first, remember?”

“That’s a laugh. Okay,” said Ibuki, “I’ll start by burning that hubris of yours to nothing.”

What an interesting choice of phrasing. The style she was using was primarily focused on footwork, the same as when we had faced each other previously. Her movements may have been more swift and precise than before, but the difference was negligible, well within margin of error. I quickly determined where her feet would land and avoided her kicks.

“Don’t get cocky! If I get your left arm, you’re mine!” shouted Ibuki.

Apparently, Ibuki intended to grab my left arm to cut off my means of attacking. If that was what she wanted, I’d let her grab me as much as she wanted. When I deliberately brought my left hand into a position where it would be easy for her to reach, she took advantage of what looked like a perfect opportunity and grabbed my wrist.

Once she did, I extended the five fingers of my left hand and took a large step with my left foot, planting it past Ibuki. As I pulled my hand away in an arc from left to right and broke free of Ibuki’s grip, I opened my left leg and separated from her. After brushing Ibuki off, she was defenseless and had her back completely open to me before she even realized it.

“Huh?!” blinked Ibuki.

I thrust outward with my clenched left fist, lightly driving it into Ibuki’s back before she could wrap her head around what had

just happened.

“H how…?!” she stammered.

“It’s a type of aikido. No matter how many times you try that, the results will be the same,” I replied.

In a situation where it was certain that you’d be facing an opponent with established techniques in a one-on-one match, you couldn’t overcome a difference in ability no matter how many times you fought. To do so in this case, they would need to accept attacking two-on-one to throw more moves than their opponent.

“May I switch in, Ibuki-san?” asked Horikita.

“I guess you have to experience it firsthand to really understand, huh?” replied Ibuki.

“It’s not that. Even in that short sequence, I could recognize full well your fear. That’s why I want you to look at it objectively, Ibuki-san. You can’t make any progress if you don’t know what you experienced,” said Horikita.

It sounded like Horikita had wanted to let Ibuki gain experience fighting me of her own free will.

“I’m going to block your left hand, just like she did. But I don’t plan to let you do to me what you did to her,” said Horikita.

“That’s good,” I replied. “It’d be stupid to just come in and get worked over the same way she did on purpose.”

I let Ibuki back off, and now Horikita stood before me.

“You can start anytime,” I told her.

“I intend to.”

I thought she might’ve paused for a moment to take a breath, but apparently not. She immediately tried to grab my left forearm, further up from my wrist. I supposed that she was trying to make me act on instinct without even considering what I just said. However, I forced her to take hold of my wrist by adjusting and pulling my arm back.

“Urk…!”

Horikita hadn’t caught me; she had been caught. Even though Horikita had realized this, she couldn’t stop the momentum of her own movements. And even though she understood intellectually

that she was in a disadvantageous position, she was moved in exactly the same way Ibuki had been. Instead of letting her grab me, I deliberately made her grab the location that she did not want to.

The human mind is a strange thing. Even though one understands that they shouldn't grab in that situation, their brain decides that it's better than not grabbing at all. That was because they haven't experienced a situation in which not grabbing hold is actually more advantageous.

"So, I got worked over too, in that sequence just now..." remarked Horikita.

"That's what I told you," I replied.

"Even though I didn't intend to let you do the same thing to me, I found myself being forced into it before I even realized..." said Horikita. As frustration welled up within her, she stared at me with a powerful intensity in her eyes. "And that's the difference in ability between Amasawa-san and us right now, yes?"

"Yeah. I can't see you having any chance of winning whatsoever unless you can at least make me give up on the rules that I imposed on myself here," I answered.

Either they forced me to take even one step outside the circle or they made me use my right arm. If they couldn't do either of those things but still tried to take their revenge now, then all that would happen is they would get scornfully laughed at.

"So, does this convince you? How reckless it would be for you to fight Amasawa one-on-one?" I asked.

While Horikita's facial expression was still subdued, Ibuki's showed her frustration clearly and plainly. Since she wasn't talking big about how she would defeat Amasawa anymore, I supposed that meant she saw the light.

"How much is it...?" asked Ibuki.

"How much is what?" I asked in return.

"The difference between Amasawa and me. Can't you give me like a number or something, to make it easier to understand?" replied Ibuki.

It was true that just having a vague sense of it intuitively wouldn't be enough to maintain her motivation into the future.

"In terms of physical ability, if we treat you and Horikita as having about the same level, we could say fifty for you both, then Amasawa would be sixty, with a difference of about ten between you." At that answer, Horikita and Ibuki exchanged looks, perhaps surprised that there wasn't as much of a difference as they had expected. "However, it's a different story if we factor in technical skill. You two each focus on a single martial art, whereas Amasawa has practiced an extraordinary number of them. If you take that into account, the gap widens further," I explained.

Even though I expressed it in numerical terms, those numbers were nothing more than an overall guide. Who won or lost could vary greatly depending on the conditions that day, unpredictable events, misreading, or luck. However, a greater difference in skill meant a greater number of required attempts.

"From here on," I added, "you'll be fighting together, two-on-one."

"I don't like this," replied Ibuki.

"I feel the same way, Ibuki-san," answered Horikita, "but you can understand that necessity calls for it, right?"

"We're definitely gonna make him use both hands. Got it?" said Ibuki.

"I'm not so sure about that. Personally, I think it would be easier to force him out of the circle. Don't you?" said Horikita.

"I don't care," snapped Ibuki, "You're gonna go along with my plan."

Before they could even start fighting, the two quickly started quarreling about how they would fight. Horikita and Ibuki were oil and water. They probably hadn't even considered the notion of working together this whole time. For now, I would stay out of it and let them do as they pleased.

"It's impossible for us to be in sync with each other. Fine. Let's just each attack however we like," said Horikita.

"Agreed," replied Ibuki.

Apparently, neither side was going to compromise. Instead, they were going to attack individually but at the same time.

5.1

"Let's call it a day," I announced.

The both of them had greatly depleted their stamina, partly due to the fact that they were forced to work together and coordinate, which they weren't used to. When I announced that we were done, they both dropped to sit on the ground right on the spot, at almost the same time.

"Even if we do another day of this, it won't change the fact that it's just hasty last-minute preparations. Even so, it'll make things somewhat better," I added.

If they tried taking their revenge on Amasawa without any guidance, they wouldn't have the slightest hope. They wouldn't have any hope whatsoever if they tried to get revenge without guidance.

"Where did you get to be so strong?" huffed Horikita.

"I've studied a whole bunch of martial arts since I was little, that's all," I replied.

"But I have too, just focusing on karate. At least, I've been trying to get good enough so that I won't lose to people around me," said Horikita.

That might have been a little too much stimulation. Did I damage that confidence that Horikita had built up through experience? I thought about hastily injecting some emotional comfort, but apparently there was no need.

"But I'm just going to assume that you are outside the norm. The fact that my brother acknowledges you is a source of support for me, now," said Horikita.

"Hmph..."

Unlike Horikita, Ibuki was still incredibly frustrated. She stood up and turned her back to me.

"Tomorrow, I am definitely gonna make you use your hands," spat Ibuki.

After leaving us with that, Ibuki forcefully stomped her way back toward the camp building.

“No matter where or when, she sure hates to lose,” I remarked.

That wasn’t a bad thing, but it was a shame to narrow her vision because of it. I doubted whether she managed to properly absorb the movements and fighting style.

“Don’t worry,” said Horikita, “I’ll talk to her later and have her reflect on today’s experiences—even if I have to force it out of her.”

Hearing that put me at ease. Horikita and I walked back to the camp building side by side.

“I never thought you would be this cooperative. I had thought that you would’ve…I don’t know, cut corners, or done things in a noncommittal way,” said Horikita.

There were several reasons, but the core factor in my not often showing my cards was that I had determined that doing so would make the future excessively hard on Horikita.

“I do charity work on occasion,” I replied.

“That’s kind of fishy. It makes me want to suspect that there’s something behind it.”

“I guess I’ll just have to let you be prepared for it when the time comes then.”

Horikita’s eyes narrowed in dismay at my deliberately implying that there was something going on.

“I see,” said Horikita. “In that case, I suppose let’s just consider this mutually beneficial.”

I parted ways with Horikita, who had interpreted what I said in *that* way, and we each decided to head to our individual rooms separately. It would have been better if we didn’t let Amasawa know that I was coaching Horikita and Ibuki. By the time I got back to my shared room, it was just before seven o’clock. I had come in at just the exact time to see Hashimoto wake up and sit up in bed. While Hashimoto and I were conversing quietly, the first-year students roused from their shallow sleep, and soon all the inhabitants of the room were up.

“All righty. Think I’m gonna go take a bath this mornin’. What about you fellas?” asked Hashimoto.

I decided that I’d tag along with Hashimoto and enjoy myself a morning bath.

“A-Ayanokouji-senpai, are you going too?”

“Yeah, I’m planning—”

“Yanagi, Obokata, Kosumi, let’s go!”

“Huh? Uh, wait, we’re—”

“Come on, just come! Ayanokouji-senpai’s telling us to come along!”

No, I didn’t tell anyone that, at all. I would really like for you not to say anything that could be mistaken as harassment from a position of power on my part, I thought.

5.2

AFTER OUR MORNING BATH, the entire group gathered at Hashimoto’s command and exchanged opinions about the day’s Social Group over breakfast. However, Hashimoto took over the bulk of the conversation, and the rest was a little bit from each of the other students.

“I do not quite understand what is going on, but the boys’ bizarre excitement is…rather unsettling,” said Morishita, who whispered it to me casually, despite the venom.

Hiyori seemed to have a completely different opinion, saying, “Really? Personally, I thought it was kind of cute.”

Morishita once again stared at the first-year boys. Even leaving aside assessments of cuteness, they were definitely unusually excited. Whenever the group gathered yesterday, they had a strong tendency to wither away in the face of their upperclassmen, but that tendency has since vanished. Actually, they were exchanging gestures that I didn’t quite understand, even making each other laugh out loud hysterically.

“Is that cute?” asked Morishita.

“I think so,” said Hiyori.

“I apologize, but it is rather creepy after all. You sure are strange, Shiina Hiyori,” said Morishita.

“Really?” asked Hiyori.

Watching the two of them interact up close, I felt like Hiyori had changed quite a lot since we first met. I had held the impression of her as a student who kept her heart hidden, whose emotions had few ups and downs. Or rather, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she’d finally laid her true self bare, rather than that her personality had fundamentally changed.

“Is something the matter, Ayanokouji-kun?” asked Hiyori.

It turned out that my unreserved observation had resulted in Hiyori noticing my gaze.

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it,” I replied.

“Oh, really?” she answered, with a very slight tilt of her head and a smile that held not a trace of suspicion.

“Ayanokouji-senpai! May we join you in the bath again tonight too?!”

“Huh? O-oh, yeah, sure. That’s fine,” I answered.

Despite the strange sense of coercion I was feeling, I didn’t feel at all bothered by that level of intimidation, and so I agreed. Then, just like that, the first-years were spurred into an excited frenzy again.

“Never imagined you could win over the first-years so well, and in less than a day at that. What kind of magic did you use?” asked Kiryuuin after she finished her meal, her voice full of genuine interest and her arms laid flat on the table.

“To be honest, I’m puzzled too. I didn’t do anything special,” I answered.

“Are you trying to hide things from me now, as well?” said Kiryuuin.

Apparently, she thought I was keeping secrets, but I honestly didn’t know.

“You really don’t get it? Why you’ve got the respect of your juniors?” Hashimoto perked up as he interjected. While it might’ve been rude to say as much, perhaps he had been eavesdropping on

my conversation. “I may not know myself exactly why, but I also admire… Well, no, that’s not it. There’s part of me that’s in sheer awe of you.”

“Awe?” I repeated.

Awe meant that you trembled with fear in the face of something with overwhelming power. I was sorry to say that I didn’t remember once ever using threats like Ryuuen and Housen, but…

“Really, I was shocked. Or like, I feel like you’re a real man among men… It ain’t surprising that first-years would start acting like this when they found out about *that*,” said Hashimoto.

“Oh ho?” Kiryuuin chimed in, “I don’t really understand, but I am very, very interested. What do you mean, *that*?”

“Oh, nothing, forget it,” said Hashimoto, “It’s a secret between dudes. Can’t tell ya. Sorry!”

“Hmm. A secret between men, eh? That’s not so bad, either,” replied Kiryuuin.

Kiryuuin was somehow satisfied with that explanation, and she rose from her seat. Just as she was about to pick up the tray with the empty dishes on it, Hashimoto stopped her.

“We’ll take care of the cleanup, so you don’t gotta worry about it, senpai,” said Hashimoto.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I’ll take care of my own dishes, at least. See you again for Social Group,” said Kiryuuin.

With that, Kiryuuin lifted her tray with both hands and headed for the tray return drop-off.

“It’s hard to tell if she’s a senpai that’s easy or hard to work with,” said Hashimoto, offering his honest thoughts about Kiryuuin now that she was gone.

When it came to choosing people, he was probably exactly right.

5.3

“**G**OOD MORNING to you, Ayanokouji-kun.”

After finishing my meal and passing through the lobby, I saw Sakayanagi sitting alone on a sofa.

“Morning. You seem a little sleepy, for some reason,” I replied.

I thought I’d mention that, since she seemed a little dazed, and she nodded, not denying it.

“Yes,” she said. “Sharing a room is not my cup of tea, shall we say, and I couldn’t sleep well. So I thought I’d have a short rest after finishing my meal.”

Even if it’s only a short nap, closing your eyes for even a little bit can help to make you feel better, after all.

“I see. And there’s no guarantee you’ll be able to settle even if you head back to your room,” I added.

“I usually get eight hours of sleep a day. These next few days will likely be a struggle for me,” she lamented.

Considering her personality, it seemed possible that she could calculate so that she slept for exactly eight hours on the dot.

“Have you and the others in your group been able to open up to each other?” I asked.

“I do not think there is any particular need for us to become accustomed to one another. At any rate, I oversee Class A. They come to me without me even having to do anything, really, so I am not having any difficulty in engaging in dialogue,” said Sakayanagi.

Well, I guess I could say it was good to hear that she didn’t seem to be having any trouble in that regard.

“What about you? Do you not have any problems sharing a room with unfamiliar people?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Nope, all good. I’m having a good time, in my own way,” I replied.

“You are in the group together with Hashimoto-kun and Morishita-san if I remember correctly, Ayanokouji-kun. How is Hashimoto-kun doing?”

“He’s acting the same as always, but he seems to be scared of something.”

“Speaking of which, I hear that there are some rather strange rumors going around about him. Something about betraying the

class. I would really appreciate it if you could give him some advice, to watch his back," said Sakayanagi.

"I can't imagine any advice would actually help though," I replied.

"Heh heh."

Sakayanagi let out a little chuckle, but she really didn't seem as tough and composed as usual.

"Do you feel pretty comfortable with your group?" I asked.

"This is not a special exam; it is merely a social event. We haven't done anything in particular."

"That seems a little at odds with the information I've heard before. Hashimoto said that you would always go for the win, no matter what form it takes."

"It isn't like you to simply take everything at face value without question, is it, Ayanokouji-kun? Perhaps this is one possible pretext that someone could use to investigate me, wouldn't you say?"

While it was true that Hashimoto might have been a little over the top in expressing it, he wasn't necessarily wrong.

"Yes, there was some unexpected damage in the immediate wake of Masumi-san's departure. You know that as well, Ayanokouji-kun. However, that will not drag on for long." Sakayanagi spoke with composed confidence. She continued, "If I were pressed to give a firm reason for why I am not doing anything in this Social Group event, it would be because I am focusing my energies into identifying someone to be my new servant, to be at my beck and call."

Kamuro's presence as Sakayanagi's assistant until now had been significant, and her sudden absence would in fact make it more difficult for Sakayanagi to take action.

"Someone you keep so close must be as trustworthy as possible, you see," she concluded.

"What about Kitou?" I asked.

"When it comes to loyalty he certainly is the most loyal in the class, but I do have some aversion to the idea of having someone of the opposite sex, as you can imagine. However, if I were to only

choose from the girls, there is no one suitable at the present moment."

Basically, the only girls from Class A that I interacted with were Yamamura and Morishita. They each had their areas of competency, but neither was suited for the role of Sakayanagi's assistant.

"So, are you ready to make a decision? On her replacement?" I asked.

"Not yet, so it appears that I will be working solo for a while. I am content to accept this as another situation brought about by my error in judgment," said Sakayanagi.

It felt less like she couldn't find someone suitable and more like she wasn't really looking very hard. It would be an exaggeration to say that Sakayanagi was showing some kind of penitence over Kamuro, but she probably intended to choose a life of inconvenience for a while, as a sort of ritual purification. That was Sakayanagi's choice too, but there was another problem that needed to be solved.

Suddenly, I sensed a presence behind me, and turned to find Kitou glaring at me with a terrifying look on his face as he drew closer.

"Good morning," I offered.

"... It looks as though you are not having any problems," he remarked, directing his statement at Sakayanagi while completely ignoring my greeting.

"No, no problems whatsoever," she said, "but thank you very much for your consideration."

The interaction made it obvious that Kitou had approached us out of concern for Sakayanagi, which I supposed was understandable. During this unstable time after the loss of Kamuro, it made sense that he would be on high alert not just for Hashimoto, but for any foreign contaminants from other classes.

"Please do not take this in a bad way, Ayanokouji-kun," said Sakayanagi.

"I get it. I'd say that you're just as doubtful as you all should be right now," I answered.

“Gooood morning!” exclaimed Amasawa, announcing her arrival.

As I stood facing Sakayanagi and Kitou, Amasawa slid in as though she were wedging herself between us.

“Good morning to you, Amasawa-san. You seem to be in good spirits this morning,” said Sakayanagi.

“Well, bein’ spunky is my strong point, after all,” explained Amasawa.

Kitou took a step away from Sakayanagi and closed his mouth so as not to interrupt the conversation.

“Just thought I might give ya a little pep talk before the second day of Social Group begins,” said Amasawa. “Looks like Ayanokouji-senpai is doing super and winning all his games, but…you lost three times on the first day, Arisu-senpai. I got worried, thinkin’ that you might already be in trouble or something.”

“Unfortunately, I am in no way involved whatsoever in directing the group today. I have entrusted matters entirely to the third-year student,” replied Sakayanagi.

“Hmmm? So you’re basically saying it’s whatever then, even if you lose? Personally, since this is a precious opportunity to do stuff with other grade levels, I was kinda hoping for something to happen,” said Amasawa.

“There is no need to set any sort of restrictions of any kind, you know,” said Sakayanagi. “If you wish to have a confrontation with me, then please rest assured, I will accept at any time.”

So Sakayanagi wanted her to just ignore Social Group and things like it, and to bring a challenge whenever she wanted. However, when Amasawa heard this, instead of showing enthusiasm or even interest, she just laughed it off.

“Aww, you’re acting tough. I heard that you lost in the previous special exam and came in last place,” said Amasawa.

Amasawa appeared to be well-informed about the goings on with the second-years. She threw that fact in Sakayanagi’s face, certainly not out of concern, and then reached out to touch her as another way of teasing. But in that exact same moment, Kitou

demonstrated his role as Sakayanagi's shield, and grabbed Amasawa's wrist mercilessly.

"What are you doing, Kitou-senpai? Isn't that the kinda thing that Ryuuen-senpai would do?" asked Amasawa.

Amasawa played up being a weak girl to appeal to Kitou, but he didn't loosen his grip on her.

"I will act if it is necessary, whether it is against Ryuuen or whomever. Naturally, I will use any means at my disposal. Keep that in mind," said Kitou, directing his comment at Amasawa as she smiled at him through the feeling of animosity she was exuding.

"Well, that doesn't exactly feel like a knight protecting his princess, but it's still interesting. I'm not against the idea of being violent with anyone, even if that someone is a girl, but...I guess maybe I was taking the pranks a little bit too far," said Amasawa.

Amasawa apologized, saying that she had no intention of doing anything serious, and backed off as soon as Kitou relaxed his grip.

"I'll deal with you some other time, then. Please make sure you can really give it your all, properly, okay, Arisu-senpaaaaai?" said Amasawa.

As Amasawa bounded away, hopping up and down, she turned back several times to wave at us.

"We managed to keep things civil," said Sakayanagi.

"Maybe so," I replied.

After briefly exchanging glances, I decided to walk away, since I would have felt bad if I stuck around for too long and drew attention to Sakayanagi for nothing.

Chapter 6:
Those Who Watch, Those Who Are Watched

AS 9 A.M. ROLLED AROUND, the second day of Social Group began. Since we would be having seven matches both today and tomorrow, there would be a few more busy periods for the students ordered to participate in a lot of the games by their leaders. However, the work itself wasn't any different from what we did yesterday. When the time came, you followed the instructions you received, met up with the group that would be your opponent, and played the game. On the other hand, the students who weren't participating were free to do whatever they wanted in their free time. It would probably be all right for the students who were at the top of their class to do some experiential learning, even if they just chose things at random, and ensure that they collected stamps to receive rewards.

The sixth game was Sculpture Experience. This was an authentic activity in which the students would use the same tools artisans use in working with kimachi stone, meaning that this activity was naturally on a different level than what someone would do in school art classes. This truly was an exciting hands-on learning experience.

It was rather difficult for me to find time to do experiential learning activities freely, since I would be participating in all the games. Which meant that there were still lots of experiential learning activities left. So many activities that, if I could, I'd have liked to stay here for a week or two, not just these three days.

I held that indulgent thought as I gazed at the uncut kimachi stone, and the tools that had been prepared for the students. However, both groups were engaged in idle, trivial chatter about this or that, not paying any attention to the raw, unpolished stones we'd be using. Those stones exuded—no, were positively *overflowing* with charm. I supposed that for ordinary students, this experiential learning activity was just another part of school life, after all…

Well, there was also the fact that if they were that lax about it, it made it easier for me, anyway.

You would think that if a particular someone was participating in game after game, they would draw a little more attention to themselves, and in a bad way. However, my continued participation went so unnoticed that it was kind of interesting in its own right. I figured it was because the experiential learning activities were being held constantly all over the place, and the school didn't publicly disclose details like who was participating from each group. And since there weren't any students who were zealously going around gathering information, no one took any notice of how many consecutive wins or losses I had.

Even if I participated in all nineteen games, only Nagumo's group would know about it, since they didn't slack when it came to scouting out the individual results. Kushida was in the first group that I would be competing against today, and she came over and called out to me.

"It seems like your group had a fantastic start yesterday, Ayanokouji-kun, with five consecutive wins. Seems like a sign of good things to come," she said.

"The first-years seem to be giving it their best. And it looks like you're doing great too, with four wins," I replied.

I had found out that the only loss her group had yesterday was against Nagumo's group, the leading group expected to come out on top.

"Our group's policy is to not worry about winning or losing, because we were told to do our best, work together, and have fun. But I guess everyone really has been taking it easy, since they've been asking me to handle things all the time. This is already the fifth time in a row that I've participated," said Kushida, before expressing what she honestly thought, her smile barely slipping at all. "Honestly, it's really stupid. This whole experiential learning thing is so lame. I just wish this camp would be over already."

"What're you saying and what you're doing are exact opposites," I remarked.

She was really something; it was magnificent that she could spew venom like that while hardly moving her facial muscles at all.

"I'm only doing this because I have to put on a happy face, otherwise it'll come back to bite me. Honestly, I don't think there's

any need to take this Social Group thing seriously. But there's a shared room, large baths, meals, and people everywhere, which means I don't have any time to relax."

So she didn't want a prize or anything, she just wanted to hurry up and go home already. She seemed extremely stressed about playing the good girl in a more cramped environment than the school.

"I just hope you don't get too stressed and explode," I replied.

"I think it's fine for now. I've been able to vent to those two lately," said Kushida, no doubt referring to Horikita and Ibuki.

"It looks like you lost against Horikita's group."

"I guess that's just what you get from someone who works hard on all sorts of things with a straight look on their face, since being stupidly serious all the time is the only thing that they've got going for them, huh? Yesterday, too, Katsuragi wasn't doing so well in the glasswork activity, so he seemed to go stand in line over and over and over again to immerse himself in practicing."

It wasn't possible for a large number of people to participate simultaneously in the experiential learning activities based around making things, due to factors such as the number of people to teach, the amount of equipment, and so on. Because that would clash with game times for Social Group, the time slots for free participation were hardly ever available, which inevitably meant that that there would be a line.

"Nagumo's determined to win, and he's got some serious folks on his team, so they probably aren't going to cut any corners," I replied.

"Do you think they'll win then, in due course?" asked Kushida.

"If no one makes a move, then yeah, I think that there's a high chance they will."

"Hm, but hold on," Kushida responded with a curious voice. "You say 'make a move,' but all we can really do is practice and hope that a game will be chosen where we can demonstrate the results of that practice, right? There isn't anything else we can do. Aside from that, all that might be left is the leader picking the right people."

“There are many other ways we can improve our win ratio to put ourselves in the running for the higher rankings. Bribing an opposing group so that they throw the game, for example. If the offer is made in good faith and for the full amount, there’s plenty of room for negotiation, right?” I replied.

Of course, efficiency was another matter. At any rate, at most, that was just one example of a way you could increase your win ratio. Kushida imagined a situation where an opponent would offer such a proposition.

“Sure, if someone offered me even 10,000 points, there would be little reason to refuse, so I think I’d gladly hand them the win. But if someone kept doing that over and over, wouldn’t they end up in the red?” said Kushida.

That would depend on who was doing the negotiating and how much. Hypothetically, if you gave ten thousand to five opponents, that would be fifty thousand, but you could also handle things more cheaply by bribing the leaders under the table for twenty or thirty thousand each. However, that sort of strategy didn’t appear to be very popular here was because there wasn’t that much of a profit to be gained in this Social Group event.

Even if my group were to repeat this bribing process and won sixteen or seventeen times, the groups like Nagumo’s that were playing to win with everything they had obviously wouldn’t agree to a deal, so naturally our groups would come to clash. And if we came in second or third place as a result, we wouldn’t be able to recover the funds we used on bribery.

“That’s why no one would do it, yeah. It’s not profitable,” I replied.

Only people like Nagumo wanted the title of winner regardless of profit or loss.

“How could you do it without spending money?” asked Kushida.

“It would take some effort. It’s nothing flashy,” I said, “but there are a few ways you can lock down some experiential learning activities so that your rivals don’t get any practice in. Just like you said, Kushida, there are lines for the popular experiential learning activities.”

Surrounding the students from rival groups and doing things to delay them over and over would also be effective.

“That kind of sounds like a method Ryuuen-kun would be happy to put to use,” said Kushida.

“Yeah. But no one’s been doing that so far because in the end, it would lead to the same kind of problems as the bribing approach,” I replied.

“You mean that there’s no value in doing it just for the sake of it? So, it’s not worth it?”

“Yep, that’s exactly what I mean.”

An instructor wearing overalls had appeared and instructed the students to gather together for a moment.

“In case you’re wondering, I’m rooting for your group. It’d make me happy if Horikita-san lost to you,” said Kushida.

Even though they seemed to be on good terms, the part about her wanting Horikita to lose was no different from Ibuki. Although, that might’ve been exactly why the relationship between the three of them was miraculously balanced.

“If you’re rooting for me, then does that mean you’ll give me the win for this game?” I asked.

“I’m not so sure about that,” she replied.

She had an adorable smile on her face, but it didn’t sound like she was going to go easy on me. Still, the game ended with a win for my group over Kushida’s, three to two. Personally, I was able to win thanks to my passion for artistic activities, which the other student did not have. Afterward, Social Group games continued on quietly throughout the morning and afternoon, without anyone making a scene.

Playing Cards

Including the first day’s activities, this was the seventh game of Social Group, and it was the first time there was a battle with a lot of luck involved. The game resulted in a stunningly crushing defeat for my entire group, me included, and my first loss had been recorded. This meant that I could only lose one more game, but I

saw that playing cards together had been quite an exciting experience for the low-key Social Group event, and many students enjoyed this game considerably more than the previous six.

Chalk Art

We drew pictures on a reasonably sized blackboard using chalk. The fact that the rules were to reproduce an image rather than to draw an original work made this a surprisingly easy challenge. Chalk was different from the tools usually employed to apply color, like colored pencils or crayons, so I struggled with the unique texture. On the other hand, this was also a moment where I was introduced to a new world of art. Because the basis of the competition was the quality of our reproductions, I was able to rack up another individual win, and we also won as a group, three to two.

Miniature Golf

Going from the indoor Social Group events in the morning, we went outside to experience golfing on a small course. Apparently, there were many male volunteers who wished to play before we began, and the group leaders kept that in mind and chose mostly boys. That on its own was a bit unusual, and on top of that, no one had any experience with this game when we started it. However, perhaps because we were all beginners at more or less the same level, it had the opposite effect you would expect, and the game was just as exciting as when we played cards, maybe even more so. Although I had won my own personal competition, the other four players from my group had lost by a narrow margin, and so we collectively suffered our second loss as a group.

Patchwork

A word that you might not hear very often, patchwork refers to a type of handicraft in which small pieces of cloth are joined together to form one large piece of cloth. We were evaluated based on things like how much we were able to complete within the time limit and the quality of our designs. Our opponent this time was

Tatebayashi's group, which had some friction on the first day thanks to Kouenji's selfish behavior. Their record thus far was one win and nine losses.

All five of their participants were girls, and they were powerful opponents with plenty of sewing experience. On top of that, I had the misfortune of going up against Inokashira, who was exceptional even among those with sewing experience. Thus, I had my second personal loss, and we suffered our third loss as a group.

Archery

I wanted to avoid a consecutive loss in the eleventh game, which was yet another outdoor sport that brought us outside. Even without any prior experience, you could probably guess the rules rather easily. We competed in a rule style called recurve, where we competed one-on-one in hitting the targets. In normal recurve, arrows were shot at targets seventy meters away, but for this experiential learning activity, targets were set at twenty meters. Each student was given six arrows to shoot at the targets and we completed for total score. The center of the target was worth ten points and the outermost part was worth one point. The only slight mishap our group dealt with was Morishita volunteering for the event because she wanted to try but not being able to hit a single target because she couldn't handle the bow very well. Despite that, we successfully managed to avoid a consecutive loss, both in terms of our group record and my personal record.

Glasswork

The final game of the second day was glasswork. The facility was furnished with a fairly large workshop, and the students were able to take home the things we made, which made it a popular activity. Our opponents had a low win rate, and it felt like they were focused on making whatever they wanted to make, rather than winning. I was awarded the victory by the judges, perhaps because we were evaluated based on completion and production speed. As for the group as a whole, Hiyori once again demonstrated her dexterity and contributed to yet another win.

With the second day, the halfway point, coming to an end, the total record for our group in Social Group was nine wins and three losses out of twelve games.

6.1

JUST BEFORE 6 P.M., it was time to settle down after Social Group. I could see that the rest area in the building was a little crowded, likely because a free drink area had been set up as a show of appreciation for the tired students. There were several kinds of soft drinks and small paper cups lined up in upside down stacks. I happened to bump into Sanada, who had come to the rest area at almost exactly the same time I did, and he called out to me.

"Your group seems to be doing quite well," he remarked.

Kiryuuin's group was currently tied for sixth place, with nine wins and three losses. Depending on how tomorrow went, we just might be in the running for the winner's circle.

"I've got support from dependable allies," I replied.

Hiyori in particular was someone clearly recognized as being good at detailed work. She was far, far more capable than the average student in handling things that required not only technical skill but also an artistic sensibility, like pressed flowers or glassblowing. This was something I probably never would have noticed about her if we hadn't spent time together in these experiential learning activities.

"What about the students from Class A? Are they cooperating with you properly?" asked Sanada in a reserved voice, likely concerned about his classmates.

"Hashimoto isn't participating in games at the moment. If anything, I'd say he's mainly focused on providing logistical support. Yamamura has been participating in games, and she's been honest and helpful," I replied.

Yamamura had seemed to be feeling down for quite a while recently, but I wasn't going to mention that. When I told Sanada just about the good things going on with those two, Sanada was delighted to hear it, as though he were the one being praised.

“And then Morishita, she’s…well, she’s cooperative. Uh, well, no, rather, she’s creative,” I added.

“Creative. Yes, I suppose that’s a good way to put it.”

Compared to Hiyori, Morishita was not particularly good with her hands. Actually, if I had to be honest, I’d say she was clumsy. She did things diligently but had little success. She might have had something that would resonate with artists though, in that she always ended up creating very bizarre things. Also, as I mentioned earlier, she had cheerily volunteered for archery, which had gone terribly for her.

Sanada and I stood in a fairly long line as we chatted, and once we got to the front, I poured myself some tea. Meanwhile, Sanada chose to have hot coffee.

“I see. To be honest, I am glad that those three are in a group together with you for all this, Ayanokouji-kun,” he said.

I figured that he was trying to be diplomatic and saying something for the sake of being polite, but still, what he said struck me as odd.

“Why would you think so? I’m sure there must be a lot of other students out there who are on friendly terms with them, though,” I replied.

Even if we were just talking about Horikita’s class, Yousuke and Kushida were far, far more capable than me.

“Actually, I think that how Sakayanagi-san sees you is quite important too. Even I can see that she treats you with special regard, Ayanokouji-kun. Even Kitou-kun, who has been rather tense since the previous special exam ended, is likely still able to maintain his self-control precisely because you are by Hashimoto-kun’s side,” said Sanada.

It’d been a series of unaccounted for lucky breaks for Hashimoto since that day he came to my room.

“Were the three of them able to fit into the group comfortably? I think that Hashimoto-kun is good at handling himself, but I feel like Morishita-san and Yamamura-san are probably not,” said Sanada.

“I dunno. Honestly, I leave it to the girls to take care of each other. Are you worried about them?” I asked.

Did he have some particular feelings for the two of them? Or was he simply worried about his classmates? It wasn’t surprising that he would be concerned, since they both had such distinctive personalities.

“To tell you the truth, I normally watch over Morishita-san with a fair amount of worry,” said Sanada.

“I bet if your girlfriend Miya heard that, she’d cry,” I replied.

“H-huh? O-oh goodness no, I didn’t mean like *that*, not at all. Miya-san is the only one for me!” The usually mild-mannered Sanada corrected me, obviously very flustered. From how he looked and sounded, I could sense that he did not want there to be any strange misunderstandings. “It’s simply because we’ve been seated close to each other since we were first-years… She isn’t timid in the slightest, or rather, she’s the type of person to say everything that is on her mind, and there have been more than few little problems because of that.”

Come to think of it, just recently she has repeatedly made remarks that made Hashimoto flinch.

“She certainly seems to be the oddball of your class,” I remarked.

“Yes, I suppose so… I feel bad for saying so, but there certainly are times where she’s perceived as such,” said Sanada.

I figured that not everyone in Class A got along the way they did in Ichinose’s class. Some of them liked each other and some disliked each other. Some of them probably showed it in their attitude. That was normal.

“I don’t really know much about her situation to say anything,” I said, “but Morishita isn’t worried, is she?”

If Morishita preferred to be alone in her situation, then it wasn’t other people’s place to say anything. I supposed that was precisely why Sanada expressed it as watching over her.

“Well, I don’t think so. It hasn’t ever looked like she’s cared about it, but…” said Sanada.

“I don’t think there’s anything to worry about, but I understand what you’re trying to say, Sanada. I’ll keep an eye out for the remainder of our time here.”

“…All right. Thank you very much.”

Sanada, lightly blowing on his cup of hot coffee to cool it down, took a sip. I could almost hear him thinking, *“Phew, finally, I can take a breather.”*

“Sanada-senpai!”

Miya, a girl from Class 1-B, spotted Sanada and came running up to him as the two of us were relaxing next to each other. Once she realized that I was next to Sanada and we were talking, she hurriedly offered me a courteous bow.

“I’m gonna get out of your way and head on back to my room. See you later, Sanada,” I announced.

“Yes, until next time,” said Sanada.

Although Sanada and Miya hadn’t been dating for a long time, they seemed to get along extremely well. I could imagine that they were always together, even during concert band, and I was sure that they were having fun times together as students. It would be best for me to quickly let them be, so I didn’t cause them any unnecessary trouble.

6.2

AFTER DINNER, it was the time when many students were relaxing in their rooms or in the baths. Tokitou saw a message from Ishizaki telling him to come over and quietly left his shared room. In that group’s shared room was the first-years number one problem child, Housen Kazuomi. However, Ishizaki didn’t consider the boy’s existence to be that much of a problem and would even make harsh but honest comments about the boy’s violent and high-handed behavior.

Tokitou wasn’t the strongest fighter, nor was he clever or had a way with words. However, he remained undaunted no matter the circumstances due to his strong backbone, which had remained

unbroken despite being under Ryuuen's control. It was undeniably thanks to his two years' worth of experience.

Tokitou's destination, the area where people would gather to go to the experiential learning classrooms, was already empty and quiet. Ishizaki had called Tokitou to come out in front of the ceramic arts classroom. Peering through the corridor window, he saw an array of works made by students. Just like with the glasswork experience, the ceramics and such made here could be shipped to the students' homes after they were fired, if they so wished. One of Tokitou's works was on display here as well, as he had participated in the ceramics painting game that morning.

"...Seriously, he's the one who called me out, and he's still not here yet?" huffed Tokitou.

Irritated, he reached into his jersey pocket to retrieve his cell phone. As soon as he did, though...

"Yo. Sorry to have kept ya waitin'," announced Ishizaki.

"Whaddaya want, Ishizaki?" replied Tokitou.

There was irritation in Tokitou's voice as he called back to Ishizaki, who nonchalantly strolled up to him. But rather than answer his question, Ishizaki merely stopped right in front of Tokitou.

"Dontcha know what this is about?" asked Ishizaki.

"How the hell should I know...? You didn't really write anything in your message," replied Tokitou.

All that Ishizaki had said to him in his text was *"hurry and get over here,"* and it radiated tension.

"Well, I actually dunno either. To be honest, I ain't got a clue what this is about," said Ishizaki.

It was a bizarre situation: Ishizaki himself, the person who had contacted Tokitou and told him to come, didn't know why he'd called him out.

"*You* don't know? That doesn't make any sen—"

Just as Tokitou was about to voice his complaints, he felt a powerful pressure on his back. Immediately afterward, he found himself pressed hard against the wall.

“Hey. What the hell d’ya think you’re doing?”

The devil whispered into Tokitou’s ear, grinning.

“Ryuuen…?! What am *I* doing?! What the… What the hell are *you* doing?!” shouted Tokitou.

Though Tokitou was surprised, he somehow managed to keep his agitation to a minimum, only directing his gaze behind him.

“Guess I didn’t give ya enough discipline, so I made a surprise appearance,” hissed Ryuuen.

Tokitou was held down firmly, and even though he struggled, he was unable to break free. Even if Tokitou was able to free himself from his restraint for a moment, he knew all too well that Ishizaki, who was standing watch nearby, would come in as reinforcement.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about…” groaned Tokitou.

Tokitou’s arms were bound tightly, and he felt pain crawling up his back.

“You really don’t know?” answered Ryuuen.

Truthfully, there was one thing that came to mind that he had done, but Tokitou couldn’t just up and say it, and he instead feigned ignorance.

“I didn’t do anything…” he huffed.

“Oh, really? I got a report from my underlings ’bout ya, though,” said Ryuuen.

“H-huh? Th-the hell does that mean?! What are you talking about?!” snapped Tokitou.

Tokitou insisted that he was clueless, but he was assailed by a throbbing in his chest, which got faster and faster as he got more ruffled. Tokitou hoped that what they suspected was completely unrelated, but his hopes were immediately dashed.

“I’ve got eyewitness reports that you’ve tried to get friendly with Sakayanagi four, count ’em, *four* times since we came to camp,” barked Ryuuen.

Even Tokitou couldn’t feign ignorance once Sakayanagi’s name came up, so he stopped trying.

“I just bumped into her by chance is all, and we chatted. That’s it. I don’t see what’s wrong with that!” he protested.

“A plausible story. Unfortunately for you, I don’t believe a word of it,” replied Ryuuen.

Considering the frequency of contact between two people who weren’t even in the same group, it was difficult to make the excuse that they simply happened to be in the same place together that many times by sheer coincidence.

“Besides, you don’t ‘see what’s wrong’ with that? That’s a funny thing to say,” added Ryuuen.

“Urgh…” groaned Tokitou.

Tokitou, his story now blown, averted his gaze. Ryuuen, as if chasing after him, brought his face closer to Tokitou’s and forced eye contact between them.

“She’s flagging right now. And with the final exam comin’ up next, she’s gonna fall, and that’ll be the end of her. Which is why I told you all not to stupidly intervene. Remember?” said Ryuuen.

Ryuuen had been particularly thorough in making sure to issue that warning to Kondou and Yajima, who were in Sakayanagi’s same group, when the group assignments were announced back on the bus. The bus had been otherwise silent, so there was no way that Tokitou wouldn’t have heard his warning.

“We just chatted… H-how is that supposed to count as intervening?” asked Tokitou.

“It just does. ’Sides, didn’t I tell you before? I said, either you leave her entirely alone, or, if possible, you corner her thoroughly, to inflict psychological damage. Can you interpret either of those to mean ‘having a fun little conversation,’ Ishizaki?” said Ryuuen.



“Nope, you can’t!” answered Ishizaki.

“There, ya see? You’re smarter than Ishizaki, so you oughtta know that,” said Ryuuen.

Actually, if you looked at what happened, what Tokitou did was the exact opposite. It was reported that, rather than simply engaging in chitchat with her, Tokitou had often been seen thoughtfully showing consideration and providing support for Sakayanagi.

“And I hear that you even told Isoyama to shut up and keep quiet when you were seen yakkin’ with Sakayanagi, eh? C’mon, man, if the choice is between you or me, it should be obvious whose orders would be followed,” said Ryuuen.

Ishizaki nodded emphatically several times from where he was listening nearby.

“C’mon, Tokitou, dude, just get it through yer head already. It’ll make things easier, y’know? Ryuuen-san’ll forgive ya,” said Ishizaki.

If Tokitou swore to be obedient here and now, then at the very least, he would be released from Ryuuen’s restraint. Instead, Tokitou resisted the urge to shake himself free and merely bit his lip and glared at him.

“I… I just…” began Tokitou.

“You just what?” said Ryuuen.

Keeping it secret no longer made sense, to the point where it would be foolish to hide it, so Tokitou spat out words fueled with exasperation and anger.

“I just… I wanted to make Sakayanagi feel better, ’cause she’s been sad since her friend got expelled, that’s all…!” he shouted.

“Pah. What, you wanna screw Sakayanagi that badly?” answered Ryuuen.

“N-no! That’s not it!” protested Tokitou.

“Oh really? ’Cause that’s all it sounds like to me.” Ryuuen smiled at him before he continued. “In that case, maybe it’d be better if we just set the stage for an attack? That chick has climbed to the top, but she’ll get torn to shreds physically and emotionally if you’re the one who does her in.”

When he heard those devilish whispers in his ear, Tokitou's anger instantly shot through the ceiling, and he summoned more strength than normal to break free of Ryuuen's hold.

"You've gotta be kidding me!" he shouted.

Tokitou let his rage get the better of him, and he tried to grab hold of Ryuuen with both hands. However, the laughing Ryuuen disappeared from his sight, and the next thing Tokitou knew, he got hit by a kick from below, gritting his teeth to bear the pain. Before he knew it, he was restrained again.

"Heh heh heh. Come on, don't take it so seriously. But hey, if you're up fer it, I'll let ya be in charge of hunting down Sakayanagi, 'kay?" said Ryuuen.

"I am not going to obey you... I will never, ever approve of that way of doing things!" snapped Tokitou.

So he declared that he would not yield to threats, and that he would not change how he acted with Sakayanagi. Ryuuen, although he understood that Tokitou's spirit and determination were the real deal, showed no signs of stopping his cruel treatment toward Tokitou.

"In that case," said Ryuuen, "how 'bout I beat the message into you?"

"Stop messin' around, that's completely—"

Before Tokitou could finish speaking, Ryuuen clenched his left fist and drove it right into Tokitou's abdomen, without holding back.

"Urgh...!"

A look of agony appeared on Tokitou's face from the intense, unfamiliar pain, and his knees buckled. However, he didn't fall to the ground, because of Ryuuen's grip on him didn't allow for it.

"There are none of the school's oh-so-valuable security cameras here. Ain't that right, Ishizaki?" said Ryuuen.

"That's right! I have already made sure that there aren't any here!" exclaimed Ishizaki.

"You're seriously obeying a guy like him...?!" spat Tokitou venomously, irritated by Ishizaki's attitude.

“Look, I know what you’re tryin’ to say here, Tokitou. I had total control of the class and went on a warpath, but then I gave up that position for a time. I’m sure that time must’ve felt really good, huh?” said Ryuuen.

“Yeah… It felt like we got rid of a delusional tyrant, like the emperor in his new clothes,” said Tokitou.

Tokitou spat out his unfiltered thoughts without mercy, prompting Ishizaki to put a hand to his own forehead, with an, “Aww, man, you really did it now.”

If you say anything disrespectful, you will be purged. That message had been ingrained into Ishizaki’s body, like it was only normal. But rather than putting Tokitou in more physical pain, Ryuuen opened his eyes happily.

“Damn, that’s too bad. In the end, I’m back upon my original throne, doin’ whatever I want. That’s gotta be frustrating for ya,” said Ryuuen.

Ryuuen didn’t even need to stop and think about how the people below him thought of him, when he looked at himself objectively, but that didn’t mean that Ryuuen was going to change his behavior.

“You hate me?” asked Ryuuen.

“So much it makes me wanna die…” spat Tokitou.

“Well then, don’t be shy. Show me. Drag me down yourself, as soon as ya can. I ain’t gonna run or hide, y’know? However, once you raise your fist against me, I am gonna hunt you down until there ain’t nowhere to go. Your only escape will be expulsion. Be prepared for that,” said Ryuuen.

Not only Tokitou, but everyone around him knew very well that Ryuuen was not afraid of defeat, which was precisely why they could only raise the banner of revolt after they determined that his downfall was absolutely certain.

“Listen. Here’s some advice, from me to you. If you understand, don’t ever do nothin’ that even resembles helping Sakayanagi ever again. Got it?” said Ryuuen, speaking softly despite the pain from his tight grip on Tokitou’s arm, telling him that he could still back down now and return to how things were.

“And if I…break that promise…?” said Tokitou.

When Ryuuen was asked a question that didn’t need to be asked, joy welled up within him, and he smiled down at Tokitou.

“Then I crush you. It’s that simple,” said Ryuuen.

It would be the same even if Tokitou didn’t raise his fist against Ryuuen. He simply told Tokitou that he would attack those who did not obey him completely.

“…Hmph.”

And yet, despite Ryuuen’s threats, Tokitou continued glaring back, without losing his defiant spirit.

“Hey, it’s all right, Tokitou,” said Ryuuen. “Y’know, that part of you is pretty interestin’. So, let’s see how long you can keep that look in yer eyes, yeah?”

Tokitou looked down at his aching arm and immediately steeled himself for an inescapable situation.

“You can rest assured I won’t let Ishizaki lay his paws on you,” said Ryuuen.

Giving Tokitou time to catch his breath and the right to throw the first punch, Ryuuen took a step back and extended his hands wide.

“Fine, I’ll do it… I won’t be beaten by the likes of you…” huffed Tokitou, speaking more to himself as he rubbed his fists together.

There was a considerable gap between them in terms of their physical strength. However, Tokitou was prepared to go down fighting with honor and slam his fist right into Ryuuen’s face, even if only once. If you were mentally prepared to inflict a revenge twice as painful on the one who wronged you, then there was nothing you couldn’t do. However, just as Tokitou was about to make up his mind, an unexpected visitor appeared.

“I come lookin’ for Paisen, since he didn’t come back after he left for somethin’, and what do I find?”

The person who appeared, with his hand at the back of his neck, was none other than Housen from Class 1-D, who had a deep connection with Ryuuen ever since their junior high school days.

“Yo, Tokitou-paisen. The hell’s goin’ on here?” asked Housen.

“Nothin’…” replied Tokitou.

They were in the same group, but there was no way that Tokitou could go crying to his juniors. That was what he said in his response, basically. However, there was no way that there was “nothing” happening here, with him confronting Ryuuen with clenched fists. Tokitou had a certain stubborn pride about him that wouldn’t let him accept help from a junior. And besides, this problem should’ve been contained within his class. He also considered the fact that he couldn’t allow his group to be disadvantaged by what was happening here.

“You’re in the way. Get lost,” barked Ryuuen.

Housen’s arrival had spoiled the mood, and Ryuuen casually tried to shoo Housen away with a wave of his hand.

“If it’s nothin’, then go buy drinks for me and the other first-years,” said Housen.

Housen being Housen, he seemed to not care about Ryuuen at all and ignored him, bluntly giving orders to Tokitou in a strong tone.

“Huh? Drinks? Why the hell would I…?!” huffed Tokitou.

Tokitou had been given the right to throw the first punch, but he was too stunned by what just happened to exercise that right. In that moment, Ryuuen reached out once again to push his left forearm against Tokitou’s throat and slammed him against the wall. Tokitou made an inaudible scream of agony and nearly passed out.

“Back off, Housen,” said Ryuuen, “I ain’t dealin’ with you right now.”

“I don’t give a shit. I’m talkin’ to Tokitou-paisen over here. You’re the outsider here, so *you* back off. You want me to kill ya?” snapped Housen.

“…Hah! So you came all the way here ’cause you were lookin’ for somebody? You must be half asleep, idiot,” said Ryuuen, suspecting that someone was behind Housen’s appearance.

“H-Housen’s got nothing to do with this… I got called to come here by Ishizaki…that’s all,” said Tokitou.

“Huh? Hey, Ishizaki. What the hell kinda message did you send?” snapped Ryuuen.

“Hu-what?! J-jus’ a normal text! All I said was to hurry up and come to where the classrooms are. That’s it!” wailed Ishizaki.

It was a careless mistake on Ishizaki’s part, to not consider the risk that Tokitou wouldn’t tell the others in his room where he was going when he left. Upon seeing Ryuuen’s slightly scornful smirk, Ishizaki realized this as well.

“Sorry, Ryuuen-san! Hey, Housen! You get outta here!” said Ishizaki.

Ishizaki, trying to rectify the situation somehow, grabbed Housen’s thick right arm, but Housen shook him off and instantly freed himself from Ishizaki’s grip.

“Don’t touch me. I’ll kill ya,” snapped Housen.

“Uh…!”

Ishizaki flinched in the face of Housen’s fierce coercion, which was of a different flavor than the intimidating Ryuuen. Rather than leaving though, Housen instead walked toward Ryuuen and Tokitou.

“Apparently, he wants to play. Albert, go deal with him,” Ryuuen ordered.

Albert appeared in complete silence, which you wouldn’t expect from his huge body, and stood in front of Housen, blocking his path.

“Guess ya really can’t do nothin’ without your henchmen, as usual,” said Housen.

“Rushin’ into somethin’ all by yourself like an idiot? That ain’t fighting,” said Ryuuen.

It looked like Housen yawned or something, then he cleared his throat and spat a wad of phlegm on the floor.

“So, Albert, right? I’ve always wanted to go toe to toe with ya once. Let’s play table tennis. Might be fun,” said Housen.

Even though this wasn’t the kind of thing you could imagine happening at a camp like this, in this intense situation, Ryuuen took his eyes off of Housen and looked straight into Tokitou’s eyes.

“All right, now that the obstacles are outta the way, our fight can contin—”

“Excuse me, Ryuuen-senpai, but could you please take your hands off of him?”

“Say what?”

Someone called out to Ryuuen, confronting him, and that someone just happened to be Utomiya Riku from Class 1-C.

“What, Utomiya? You came here too?” said Ryuuen.

“Wh-what’s goin’ on here?” wailed Ishizaki, who was the only person shaken by this turn of events.

“What? Oh, well, I guess you must’ve heard what was goin’ on with Tokitou-paisen too, huh?” said Housen.

“I was worried that you might raise your hand against a senpai,” said Utomiya, “so I came to check things out.”

“Where the hell did you even put your eyeballs? I ain’t raisin’ my hand or nothin’,” snapped Housen.

Utomiya walked toward Tokitou and Ryuuen while looking at Housen with contempt in his eyes. Ishizaki tried to stop him, but he was grabbed by the cuffs of his jersey and pulled over by the long arms of Housen, who was standing opposite Albert. There was no one to stop this. Utomiya fearlessly closed the distance between him and his target, then grabbed Ryuuen’s left forearm, which was still holding onto Tokitou.

“Tokitou-senpai is a member of my group. If he got injured here, it would have an impact on tomorrow. No matter how much anyone says this is a class issue, I ain’t—I mean, I cannot—overlook it,” said Utomiya.

Utomiya, having sensed trouble brewing in the air without having to hear any kind of explanation, intervened.

“Don’t care. Don’t come tryin’ to get me mixed up in this shitty social whatever thing, with people yappin’ at each other,” said Ryuuen.

“...It’s people like you who use their position to threaten others at the ‘shitty social whatever thing’ who are the problem here...” replied Utomiya, his anger growing inside him as he faced Ryuuen.

“What? You gonna try and stop me?” answered Ryuuen.

“You sure you wanna do this? ’Cause yer gonna get humiliated in front of your people, as a senpai,” snapped Utomiya. At this point, he’d completely given up on using respectful language, and was ready to fight at the drop of a hat.

“Hey! Hey, hey, hey! Don’t go tryin’ to start a fight with Ryuuen on yer own!” barked Housen, his voice echoing through the hallway. He disliked this development so much that his face flushed with anger.

“God, shut the hell up, Housen. I don’t got any use for you. Don’t be a freakin’ baby and cause a scene,” replied Utomiya.

“What was that? What the hell’s your deal? Do you have any clue who you’re talkin’ to?” replied Housen.

“I guess nothin’ I say would get through to a big gorilla like you, huh?” answered Utomiya. He’d seemingly come to offer aid to Tokitou, and treated Housen in the same way as Ryuuen.

“All right, then. In that case, I’ll start with you before Albert-paisen,” said Housen.

“I already told you: I’ll take you on anytime,” replied Utomiya.

Seeing the first-years getting into a fight with each other, Ryuuen couldn’t help but burst into sinister laughter at the unfamiliar sight.

“Man, this school’s sure gettin’ awfully rowdy. When I first started here, I thought it was full of stupidly serious, boring people, but now I see some hot-blooded folks are poppin’ up. I, for one, welcome this with open arms.”

Now that Utomiya had joined the fray in addition to Housen, Ryuuen released Tokitou from his grip and looked away from him as he plopped down on the floor and coughed hoarsely.

“All right, I’ll accept your revenge right here, right now, Housen. And I’ll take on that other first-year too, while I’m at it,” said Ryuuen. With this turn of events, he no longer cared about Tokitou.

“Sounds good,” shouted Housen. “This is turnin’ out to be a fun camp after all. In that case, guess I’ll make you disappear first!”

Albert kept his lips clamped tightly shut as he stopped Housen’s powerful fist with his own hand.

“Oh ho! Guess you were able to stop that one after all, eh?! Awright, bring it!” exclaimed Housen.

Just as it was looking like things couldn’t be solved without resorting to violence, Housen’s loud shouting had brought about a conclusion.

“What? What’s this? What are you all doing?”

Several guys and girls, including third-year students, had heard the commotion and began showing up in the experiential learning classroom area.

“*Tch*. Damn, just when it was gettin’ interesting.”

“*Tch.* God damn it.”

It didn’t even occur to Housen that his shouting may have blown their cover, and he clicked his tongue in irritation just the same as Ryuuen.

“You weren’t fighting, were you?”

“No, not at all. We were just’ havin’, I mean, we were just having a friendly chat. Is all,” said Utomiya, immediately stepping out in front of the third-years, trying to smooth things over.

Recognizing that the situation had soured, both Ryuuen and Housen turned and stepped away from each other to get some distance, although they were still glaring at one another.

“Let’s go, Albert. You too, Ishizaki. I’m gonna teach you lots of stuff later,” said Ryuuen.

“O-okay! Thank you very much!!” exclaimed Ishizaki.

The three of them, Ryuuen, Albert, and Ishizaki, left under the glares of the two first-year students and Tokitou. As they left, Albert stared at Housen’s wide back and muttered something.

“His fighting ability may be equal to or greater than Ayanokouji’s. He’s an incredible freshman,” said Albert.

The numbness that Albert felt in his hand told him that the weight of the fist he caught was no less intense than Ayanokouji’s, and his words meant that he was glad he didn’t have to fight. Ryuuen, however, could not hide his amusement over Albert’s comment, snickering scornfully.

“Don’t make me laugh. If we’re just talkin’ simple power, then yeah, Housen might be able to compete with ’im. But if we’re comparing their actual strength, then it ain’t even a question. The root of Ayanokouji’s strength can’t be compared with somethin’ that simple,” said Ryuuen.

Albert, after opening his hand and looking at his outstretched palm, nodded. He was surely thinking back to the incident on the rooftop, when his opponent had been someone who had transcended the dimensions of heaviness and lightness.

“Anyway, guys, sure seems like Tokitou’s really into Sakayanagi, don’t it? Shouldn’t we, uh, do somethin’ ’bout that? He could betray us like Hashimoto did with his class…” said Ishizaki.

Ryuuen had already considered these concerns, and Ishizaki had no need to voice them.

“Tokitou ain’t that stupid. We can just leave him be. We’ve already given him ’nough warning,” said Ryuuen.

“…’Kay. If you say so, Ryuuen-san,” replied Ishizaki.

“Focus your energy on Class A. The biggest hassle right now is that asshole Kitou, rather than Sakayanagi. If we ain’t careful, he could become a loose cannon and go on a rampage,” said Ryuuen.

“It kinda feels like we’re in, like, a rivalry,” said Ishizaki.

“A rivalry, huh? Yeah, it’s true that anythin’ could happen in the future,” said Ryuuen.

Final exams would be starting soon. Ryuuen understood that there was going to be turmoil, and he was beginning to prepare for what lay ahead.

6.3

WHILE RYUUEN, TOKITOU, HOUSEN, and the rest were squabbling, I had finished with my bath and was sitting on a sofa in the lobby, blissfully unaware of the ruckus. I was sitting just next to the spot where Sakayanagi had been sitting this morning.

Hashimoto had requested reconnaissance. Personally, I was satisfied with having made contact this morning and getting a feel for how things were going, but since I hadn’t really reported

anything in particular, he was probably expecting results. Even if I had no intention of doing that, I thought I should at least look like I was making an effort.

"Oh, heeey! Ayanokouji-kun! Hey, could I talk to you for a sec?!" shouted Satou.

It looked like Satou was on her way back to her room, but after spotting me, she changed course to approach me. There was an air of regret about her, like she was frustrated about something.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing like, *happened* really, it's just about Social Group, I guess. I was really, seriously trying to compete for the top place, but..." She didn't even try to hide her disappointment, slumping her shoulders dejectedly in an overexaggerated fashion. "There's something I wanted to buy, and I really tried my hardest, yanno? I gave it my personal best. Ughhh."

Satou's group had won seven and lost five of the twelve games they'd played over the past two days. Although they were putting up a good fight, they were facing a situation in which coming in third looked like a tough prospect.

"If you continue to give it your best, at this rate, you've got a fairly good chance of finishing in tenth place, don't you think?" I replied.

If her group could just maintain their record, they could get 5,000 points. That wasn't a bad amount of money.

"Yeah, you're right," said Satou. "I think that's def gonna be my goal. But what gets me is that it feels like our group's motivation has really dropped off after today's results..."

If they were aiming for the top of the rankings, then it was perfectly understandable that they'd feel discouraged. Even in this Social Group event, the gap between those at the top and those at the bottom was extreme, after all. The groups that were losing had either lost all of their games or only had one win. Therefore, wins were concentrated among groups like Nagumo's, who took things seriously. The group currently in third place and Satou's group were only three wins apart, but that difference was quite substantial.

“I guess I just have some lingering regrets about the last game we played today, after all,” added Satou.

“What group did you play against for that one?” I asked.

I figured I’d try asking, since I didn’t know which group Satou had fought against. When I asked, Satou made a face like she was slightly embarrassed for a minute, and then she spoke up and told me.

“...It was Minamikawa-senpai’s group,” she replied.

A student from Class 3-C. If I remember correctly, Minamikawa’s group included Onodera, and it was a relatively well-known fact that Satou didn’t get along with her. If the two were on bad terms to begin with and Satou was embarrassed to tell me that her group lost to Onodera’s, it seemed likely that their friction was the reason behind it.

From what I can tell from my interactions with them, though, both Satou and Onodera were perfectly ordinary schoolgirls. Looking at it from a complete outsider’s perspective, you might think that it would be natural for them to get along, but that’s not how human relationships worked. It would be simple to ask “You still don’t like Onodera?” but also a bad idea.

“You just gotta carry that frustration with you into tomorrow. You still have a chance, depending on your effort, Satou,” I told her.

“...Okay,” she replied.

We changed the subject and talked for a little while, but then Satou got called away by someone from her group, and I headed back to my shared room without having gained any major results.

“Guess no one’s here,” I remarked.

Not a single person was around. All I could see was a slightly disheveled futon that had been left behind in the room. I looked at my phone and saw that I had received a message from Hashimoto about ten minutes ago.

“I’m going to the girls’ room, so let’s meet up there.”

He had requested that I engage in reconnaissance, and yet he was being awfully carefree. Well, you could say that hanging out with people of the opposite sex in their room was one of the classic, proper things to do at a camp like this. After putting away the

trampled futon, I decided to follow my groupmates in the tradition. Approximately five minutes after noticing Hashimoto's message, I was over at the girls' room.

It was the same building, had the same layout, and had the same furniture and décor. Unsurprisingly, this place was in no way inferior to the boys' shared room. The only real difference to speak of was the presence of the opposite sex. Nothing more, and nothing less, and yet, why did things look so different? I supposed how one viewed it was up to the individual.

All the girls were there, from the first-years to our third-year leader Kiryuuin. All the boys had nervous looks on their faces, but they seemed happy despite that. Looking at the girls, Yamamura seemed somewhat out of it, and her expression was gloomier than usual. She hadn't participated in this Social Group event, so she was the group member I knew the least about when it came to how she had been spending her time.

"Hey, you came," said Hashimoto.

"Well, I was called here," I replied.

The boys seemed to be having even more fun than I'd thought, but the girls were less excited than I'd expected. Frankly, they didn't seem to be having any fun. My brain registered those two pieces of data in an instant. I could imagine what had happened: Hashimoto practically forced his way into the girls' room, with the other guys in tow, to come and hang out.

"So, we're in a bit of a bind, my guy. Do you have anything that'll, you know, liven things up? The vibe in here is kinda heavy, yeah? Maybe like, a gag or somethin' that'll cut through the tension or something," said Hashimoto.

"Unfortunately, I don't have any jokes like that, but I do have a little something. What about this?" I asked as I took out a case that I had put in my jersey pocket and showed it to him.

"Oh, nice, dude. You're pretty sensible," remarked Hashimoto.

Since cards were included on the list of experiential learning games, there were heaps of playing cards laying around and readily available. Hashimoto seemed to welcome the idea with open arms

and gestured for me to hand them over. When I did, he immediately opened the case and took out a bunch of cards from inside.

“Cards is *the* tried-and-true classic among tried-and-true classics, Ayanokouji,” said Kiryuuin without looking up from her phone, still seated on one of the room’s chairs.

“That one blond-haired senpai had told me before that playing card games was a camp staple,” I replied.

“Hm? Do you mean Nagumo, by any chance?” Kiryuuin, who had been resting against the backrest of her seat, now sat erect, sounding deeply interested as she asked for clarification. When I nodded in response, it seemed to amuse her, and she chuckled. “Even that man can be corny and clichéd sometimes, I see.”

“Besides, we lost for the first time today when we played cards,” I replied, “so I figured I could reflect back on what happened.”

“Playing cards?” muttered Morishita.

Morishita had been looking outside the window near Kiryuuin when she noticed me. Then, while remaining seated with her legs folded underneath her body, she firmly pressed against the tatami mat with both hands and approached me.

“Let’s do that. That one thing. The game in which whomever has the joker in the end loses,” said Morishita.

“Your eyes sure are glittering brightly… Do you like playing cards, by any chance?” I asked.

“I cannot decide on whether I like it or dislike it because I haven’t played before,” replied Morishita.

“You haven’t played before? Seriously, what rock have you been living under?!” said Hashimoto with wide-eyed disbelief.

“That is because I haven’t had anyone worth playing cards with,” said Morishita.

In other words, she’d never had a friend with whom she could have that kind of relationship in her entire life.

“Wait a minute,” Hashimoto said, “hold on here. That’s weird. Didn’t you put down a five for cards though, as one of your best events?”

That was true, Morishita had definitely put down the maximum value of five down for playing cards.

“Because I thought that someone as talented as I would be capable even if she were inexperienced. Besides, you had asked us to evaluate ourselves on a scale of five based on our confidence, rather than confirmation of whether we are good at something or not. Which is why I gave myself a five,” said Morishita, answering proudly, with her chest puffed out. She was certainly brimming with confidence.

“What the… Well, even so, it seemed like you weren’t called on to participate in the game today, though,” replied Hashimoto, as he wondered why a score of five hadn’t led to her participation; however, only our leader Kiryuuin could answer that.

“That’s right. Why didn’t you choose me?” asked Morishita.

“Well, saying that you’re confident in playing cards is kind of suspicious, isn’t it? That’s why I left you out,” said Kiryuuin.

Apparently, Kiryuuin had made her decision based on the list of responses, and her impressions were right on the mark.

“Well, that’s not important. At any rate, let’s play cards. Please go ahead and distribute them, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka,” said Morishita.

It was clear that she just wanted to play cards by any means necessary, which wasn’t a bad thing to me, as the person who brought the cards. Not everyone could play at one time though, so I didn’t know what to do.

“Well, why don’t we do something like this? We have four people to a game. We’ll have a guys-only tourney and a girls-only tourney. Then, we could have a mixed guy-girl tourney after that,” said Hashimoto, jumping in to make groups when he noticed that I was at a loss.

“That is not a bad idea. Let’s do that,” said Morishita.

Morishita was already wanted to play, so it didn’t matter to her exactly how she did it. I had thought that Tsubaki, who had been rather quiet this whole time, wasn’t going to play, but she and the other first-year students seemed surprisingly willing to join in.

“Why don’t you come over here too, Yamamura?” I asked.

I tried calling over to Yamamura, who was sitting all alone some distance away from us, but she shook her head.

“Um…I’ll just…watch,” she replied.

“You sure?” I asked.

Yamamura gave a slight nod in response to confirm she was refusing my offer.

“There is no need to involve people who do not wish to play. Now, come on. Let’s get started,” said Morishita.

Feeling overpowered by the pressure of Morishita’s strong momentum, the girls began their match.

“This is a good Social Camp event,” remarked Morishita.

“That’s a cheap assessment. Are you seriously satisfied just from being able to play cards?” muttered Hashimoto, sitting cross-legged with his elbows resting on his legs.

“I am,” Morishita replied, “but please do not look at my cards from behind.”

“I’m not gonna say what your cards are or anything,” protested Hashimoto.

“One never knows what Hashimoto Masayoshi will betray,” Morishita retorted, blocking his view of her cards with her body.

A pained, forced smile of apparent dissatisfaction appeared on Hashimoto’s face, but in truth, he really was a traitor, so…

“However, I can see it now.” Even though it was her first time playing this game, Morishita was not only having fun, but also analyzing it in her own way. “There are several strategies in this game.”

With that, Morishita held a single card from her hand in a blatantly conspicuous manner.

“Please, go ahead, Shiina Hiyori. Do not be shy. Please draw whatever card you wish,” she said.

“Well, I’m…a little curious about this one card,” said Hiyori.

“Right? This is exactly the sort of sophisticated strategy that I am considering,” said Morishita.

Incidentally, though Hashimoto no longer could, I was able to see Morishita's hand perfectly from where I was sitting. Apparently, the one card that was being separated from the rest was the joker. Normally, it was precisely because it looks suspicious that you wouldn't put the joker in that position. So, that was Morishita's aim. From a strategic point of view, it wasn't a bad move. While you couldn't prove definitively that it directly increased the chances, it certainly seemed like it would have enough power to psychologically influence someone into wanting to draw that one card.

"What to do..." wondered Hiyori aloud.

Hiyori, though suspicious of that one card, tried to escape from it and looked to the four cards in Morishita's right hand, but her fingers stopped. Apparently, she couldn't help but be curious about the one card in her left.

"Go ahead. Please choose whichever you like," said Morishita.

Factoring in Morishita's nature as well, as a person who showed little emotional fluctuation, she was exquisitely deceptive. After a prolonged period of consideration, Hiyori ended up becoming entranced by that one card in Morishita's left hand and drew it. She took it in her hand, turned it over, and was disappointed to find that the card she had chosen was none other than the joker.

With how easy it was to read Hiyori's reactions, I'm sure that everyone had realized who had the joker now.

"If you let too much show in your facial expressions, then you have a long way to go," said Morishita.

For the next few rounds, the game continued in silence. The first to clear their hand was the first-year student, Eikura, followed by Hatsukawa. Morishita had skillfully passed the joker off at an early stage, but after that round, she ultimately lost against the two first-years due to their better hands, and the game came down to Hiyori and Morishita as the last two players. By then, the situation had changed, with Hiyori holding two remaining cards and Morishita with one last card.



“Go ahead, Morishita-san,” said Hiyori.

Suddenly, Hiyori held out her two cards and presented them in much the same way. Morishita, starting intently at the cards, selected the card on her right, holding it with her fingertips. However, she didn’t immediately pull the card but instead spoke to Hiyori.

“Is it this one?” asked Morishita.

“...Is it what?” asked Hiyori.

“I was thinking it might be the joker.”

“I cannot answer that.”

“I think it’s the joker.”

“I see... In that case, I think you might want to avoid that card, then. Why don’t you choose the other?”

“Are you sure? You’ll lose.”

“Well, to tell you the truth, I actually don’t know which one is the joker.”

“Too bad, Shiina Hiyori. There are no mysteries left.”

Morishita pulled her fingers away from the card she was touching before, grabbed the card on her left, and drew it vigorously. That card in her grasp, which was now facing me was... the five of hearts.

“I am victorious,” said Morishita.

“I lost,” said Hiyori.

Even though Hiyori looked disappointed, it seemed like she even enjoyed losing. As for Morishita, she gave me the impression that she wanted to win, no matter what.

With the girls’ game over, it was now time for the boys, and after that, they moved onto the mixed-gender game.

“Come on, let’s hurry up and play the next game,” said Morishita.

Morishita apparently hadn’t had her fill. I decided to speak up and say something that had been bothering me for a long while.

“Don’t you think it’s about time you join in too, Yamamura?” I asked.

“...No, I’m...I’m fine...” said Yamamura.

She’d been watching us the whole time, but it felt like Yamamura’s gaze wasn’t truly directed at the game. She seemed like she was out of it, and any way you sliced it, she looked like she was feeling down. I spoke up because I thought she might join in and play cards, but I guess it wasn’t any use after all.

Just then, Hiyori came up beside her and spoke to her. “Yamamura-san, why don’t we play together? It’s fun.”

“But...” protested Yamamura.

“Come on, let’s play.”

Not even Yamamura could refuse Hiyori’s soft demeanor, and with a gentle push from behind, she decided to join. However, as soon as the game began, unexpected issues arose.

“U-um, excuse me. It’s...my turn,” said Yamamura.

“Oh! Sorry, Yamashita-senpai. Go ahead, please, pick a card,” said Shintoku.

Not only did Shintoku nearly skip over her before hurriedly offering his cards, but he’d also gotten Yamamura’s name wrong. She must have decided to ignore it, because she didn’t even make an attempt to correct him. Even though Yamamura was properly seated in the circle, the student who was supposed to draw a card from her skipped her as well.

Maybe Yamamura had been avoiding playing cards because she didn’t want this to happen. If a mistake happened just one time, it could be brushed off and ignored. If it kept happening, however, it would be very noticeable to an outside observer like me. Was Yamamura’s existence even more tenuous than I had imagined? I’ve known for a long time that she’s had a knack for tailing people, and yet the idea that someone could just lose sight of her while physically looking at her with their own eyes was practically unthinkable.

However, I wasn’t sure if this was because I was purposefully endeavoring to be actively conscious of Yamamura, or if it was because the others just didn’t care about her. I made a note to myself to try asking someone about it when the opportunity arose.

6.4

ON OUR WAY BACK from the girls' room, I looked at my phone and realized that it had gotten very late, about twenty minutes before lights out.

"Maaan, that was so much fun! Though, I gotta wonder, why does the girls' room smell so good?"

"Hey, for real, dude... Also, isn't Tsubaki-san super cute?"

"Whoa, for real? You're a Tsubaki fan?"

And so on and so forth. The first-years were wither unable or unwilling to hide their excitement over their first time in a room full of girls.

"Sounds like they enjoyed themselves, eh?" said Hashimoto.

Hashimoto looked happy too, pleased with the juniors' high spirits and satisfied with his good idea to bring them along. However, that look disappeared in a moment, replaced by a harder one.

"Sorry, but could you guys head on back first?" he said, then turned to me. "Ayanokouji, stick with me a little bit longer."

The others all readily accepted Hashimoto's request for them to head back first and headed back to the shared room.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Timewise, you're just going to go to sleep when we get back to the room, right? I didn't get a chance to ask you about Sakayanagi," said Hashimoto.

"If you were expecting some intel, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I didn't get anything," I replied.

"But you did see Sakayanagi today, right?" said Hashimoto.

It was certainly true that I contacted Sakayanagi this morning. Either he got that information from somewhere or he was simply trying to catch me with a lie. I could have probed him, but there was no need for that—my answer already decided.

"I tried all sorts of things to get information, but this is Sakayanagi we're talking about. To be honest, I couldn't get any details out of her." No matter what I said, Hashimoto was probably

going to remain suspicious, so I answered him in a detached, matter-of-fact manner. “Besides, we didn’t have enough time to engage in relaxed conversation.”

It would’ve been a bother if he pressed me on it deeply, so I chose my words carefully, making sure that they included a good excuse for what happened.

“...Well, it’s all right. Either way, it’s not going to change what lies ahead.” That outcome was something Hashimoto didn’t need to elaborate on, despite bringing it up. “Man though, I can’t believe that Sakayanagi and Ryuuen both dropped out of the running for the winner’s circle on the second day. After all that, it’s like they just casually and nonchalantly peaced out without doing anything.”

Sakayanagi’s group won five and lost seven out of the twelve games they played, and Ryuuen’s group had won three and lost nine out of the twelve games they played. Unless there was some major upheaval during the seven games left tomorrow, it would be hopeless for them to finish in the top ranks.

“I guess that means they gave up on this Social Group in the end, eh? Those two haven’t shown up for any of the experiential learning things. Guess that means they had no intention of going for the rewards from the beginning, right?” said Hashimoto.

“Yeah, that’s likely. But you don’t look too happy, despite finding that out,” I replied.

“Well, yeah, ’cause it just comes off as unsettling no matter how you look at it. Those two getting eliminated from competition so soon? It’s weird, man.”

It was Hashimoto’s nature to be skeptical. Both groups—Sakayanagi’s and Ryuuen’s—had disappeared from the running for the winner’s circle without ever rising to the surface even once. It was certainly true that if you looked at the results alone, it would be understandable why Hashimoto would be wary. However, that by itself was probably groundless fear.

Although Ryuuen valued Private Points, we’d all been warned that the ones up for reward here were unique and only for the limited use of shopping. Of course, while it would be nice to have those points, you could say that it wasn’t surprising that Ryuuen didn’t view them as significant. In fact, from an information-based

perspective, it might be more beneficial to be able to move around freely during these three days. Also, right now, it would probably be better for him to keep a close eye on what Sakayanagi was up to, anyway.

On the other hand, for someone who had lost the Survival and Elimination Special Exam like Sakayanagi, it would be better to set this Social Group event aside and focus on group downtime. Spending time out in nature to relax and let her wounds heal was an astute course of action, one which Hashimoto should have been taking as well. Unfortunately, in reality, he didn't have the luxury of time or leeway. While he was trying to appear calm, he was unable to hide how flustered he was feeling.

"Sakayanagi's a clever one, so I figured that she'd be having me thoroughly investigated every step of the way, but…" muttered Hashimoto.

He probably felt that, even in this relaxed Social Group camp, he was in danger of Sakayanagi attempting to get him expelled.

"Toyohashi and the other first-years haven't already been enticed by Sakayanagi though, have they?" I asked.

He hadn't said as much, but the very first thing Hashimoto had done was befriend our group's juniors, which must have been at least partially for the sake of preventing something like that from happening.

"But it's also possible that Sakayanagi had set up spies even before the groups were formed, right?" replied Hashimoto.

"She doesn't know about the relationships between the first-year students better than you do, does she?" I countered.

The fact remained that Hashimoto had been Sakayanagi's foot soldier long before this Social Group event, from the time immediately after our juniors had enrolled here at this school.

"Yeah… She probably…doesn't. Basically, Sakayanagi didn't start making connections with them right away, because I was essentially acting as a go-between for her with the promising first-years. Albeit indirectly," said Hashimoto.

He was trying desperately to smile, but he was pushing himself too hard.

“It’s not easy to get a specific person expelled from school in ways other than special exams,” I reminded him, trying to get him to calm down a little with some encouragement. But he wasn’t fully accepting my words.

“I know. I really do, it’s just… It’s Sakayanagi. I can’t deny the possibility that she’ll do something I haven’t imagined,” said Hashimoto.

After saying that, Hashimoto stopped, as if he just finally realized that he was stuck in a quagmire.

“That’s enough of that. It’s probably better to just forget about Sakayanagi for the time being,” said Hashimoto.

“That would be better, yeah,” I replied.

Hashimoto breathed in deeply and exhaled strongly, puffing out his cheeks with a *pheeew* to catch his breath.

“All right. I’m gonna stop by the bathroom in the lobby and then head back to the room. You head on back and get some sleep,” said Hashimoto.

“It’s almost lights out. Don’t be out too late,” I replied.

“I won’t,” said Hashimoto.

Was he uncomfortable using the bathroom in our shared room, or was there some other reason? Hashimoto went alone into the lobby, where there was no longer any sign of anyone else around.

Chapter 7:
Quiet Conclusion

TODAY WAS THE THIRD and last full day we'd be spending time with the other grade levels, since we were scheduled to board the buses back to school before noon tomorrow. Social Group was in full swing, but before the battle with Nagumo's group, my early morning was to be spent with Ibuki and Horikita firmly in my sights.

"You're going to do this blindfolded today," declared Ibuki.

"Wow, making demands immediately upon arrival. And it's an outrageous demand, at that," I replied.

"'Cause I can't get rid of this irritation unless I kick you flying at least once," snapped Ibuki.

Obviously, this absurd proposal of hers was unacceptable. Even if they were inexperienced in martial arts, it wouldn't matter—having to fight against Horikita and Ibuki blindfolded would mean being forced into a hard fight. And that's saying nothing of the fact that, since I was endeavoring to focus on a nonaggressive defensive policy, the only thing I'd be doing was taking on risk.

"Having him be blindfolded won't be conducive to our training, so I'm rejecting that idea," said Horikita.

"Well said, Horikita," I replied.

"If we're going to make that request, let's do it after our training."

"No, Horikita," I cut in.

Not even a single second had passed before I had to correct Horikita.

"I completely understand your mounting frustration with Ayanokouji-kun," Horikita said. "But first, our top priority should be defeating our immediate opponent Amasawa-san. Right?"

"...Yeah, I guess," replied Ibuki.

Huh, Ibuki seemed quite resolute in helping Horikita in this matter... That seemed consistent with Ibuki's character. At any rate, they both seemed plenty fired up to successfully get their revenge on Amasawa, no matter what it took.

“Okay then, let’s get right to—”

Just as I was about to call out to them, Ibuki stopped me.

“Bathroom.”

“You didn’t take care of your business already?” asked Horikita.

“I thought I was fine. But it’s just, when it gets cold, it’s, you know. Anyway, just wait a sec,” said Ibuki.

“Oh, for the love of…” huffed Horikita.

Although Horikita was exasperated, it would’ve been cruel for her to tell Ibuki to hold it in. It wasn’t likely, but it would be bad if moving around actively caused an accident. While watching Ibuki head back inside to the bathroom, Horikita called out to me.

“I’ve come to realize something today,” said Horikita.

“Realize something?” I repeated.

“The reason why your absolute requirement was that we have our revenge on Amasawa-san on the morning of the fourth day. Increasing the number of training sessions is a very believable reason, sure. However, if more sessions were all you wanted, you could have seen us secretly at other times of the day, making sure we weren’t seen by others. I think that the main reason you wanted us to do it on the last day was to mitigate the risk of injury. It would be a disservice to the people who are taking this Social Group event seriously if we got hurt in a selfish fight while the event was still taking place, after all,” said Horikita.

While Ibuki’s group lost its hope of getting a top spot by the second day, Horikita’s group was still a contender for first place. It sounded like she was able to suss out my perspective on the matter, as someone on the side of those in the running.

“If you’re that good,” Horikita said, “I’m sure you’ll have no trouble handling yourself while making sure that I don’t get hurt.”

“Okay, even if that’s true, what about the chance I might get hurt?” I asked.

“…Is there any?” she asked.

“None,” I replied.

Horikita looked a little annoyed at my quick answer.

“You should take care,” she said, “because if a normal person said something like that, it would most definitely invite frowns of disapproval and disdain. I guess we really will just have to blindfold you later then, after all, hm?”

“I would rather you not. It’s just that I didn’t think it was necessary for me to be modest with you, Horikita. I wouldn’t have said that if I were talking to someone else.”

“Am I supposed to be happy about that?”

“Be happy—you’re getting special treatment.”

“That is not special treatment to be happy about.”

Actually, I’d been having more casual conversations with Horikita lately about nothing at all. I’m sure that, out there in the world, in the past and in the future, there were others who were having exchanges similar to ours, getting angry and laughing at each other.

“On a totally unrelated topic, who comes to mind as a student who the people around them think lacks in presence?” I asked.

When I asked that question, Horikita thought for a moment, and then gave her answer.

“Ayanokouji-kun.”

“...Me?”

“When we started school, at least. You were the one who didn’t stand out at all in class.”

“I see. That’s true.”

Out of the forty students that were in our class when we started, I was probably overwhelmingly counted from the bottom of the list.

“That doesn’t apply to me now, though,” I said. “I’ve gained more presence recently.”

Compared to how things were at the start, it was fair to say that even I had changed quite a lot. But more than anything else, it was the environment around me that had changed even more.

“I wonder how exactly it’s decided whether people have greater or lesser presence,” I thought aloud.

“Hmm. I have to wonder,” said Horikita. “I think that if someone wants to disappear or they don’t want to stand out, then they would naturally become less and less visible. They probably wouldn’t speak much, either.”

All of that was consistent with Yamamura. Each factor might not have been a big deal on its own, but when combined, they had a substantial impact.

“Why do you ask?” said Horikita.

“Oh, no reason,” I replied, “I just was wondering,”

“Is that so? Oh, that reminds me, about that matter that you asked for my assistance in…”

When Horikita approached me asking for special training, I had asked her to do something for me, and now she was reporting the results of that request.

“…Well, that’s about all I had noticed, but…is that somehow useful to you?” asked Horikita.

“Yeah, that’s plenty useful,” I said. “Thanks for looking into it. With that, you can consider the favor I’ve asked of you as done.”

Horikita had done what I asked of her dutifully from start to finish, seemingly without understanding what it meant, but didn’t press me for an explanation.

“Anyway,” I remarked, “Ibuki sure is taking his time.”

“Yes, you’re right. What in the world is she doing?” said Horikita.

I couldn’t imagine that it would take her this much time just to go to the lobby bathroom and come back.

“You don’t think she went back to her room and went to sleep, do you?” I asked.

“I don’t want to think so, obviously, but… Well, knowing Ibuki-san, I can’t say for sure.”

“What about calling her?”

“I left my phone in the room. I thought it would get in the way.”

“I see. In that case, while I feel bad for you, Horikita, if Ibuki doesn’t come back, then we’ll have to cancel today.”

“It is what it is, I suppose. Fighting together with Ibuki-san is one of the conditions of our deal, after all.”

If they went into this fight with just yesterday’s single training session under their belt, it would be an exercise in futility, like pouring water on a hot stone. The best course of action might’ve been to ask to postpone, in the hopes that there would be another opportunity to attend some group training or joint activity in a place with lax supervision, like we had on the uninhabited island.

As Horikita and I were staring toward the building, waiting for Ibuki to arrive, that’s when it happened.

“You’re wide open!!”

I heard a voice from behind and felt a presence rapidly coming toward me. When I moved to avoid it, I saw Ibuki’s leg stretched out, her foot reaching the position where I had just been standing moments before—which meant that Ibuki had been planning to kick me without hesitation, as part of a surprise attack.

“God damm it! I missed! And after I went through all the hassle of goin’ the long way around when I came back!” shouted Ibuki.

“It’s okay to be frustrated, but don’t shout while you’re attacking. You’re doing the same thing Ishizaki does,” I replied.

“Wha…?! Okay, I really don’t like to hear that…! And I only shouted on instinct, though!” protested Ibuki.

Saying, “Oh well, if it’s instinctual shouting, then there’s nothing you can do about it,” would not be a good idea. It would be one thing if you knew you could defeat your opponent, but if you were fighting an opponent that you had low odds of beating, you’d just be putting yourself at a disadvantage.

“Ishizaki-kun? You’ve fought with Ishizaki-kun, too?” asked Horikita.

“I just happened to witness him in a fight, is all. I wasn’t involved,” I replied.

I had thought I could’ve talked my way out of it by throwing out a fitting excuse like that, but apparently, I was wrong.

“You fought against Ryuuen-kun on the roof before though, didn’t you? It happened back then, right?” said Horikita.

I looked at Ibuki. The look of frustration that belonged on her face immediately turned into a wicked smile.

“Hmph. Look, I don’t ever remember you telling me that I couldn’t tell anybody else. And even if you did, I’m free to talk about it,” huffed Ibuki.

“It’s fine,” I replied, “I was just thinking that a lot of things make sense now.”

That was likely also part of the reason they had asked me for help with getting their revenge on Amasawa in the first place.

“I pretended not to know anything about it while in front of others, just in case, but I suppose this might actually be a good opportunity to ask you. Do you admit it? That you did indeed have a fight with Ryuuen-kun and his followers?” asked Horikita.

“I can’t *not* admit it under the circumstances, can I?” I replied.

“True. Well, on my part, it feels like I’ve finally reached a satisfying conclusion, as it were. Like I got an official answer. It wasn’t that I had any doubts about Ibuki-san’s story, but I certainly wouldn’t have been surprised if some exaggerations or errors got mixed in there,” explained Horikita.

“The hell?” huffed Ibuki as she cocked her head, kicking some dirt up toward Horikita’s leg.

“Don’t act so childish.” Rebuking Ibuki like she was a teacher, Horikita continued as though she had been waiting for the opportunity. “Is there anything else that you’ve been keeping secret from me? Like, for example, anyone else you’ve fought with?”

“Nope,” I replied.

“Really?” she said, seemingly unconvinced. “There are still a few things I have doubts about, though. Like the matter of Yagami-kun, for instance.”

“Yagami? Why are you bringing up Yagami right now? I don’t get violent with my juniors. I know that there was that whole deal with Housen, but I’d like it if we could agree that one doesn’t count,” I argued.

“Yagami? Who the heck is that? Was there a kid with that name?” Ibuki thought aloud.

“…Forget it. We don’t have much time left, so I’d like to request that we start training,” said Horikita.

Not wanting to waste time explaining everything, Horikita suspended the conversation, and they both spread themselves out to get some distance from me.

“Basically, the rules are the same as yesterday. The important thing is not so much how I move, but that the two of you understand your own movements,” I explained.

If you’ve repeatedly had matches over and over in the past with the same person, your opponent’s moves and patterns would be imprinted on your mind, whether you liked it or not. Their ability to coordinate as a team, something that was born and honed here, would undoubtedly be much better than in their previous match against Amasawa.

7.1

AFTER MORNING TRAINING was over, the two of them were out of breath for a while, but obviously I couldn’t just let them sit here forever.

“It’s getting pretty bright out. Don’t you think you should be heading back now?” I spoke.

“You’re sounding awfully fine when you say that. What is the deal with your body, that you’re not exhausted at all after moving around so much?” asked Horikita.

“You’re a cyborg, aren’t you?” posited Ibuki.

“Of course I’m tired,” I replied, “I just don’t show it on my face, is all.”

“You’re not very persuasive, saying something like that when your shoulders aren’t even heaving up and down as you breathe.” Despite her grumbling, Horikita stood up, dusting sand off her clothes. “But it is true that we should be heading on back right about now.”

When she heard that, Ibuki jumped to her feet obstinately, like she wasn’t going to lose to Horikita. Even outside of actual fights, they had a competitive spirit.

“Oh, that reminds me. What are you planning to do today, Ibuki-san?” asked Horikita.

“What am I gonna do?” Ibuki repeated.

“The Social Group games. Is your group planning to fight all the way until the end?” asked Horikita.

She was asking because Ibuki’s group was already in a hopeless situation, with two wins and ten losses.

“Oh, that? Dunno, don’t care. I haven’t even participated once, anyway,” said Ibuki.

“Then I suppose that means your stamp card is completely blank,” said Horikita.

Ibuki huffed, sniffed, and then crossed her arms. It probably wasn’t that she didn’t want the rewards, but rather that she’d rather choose to skip doing tedious work for the lower rewards bracket of only about 1,000 points or so.

“I’m free, I guess. So I might as well tag along with you, Horikita.”

“...Why would you do that?”

“‘Cause I might be able to see you lose in something at Social Group.”

Ibuki’s driving force was certainly clear. Or, rather, how should I put it? It was like she really didn’t waver in it. I suppose it applied to Kushida too, but I wondered if she wanted to see Horikita lose that badly.

“Huh? So you’re seriously planning to trail me?” asked Horikita.

“Of course,” said Ibuki.

“What about if your group’s third-year asked you to participate, even if a loss is inevitable? Will you comply?” asked Horikita.

“Nope, I won’t. I’ll just get someone else to do it,” said Ibuki.

Knowing Ibuki, it wouldn’t be surprising if she foisted the role upon some first-year student. Every group had their own situation to deal with, and Horikita didn’t have any right to rebuke Ibuki for her approach.

“For heaven’s sake… Fine, you can do whatever you want, but in that case, why don’t you follow Ayanokouji-kun? You might even get the chance to see him lose,” said Horikita.

“I already lost twice yesterday,” I replied.

Although that information had certainly already been shared with the people in Nagumo’s group.

“Come to think of it, Nagumo-senpai was extremely happy. I heard something like you lost at cards, even though you were performing flawlessly? Or that your defeat came after a winning streak, like your hot streak ended all too soon? You lost in some game after that too, then?” asked Horikita.

From the sound of it, Horikita didn’t know too much about my situation. Perhaps Nagumo wasn’t sharing my personal results with his entire group, but only with a select few students?

“I was completely and thoroughly beaten to the ground by Inokashira’s patchwork,” I replied.

“Well, that’s something you don’t normally see. Wow,” said Horikita. “Personally, I would have loved to have seen you lose, no matter what the game was.”

“Guess that means you’re no different from Ibuki,” I countered.

Horikita looked a little put off by my comeback, but eventually, she chuckled and nodded. In other words, it just meant that they both wanted to see the person they didn’t like lose.

“Even though he lost, Ayanokouji doesn’t seem too bitter about it, does he? I bet he probably lost on purpose, anyway,” said Ibuki.

“Actually, I don’t know if he did it on purpose or not, but he does get frustrated too, surprisingly enough. At the very least, from the looks of it, I think he was serious when he lost these two times. Right? Red Panda-kun?” said Horikita.

“Are you seriously bringing that up again…?” I sighed.

To be honest, I would really like it if she wouldn’t selfishly give me a nickname like that.

“Anyway, I think I’ll be sticking with you, Horikita. Besides, I kinda want to see how Amasawa is doing too,” said Ibuki.

“I see. That might not be a bad idea. If her attention is focused on you, she might feel a little pressure about tomorrow, even if it’s only a little bit,” said Horikita, seemingly concluding that she would also benefit if Ibuki accompanied her after all.

“If you’re going back, can we just hurry up and go already? It’s getting cold,” snapped Ibuki. It was natural she would get cold while staying still after having been warmed up by exercise.

“Just don’t get in my way the entire time,” snapped Horikita.

“I can’t make any promises,” replied Ibuki.

I couldn’t help but feel like Ibuki’s entire plan was to get in Horikita’s way.

7.2

IN JUST ABOUT fifteen minutes, our opponent for the first Social Group event of the third day was going to be announced. The game would be Shogi. Five participants from our group were chosen by Kiryuuin: myself, Morishita, Hashimoto, Hiyori, and Tsubaki. However, we were still missing one of our teammates when it was time to meet up.

“Morishita’s turn is comin’ up. Where the heck is she…?” wondered Hashimoto.

“She’s not picking up, either,” said Hiyori, holding her phone to her ear.

“When was the last time you saw Morishita?” asked Hashimoto.

“At breakfast. She was with you when you left, wasn’t she, Ayanokouji-kun?” said Hiyori.

Morishita and I had finished eating at the same time, so yeah, I definitely remembered leaving the cafeteria at the same time as she did. She did say something about going for a walk more than thirty minutes ago, though. Could it be that she was still out on her walk? Or was there a chance that she had gotten lost? On a normal day, there was no way you could get lost, but it would be a different story if you carelessly trekked onto a mountain path. Considering

Morishita's personality, could we state with certainty that she wasn't doing just that?

"Seriously," Hashimoto sighed, "she even talked about how she's so confident in her shogi skills and stuff..."

"She said that she trained through online matches or something," said Kiryuuin.

"Honestly, that sounds pretty fishy too..." replied Hashimoto.

Kiryuuin had probably picked her because she trusted Morishita's claims and confidence. I'm sure that on her part, Morishita had also wanted to restore faith in her name after what happened in the archery event.

"Without Morishita here, we'll have to put in a substitute. But we still have a little time to spare before the game starts, so I'm going to take a look around outside. Hashimoto, can I ask you to handle searching inside the building?" I asked.

"Sure," Hashimoto said, "I'll contact you if I find her."

With that, we set out to find Morishita, in high spirits. Not even a half a minute later, the search was over. I had succeeded in finding Morishita in almost no time at all, which was a bit anticlimactic. She didn't seem to be lost, so I sent Hashimoto a message letting him know that I'd found her, before calling out to and approaching her.

"It's almost time for Social Group," I announced to her.

But Morishita didn't say anything in return, and just quietly laid her hand on the tree. Since there was no way that she was sleeping standing up, I wondered what she was doing.

"Morishita?" I asked.

"Can you please be a little quieter? Just now, I was...listening to the voice of the forest," murmured Morishita, quietly.

"...Huh?" My brain couldn't process her statement, and I couldn't help but ask her a question in return. "What is the voice of the forest?"

"Do you not understand? The forest is alive," said Morishita.

What could I say to that?

"Place your hand upon a large tree, like this, close your eyes, and then calm your mind and listen. If you do that, then you may

understand what I am saying," added Morishita.



“…I see?” I replied.

She was right that I didn’t have a clue what she was talking about at this point. I figured that maybe I should try experiencing it now, given the occasion. I stood beside Morishita and pressed my hand against the tree just like her. Then, I closed my eyes, quieted my mind, and listened.

“So? What do you think? Do you hear the voice of the forest?” asked Morishita.

“No…” I replied.

“In that case, you may still have some idle thoughts and desires in you,” said Morishita.

Idle thoughts. Unfortunately, no, I didn’t have any emotions in me right now. At least, there shouldn’t be anything like that mixed in there, but… Anyway, just as I had expected, I didn’t hear anything at all. No voices were going to come.

“Please inhale air through your nose and exhale through your mouth,” instructed Morishita.

However, Morishita was still trying to get me to hear it.

“Is there some deeper meaning to this?” I asked.

“We shall see. When I had a cold before, the otolaryngologist instructed me to breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth,” said Morishita.

“Isn’t that how you use a nebulizer…?” I asked.

I supposed that, in a way, I was forcefully tossing aside idle thoughts, but I still wasn’t hearing any voices of the forest.

“I’m not… What are you doing?” I asked.

Upon opening my eyes and looking over at Morishita, I noticed that she was pointing her phone at me.

“I was recording high-definition footage of the foolish Ayanokouji Kiyotaka dancing to the tune of my lie,” said Morishita.

“Hey now…” I started.

“How could one possibly hear the voice of the forest? You have seen too many dramas and films,” said Morishita.

“You’re the one who mentioned it in the first place, though. And it looked like you were really into it,” I replied.

“Come now, no need to be embarrassed,” she said, “I will not tell anyone that you were trying to listen to the voice of the forest. It will be our little secret.”

In that case, I’d prefer you not take video recordings as evidence, please.

“On another note, that aspiration device in hospitals is called a ‘nebulizer,’ is it? My stores of useless knowledge have increased. Thank you very much,” said Morishita.

She just said that it was “useless knowledge,” but she was thanking me for it anyway.

“You’re an interesting person, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka,” said Morishita.

On the contrary, I thought that Morishita was overwhelmingly a far, far more interesting person.

“By the way, what did you want with me?” she asked.

“It’s about time for our group to meet, but you didn’t show, so I came looking for you.”

“Now that you mention it, yes, you’re right. I suppose this is not an instance where I feel as though I have no fault.”

She made a statement that sounded like an apology but wasn’t, then pulled away from the tree. We started walking toward the building, where Kiryuuin was waiting for us.

“May I ask you one question?” said Morishita.

I turned my gaze toward her to let her know I was listening.

“What do you think about Hashimoto Masayoshi?” she asked.

“That’s a pretty loaded question,” I replied.

“I had thought it necessary to ask you. I had searched for an opportunity to do so several times now, but I simply hadn’t had any luck thus far,” said Morishita.

“Does that mean you were hoping that I’d be the one to come and find you while you were leaning against the trees, by any chance?”

“Knowing you, I had estimated that you would have voluntarily come searching for me.”

She was quite a resourceful tactician, even if I didn’t always understand her personality.

“As a fellow Class A student, what do *you* think?” I asked her.

“I thought you would ask me that question. Of course, I think that we should immediately band together in solidarity as a class and eliminate him,” said Morishita assertively, without hesitation. She clearly felt Hashimoto was a hindrance.

“If I were Hashimoto’s ally, wouldn’t that be a verbal gaffe on your part, saying that?” I asked.

“I thought that even if I told a lie, you would just lie in return. I figured that honesty was the best choice here,” she replied.

Morishita also knew a lot about bargaining. Even if I insinuated that I was helping Hashimoto on a surface level, I wouldn’t gain any credibility once she sniffed me out. She was quick and sharp in her judgments, as well as unreserved in her speech. Among those I’d seen in our grade level, her skill level was among the best of the best. I suppose it was true that you really couldn’t know a person’s character until you talked to them face to face.

“I’m going to try and respond to you honestly,” I said, “but actually, I really don’t think this issue is any of my business, as someone in a different class. Whether Sakayanagi eliminates Hashimoto or Hashimoto eliminates Sakayanagi, you can all just do whatever you want.”

“Meaning, in other words, you have no intention of taking Hashimoto Masayoshi’s side?” asked Morishita.

“No, I don’t,” I answered without hesitation, emphasizing my words as truth. Which it was, even if she had some suspicions; it really wasn’t a lie. I added, “Of course, now that we’re both members of the same group though, I’ll maintain proper distance and cooperation.”

“I see. That is somewhat of a relief,” said Morishita.

Instead of saying that Morishita was part of Sakayanagi’s faction, one could say that she was against Hashimoto’s faction.

“I’m only asking for reference, but would it bother you if I did take Hashimoto’s side?” I asked.

“It would bother me, yes. I believe that, in all likelihood, Sakayanagi Arisu is the one who will win. However, if Ayanokouji Kiyotaka were to ally himself with Hashimoto Masayoshi, I feel that I would have misgivings about whether that was still the case.” Apparently, Morishita seemed to have a higher opinion of me than I had imagined. “Do you find it strange? That is, the fact that I hold you in such high esteem, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.”

“Well, yeah, because I didn’t get the sense that you thought that much of me when we first spoke,” I replied.

I understood that I had caught her attention of course, but I had no idea she held me in such high regard.

“It is not uncommon for the actual substance of something to differ from the negativity of advance reviews. Thus, I had lowered the bar, so to speak. But judging from the looks and reactions from those around you, that does not appear to be true in your case,” said Morishita.

From the sounds of it, it was something more like an intuitive feeling on her part, rather than seeing or hearing anything directly, then. An evaluation based on her own high intelligence and intuition. I felt like calling her the female version of Kouenji would be rude to Morishita, but they might’ve had some similarities, in terms of the type of people they were. Compared to him, it felt like she had less recklessness, and the added essence of reason… Wait, no. No matter how I tried to spin it, Kouenji just wasn’t a good example when talking about Morishita.

“To turn my previous question around, is there a possibility you would become Sakayanagi Arisu’s ally?” asked Morishita.

“No, there isn’t. Or rather, I’m not really one to comment anyway,” I answered.

Normally, from Sakayanagi’s perspective, Hashimoto would be a much lower-ranked opponent. It wasn’t a situation where I would be much use.

“It’s just…” I began.

“It’s just?” she repeated.

“Whether we’re talking about Hashimoto or Sakayanagi, I believe they should demonstrate their true potential and fight. The best way to determine who is the winner is for both sides to give their all. That’s just what I think, anyway,” I answered.

Hashimoto was still racing ahead on his own, without the time or leeway to look at what was going on around him yet, while Sakayanagi likely wasn’t performing to her usual standards due to the loss of Kamuro. If I could remove each of their problems, then I would’ve very much liked to do so before they had a showdown.

“I understand your thoughts, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. Thank you very much.” Morishita bowed to me with a smile, albeit a small one. It seemed as though something that was stuck in her heart had been lifted. “All that remains is for me to pray that this matter will be resolved as soon as possible. If this internal strife continues for another six months to a year, it will be nothing but a negative for Class A.”

“Yeah.”

If that was the problem, then Morishita’s needless fears were resolved. The issue between Sakayanagi and Hashimoto were set to reach a conclusion soon, after all.

Morishita then walked away from under the tree. “Well then, I suppose it is time we get going. Come now, please don’t continue engaging in tomfoolery with the trees forever. What a child you are,” she teased.

“You were the one who started said ‘tomfoolery’…” I huffed.

If anything, I was just the victim here; I got sucked into it.

Incidentally, Morishita hadn’t just been talking a big game before, she was an excellent shogi player. The skills she had trained in her daily online matches were not just for show.

7.3

I HAD THOUGHT THAT, at times like these, we’d end up facing off against Nagumo’s group in our nineteenth—our last—game. However, things didn’t always work out in such a convenient way in the real world.

For the seventeenth game of the event, with two individual losses on my record, we clashed with Nagumo's group, which was still undefeated as of that point. The game was archery, which we were playing for the second time, like with table tennis before.

I wondered if I should consider this to be a good thing that this was our last game, seeing as it wasn't an activity based around luck or making something.

Nagumo was present as the leader and was visible, but he didn't call out to me. Although Nagumo and I were engaged in a personal bet in this instance, few people knew about it. It was even possible that the first-year students who were ordered to perform reconnaissance may not have known the details.

"So, why're you here, Morishita?" I asked.

"To do archery, of course. I came to do battle," said Morishita.

She had gotten miserable results yesterday, but from the sound of it, she was going to try and participate anyway, without letting herself be discouraged. When I looked over in Kiryuuin's direction, she nodded once, deeply. Apparently, she had approved of Morishita's participation.

"There you have it. You can rest easy, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, and think of it as though I have gained a reliable foundation. Like building a boat," said Morishita.

"Let's hope it's not a boat made out of mud," I joked.

Once again, the instructor began talking about safety for the students regardless of their experience level. The instructor repeatedly explained the importance of remembering the correct form for shooting. For this game, we'd be taking six shots and then passing our turn to the next person, unlike the back-and-forth alternation of the actual sporting event. Hashimoto, after having looked at our five opponents, came up to me and whispered in my ear.

"Katsuragi practiced quite a bit yesterday, from the sounds of it. And his best score was thirty-six points. If you go up against him, there's a chance you'll lose," he warned.

While I was impressed that Hashimoto had done some thorough research, I also thought back on my own performance.

Yesterday, my six shots scored two points, two points, four points, seven points, six points, and nine points, for a total of thirty points. It was understandable that he was worried, but to be perfectly clear, I wasn't going to lose to Katsuragi. The problem was elsewhere. Shortly afterward, the matchups were announced.

1st Position: Horikita Suzune vs. Yanagi Yasuhisa

2nd Position: Hirata Yousuke vs. Hashimoto Masayoshi

3rd Position: Amasawa Ichika vs. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka

4th Position: Kanzaki Ryuuji vs. Shintoku Tarou

5th Position: Katsuragi Kouhei vs. Morishita Ai

In the past sixteen games, my name had shown up as the third player in the roster every time. Nagumo had brilliantly paired me up with an opponent that would keep me steadfast in that same position.

"I look forward to our match, senpaiii," said Amasawa.

"Huh, your opponent's a first-year girl. You got this, dude," said Hashimoto.

Hashimoto sounded optimistic when he made that statement, perhaps because he didn't have any information on Amasawa. Nagumo's group, which had the advanced position, began to take aim at the targets in unison as the crowd watched.

If you saw how relaxed she was, with a composed look on her face, you could tell that Amasawa had gained a solid amount of experience with the practice she got in yesterday. She released her arrows without hesitation, and they sailed smoothly through the air and landed in the yellow-tinted nine-point area.

Nine points, nine points, ten points, nine points, ten points, and ten points. A total of fifty-seven points. She was so accurate that not only were the participating students shocked, but the instructor was as well.

"No way," said Hashimoto.

Katsuragi's score of thirty-seven points was impressive—the second highest on her team—but it was nothing compared to

Amasawa's. To win against her, I figured that I needed to be accurate enough to score all tens.

As the ones playing second, the still-shaken members of Kiryuuin's group were up next to take their turn. With the other participants as my audience, I fired off my first shot before anyone else on my team did.

My arrow pierced the yellow area of the target, earning me eight points. While the rest of my team was still getting ready, I shifted my stance to fire my second shot and waited for permission to fire. I only had a single point of leeway left, but that didn't matter. I immediately corrected my trajectory, which had been slightly off on my initial impression. The second arrow pierced straight through the middle of the yellow part of the target—ten points.

It might have been impossible for me to pull it off if the distance had been the usual seventy meters, due to effects of wind and such, but there was none of that at twenty meters. Every time the instructor retrieved the arrow and gave it back to me, I fired again practically instantly. I was machinelike, repeating the same action, in the same position, pushing my ability to replicate to the very limit. I simply went ahead and shot my four remaining arrows into the dead center of my target, without worrying about how many points the others were scoring.

I grasped victory, with a final tally of fifty-eight to fifty-seven. Amasawa applauded enthusiastically, having only lost to me by a slim margin.

"I expected no less from you, senpai. It's frustrating, but I lost," said Amasawa.

"The rules saved me in a lot of ways, though," I said. "The targets were close, sure, but if we had been playing with regular rules and we took alternating shots, things could have gone either way."

Once Amasawa had established her score as fifty-seven points, she could no longer make any other moves. All she could do at that point was surrender herself to the results.

"I prayed and tried putting pressure on you," said Amasawa "but I guess it didn't work."

I had no idea, because I had blocked out everything going on around me.

“You didn’t practice archery after yesterday’s game, right?” said Amasawa.

“I watched a how-to video in the middle of the night,” I replied.

It wasn’t just archery. Everything I experienced after coming to the camp was new to me.

“Anyway, you got the win, so, kudos to you. Though Nagumo-senpai might be mad at me,” said Amasawa.

It wasn’t likely that Nagumo would take her to task over a loss after she scored fifty-seven points. Ibuki was watching from afar, with a bored expression, and averted her eyes. Horikita had also won against her opponent, Yanagi, but Amasawa’s loss against me didn’t invalidate her overwhelmingly high score. Furthermore, I was sure that my win against Amasawa wasn’t any fun for Ibuki anyway.

“Phew, that was close, but you made it. More importantly though, man, you were amazingly consistent…” Hashimoto expressed his admiration after watching Amasawa head back to report to her own group. “That said, man, our opponents sure were tough too.”

Our archery match against Nagumo’s group ended with us losing, one to four.

“Indeed. They are certainly the top contenders. They were tough opponents and worth fighting. Still, it was frustrating,” said Morishita.

Looking at Morishita’s side profile, she looked very content, like she had given it her all and was satisfied with that.

As a side note, Morishita was the only one who had lost spectacularly, having only scored a total of six points.

7.4

AFTERWARD, we completed all nineteen of the round-robin-style matches. The final score for Kiryuuin’s group was fifteen wins and four losses out of the total nineteen games. My personal record was seventeen wins and two losses. Our group had ultimately come in

fourth place, which I could say was a great achievement after a hard-fought battle. Also, Nagumo's group, which had been the favorite since the beginning, finished in first place, having lost only once in nineteen games. That single loss to their eighteen wins was the result of a card game. While they had avoided games that contained elements of luck all the way until the end, cards had ultimately been chosen as their final game. And even then, it was a fortunate closer for them, as they had lost to a group that had only won three times up until that point.

Right now, Nagumo and I were in one of the relaxation areas, after everyone else had been cleared out. The two of us were alone in that space right now, just me and him.

"Allowing me to fail two times was a major factor in why you lost our bet, Nagumo-senpai," I remarked.

"Yeah, that's for sure," he conceded. "But still, even though that's what I'd like to say, since no one else who participated in as many games as you did has come away with so few losses, it'd be wrong for me to complain about it."

It sounded like Nagumo was able to get detailed information on every group whenever he wanted, and that he knew the individual results of all of the games. He looked at things with a very meticulous eye, despite how he might look.

"And the fact you put Amasawa, your best player, up against me in such a clean and tidy fashion was great. Just as I'd expect from you," I remarked.

"Knock it off. You were deliberately making sure that you were the third person in the roster on your team, weren't you? It was obvious that you were just setting the table, trying to make it a little more convincing when you were playing against me," said Nagumo.

"I'd like for you to honestly consider the feelings of your junior, who was just trying to lift up his senpai a little."

"If that's true, then do a better job of it. Because it just sounds like you're trying to agitate me."

Hmm... Yeah, he was right, I probably should have phrased it better, and more naturally, otherwise it would hit wrong.

“I did somehow manage to beat Amasawa in our individual matchup, but from a group competition perspective, we totally lost,” I said. “Not a single person in our group was holding back, but still, it was clear that everyone in your group was operating at a high level while playing all of the games, based on how things went.”

Their group members had built up experience over the three days, and their thorough approach directly led to their victory.

“When I decide to go for the win, I go for it relentlessly,” said Nagumo. “That’s only natural. At any rate, looks like the playing cards game got the better of both of us, though.”

“Yeah, true,” I replied.

Nagumo came to Social Group, which he didn’t even need to attend, and he also had to pull funds out of his own pocket to make this bet happen. Even before getting to the question of who won or lost, it was impossible to imagine that Nagumo could be satisfied with this.

“What do you think would have happened if I had made our contest be based on our group’s results from the beginning?” asked Nagumo.

“Well, if I’m giving an answer based on the results, I’d say that even if I was the one giving the orders for our group, we still wouldn’t have won.”

I openly and honestly admitted that I would’ve been defeated.

“That so? Knowing you, though, I’m sure you could’ve done a lot of foundational work behind the scenes to make your group more solid and reliable overall and then proceeded ahead soundly. Right?” said Nagumo.

However, the man before me didn’t believe my admission of defeat at all, buying in even less than I did.

“Your group won fifteen games even without your help, so you probably could’ve managed it. I’m sure you could’ve found a way to pick up the other wins, couldn’t you? Or perhaps you just can’t take things seriously with me as your opponent?” asked Nagumo.

“That doesn’t matter,” I countered. “Even if I tried to pick up those remaining wins for the games we lost by bribing our

opponents, if you were serious about it, you could've just bribed them too, or you could have even done something preventing me from doing so beforehand. Since you have total control over all the third-years, I'm sure you're very good at that sort of thing—it's your forte."

If I tried to lay groundwork, then Nagumo would naturally detect that and lay groundwork of his own. If it was a battle based on our financial power, then I wouldn't be able to win no matter how much I struggled.

"Besides, even if, hypothetically, I had succeeded in bribing three of our competitors to win three games, our group still would've gotten checkmated in our seventeenth game—archery—anyway," I explained.

"It still doesn't sound like you're being serious when you say that, either," replied Nagumo.

"Well... If I were trying to force a win no matter what, then in that case I suppose I might've reached out to Horikita and Yousuke beforehand and had them miss the targets so that I could win," I replied.

They were serious students, but depending on the reason, they might've taken my side. Hypothetically, even if they had entered into a contract with Nagumo and assured him that they'd take the game seriously, there was no guarantee that they could hit the targets every time, and Nagumo couldn't hunt them down over Horikita and Yousuke betraying him on that point.

"Yeah," said Nagumo.

"But, if you were able to foresee that, Nagumo-senpai, then you probably would've changed up your roster of players," I replied.

In that case, the natural course of action would've been for him to select students who were beyond bargaining power.

"Okay, then what would you do if—no, forget it. Continuing this conversation any further would be a meaningless tangent," said Nagumo, ending the conversation with a sense of futility.

If you looked at the situation objectively, it was clear that this was just a social event, nothing more. Simply an experiential learning outing, where feelings of tension weren't necessary, which

the school itself had acknowledged. It wasn't something that required a large investment of money or a lot of secret deals and maneuvering. In the end, this contest, where Nagumo and I were trying to read what the other was doing, was nothing more than a fantasy that never actually materialized.

"I seriously enjoyed the experiential learning activities. I thought that if a proper competition between us was never going to happen, then it would be courteous to at least show you the real me, as I am," I replied.

Nagumo had always wanted to know how good I was. So, no matter what form it took, I think that he could probably perceive what were the true parts of me, without any clumsy maneuvering or anything. He would know, as I participated alongside his group members, such as Takahashi, in every game. I'm sure that he had probably gotten video of the games and checked it, as well.

"I see. You impressed me with archery in particular; that was worth seeing. I could really tell that you are unbelievably dexterous with your hands," said Nagumo.

"I'm not really sure whether you could be satisfied with this approach though, Nagumo-senpai," I replied.

"Am I satisfied? There's no way I could be." Nagumo cocked his head to the side with an exasperated chuckle. "I've got to say though, you're talking much more nowadays, and you've gotten to be more eloquent."

"That's because I've been blessed with good senpai, and I've learned a lot."

Nagumo took out his cell phone and flicked the screen with his fingertips. "I'm not gonna be stingy with your winnings," he said, "I've transferred the money. Check it."

"I trust you on that. But more importantly, are you sure this is okay? Isn't this money coming from the relief fund for the third-year students?" I asked.

"How long do you think I've been reigning at the top from my seat in Class A? Even if we're just talking about my personal account, I've got millions of points to spare. What's the problem with me paying out a portion of that?" He put away his phone and glanced

outside. “Remember what I told you before, when we arrived at camp? About going to college?”

“Of course,” I answered.

“I was being relatively serious when I invited you to come to my same school. We won’t be able to compete against each other there in spectacular fashion like we do at ANHS, but on the other hand, we’d be able to do more stuff shoulder-to-shoulder, yeah?” said Nagumo.

“You might be right.”

“Come to my same college if you want. It’ll improve your boring personality a little.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I replied.

Upon saying his piece, Nagumo gently patted my right shoulder as he passed by me.

“See ya,” said Nagumo.

“May I ask you to pass on a single message, Nagumo-senpai, as you’re graduating?” I asked.

“Oh? A message? It’s not for Horikita-senpai, is it?” he replied.



“That wouldn’t be a bad idea, but no, it’s not,” I answered.

When Nagumo stopped walking, I gave him a message to relay to a certain someone. He listened to my message attentively all the way to the end without poking fun, even if he didn’t seem to fully believe me yet.

“That’s a bizarre message,” he remarked.

“I hope that you’ll pass it along, and I’ll wait on the decision,” I replied.

“I heard you loud and clear. So, what, is this your farewell gift to me or something? If you keep quiet, you’ll never know what the outcome could’ve been. There are people who won’t be too thrilled that I’m graduating from Class A,” said Nagumo.

“At the very least, I think you have sufficient qualifications and achievements under your belt to graduate from Class A, senpai,” I replied.

That was why I had entrusted Nagumo with the message.

“I’m gonna go on ahead and get Round Two started, where Horikita-senpai is,” said Nagumo.

But the hidden message in Nagumo-senpai’s parting words was clear: *“If you feel like it, you come too.”*

Chapter 8:
Sleepy Night

IT WAS AFTER 11 P.M., well past lights out, and yet it seemed like everyone was still awake in our shared room, spending time looking at their phones and having hushed conversations. When we first arrived, I had felt somewhat uncomfortable around the unfamiliar people in our group, but that feeling must have gone away, as now I didn't mind at all. While I was watching videos on patchwork and occasionally jumping into conversations with Hashimoto, Oda, and my juniors while nodding along, my phone briefly vibrated.

"Are you still awake?"

It was Hiyori.

"I am. All the guys in the room are up, so don't worry about it."

I sent her that message in reply, letting her know that it'd be fine if she sent me messages in succession.

"Thank you. Actually, I just noticed this now, but Yamamura-san isn't here."

Yamamura wasn't there? Leaving the room after lights out was expressly forbidden by the rules.

"You mean that she's out like she left the room? Have you tried her phone?"

"It seems as though she left her phone in the room. I was agonizing over whether I should go look for her now, but...I was wondering if perhaps you could help, Ayanokouji-kun."

I was betting that, most likely, saying that Hiyori wasn't be good at that sort of thing was being generous. On top of that, if Hiyori couldn't be stealthy, then she was bound to be immediately spotted by a teacher making the rounds. Hiyori had probably made the right decision in coming to me for help in this. Even if the camp event was going to be over soon, it seemed like it would be better not to leave Yamamura be.

She had an extremely depressed look on her face yesterday too, when we were playing cards. I could think of some reasons as to why. I decided that I'd better go looking for her right away.

“Got it. I’ll go check on her, so you wait on standby in the room, Hiyori, so I can confirm that Yamamura is back inside the room when she heads back that way.”

She responded with a cute animal sticker that said, *“Thank you very much.”*

“I’m stepping out for a minute,” I announced.

“Huh? Wait, dude, it’s already past lights out. They’re gonna be mad if they find you,” warned Hashimoto.

“I’m going out looking for something. I’ll try my best not to get caught and be back before you know it. On the off chance something does go wrong, we can all be mad at me together,” I replied.

Convinced, Hashimoto and the others didn’t try very hard to detain me. Rather, they sent me off with cheerful smiles, like they were having fun.

Obviously, the hallway was cloaked in darkness and silence because the lights were out.

Now then…where to look first?

Wandering around aimlessly certainly would not be efficient, by any stretch. I couldn’t imagine Yamamura to be the type of person who would casually break the rules. There were two possibilities: Either someone called her, or she left the room voluntarily. However, in this instance, the possibility of the former being true was quite low, because she left her phone behind, so I determined she must have left voluntarily and proceeded with that assumption.

The next thing to consider would be why she left after lights out, and what would make that necessary. Amid the silent stillness of the night, the mind often filled itself with myriad miscellaneous thoughts—sometimes thoughts that one might even want to run away from. And it wouldn’t be surprising that one would unconsciously seek a safe place where they could feel at ease at a time like that. If I were trying to reach the same conclusion that Yamamura Miki had come to, based on her own thought process, it would be…

Immediately after I entered the lobby without making a sound, I felt the presence of someone and ducked into the shadows. It looked like a patrolling teacher was walking about the area with a flashlight in hand. Although visibility was poor, I could easily tell where the teacher was by looking at the glow of the flashlight. The teacher was shining the light around the perimeter and didn't appear to be looking for a rule-breaking student who had escaped from their shared room, but rather handling routine duties.

For that reason, it was quite easy for me to slip past, and after a short wait, the lobby was again devoid of people. Apparently, the teacher had gone to check out the cafeteria. Considering the route, the teacher would likely be going on to the shared rooms or the experiential classrooms after that, which gave me a bit of leeway. I took advantage of that opportunity without hesitation and headed to where the vending machines were.

I'd gone there assuming that the chances of her being there were high, and I immediately saw that my assumption was correct as I spotted a lone girl sitting with her back resting against the vending machine, her face downcast. It was chilly in the hallway, so perhaps she was there to keep warm, and—actually, that would probably be reading too much into it.

I thought that she might notice me any minute now, but she didn't seem to sense my presence at all. It didn't look like she was thinking about anything. She wasn't changing her facial expression, sighing, or anything like that. She simply stared at the floor, not moving a muscle.

"I bet the teachers would never think a student would be in a place like this," I remarked.

I couldn't just stand there and watch her forever, so I decided to call out to her.

"Ah... Huh?!" she wailed.

A startled Yamamura turned to look at me. Her eyes were filled with terror, but that fear quickly disappeared when she realized it was me.

"Wh-wh-wh-why are you here...?" she stammered.

“The teachers will get mad at you if they find you. I came to bring you back before that happens,” I replied.

“I’m confident that I won’t be found… Or, I was, rather… But I suppose I can’t use that logic since you found me, Ayanokouji-kun…”

But knowing Yamamura, I was sure that she’d be able to evade the teacher’s surveillance and even make her way back to her shared room.

“…How did you know that… I wasn’t in my room?” she asked.

“Not by any special means, of course. It was simply that Hiyori noticed you were gone and told me. She was worried about you,” I replied.

“I’m sorry… I just…I really wanted to be alone…” said Yamamura.

“Yeah, I guess if you’re in a shared room, you can’t really be alone unless you hole yourself up in the bathroom or something,” I replied, nodding slightly to indicate that I understood.

“Can’t I stay here like this for a little longer…?” asked Yamamura.

“Does it have to be next to the vending machines?” I asked in return.

“Yes. I always find that listening to the sounds of the vending machines helps drown out the extraneous voices in my mind…” said Yamamura.

It sounded like this behavior had become customary practice for Yamamura, as a means of protecting herself.

“Okay then, I guess this is the only place that’ll do, then. So? Did you manage to get rid of those so-called extraneous voices?” I asked.

“Wh-why are…you asking about that?” she asked in return.

“Because if I bring you back without resolving that issue, you might slip out again. And besides…sorry to say this, but what you’re doing doesn’t seem to be working.”

“Usually, I stop hearing them right away, and the issue gets resolved… Usually…”

Meaning, in other words, this time was different. Yamamura's somber expression expressed the seriousness of the situation.

"If something's bothering you, you can just say it," I replied.

"...No. I'm...fine," said Yamamura.

"Really? Because it didn't look that way to me at all in the five minutes I was watching you," I answered.

"F-five minutes?! You were...?!" she exclaimed.

"Sorry. Five minutes was a lie. It was closer to thirty seconds," I answered.

Yamamura probably wasn't aware of what was going on around her, since she didn't suspect anything about the timeframe that I just randomly made up.

"Do you not like talking to other people about your emotional problems?" I asked.

"It's not that I like it or dislike it. It's...it's just...I've never had experience with that sort of thing in the first place," said Yamamura.

It was easy to imagine that Yamamura spent her life thus far not saying much. She probably spent a lot of time alone, with her mouth shut instead of open, from a very young age. Although our environments and circumstances were quite different, I could tell that our situations were similar.

"Fundamentally, I'm not particularly good at talking either. Even if I have some minor problem, I'm the type of person who either keeps it to himself or works to resolve it. That's why I don't have many opportunities to talk to anyone about my worries," I told her.

"You, too, Ayanokouji-kun? But, to me, I...I think you seem normal. You seem to have lots of friends too. Like Shiina-san. She's cheerful and cute... I...envy her."

I suppose it probably wasn't unreasonable for someone to feel that way if they were only looking at the way things were right now, but everyone has an immature side of themselves that they've grown past.

"Do you know what I was like before, early in the year before last?" I asked.

Back then she probably hadn't been working with Sakayanagi yet and thus would have no way of knowing.

"Now that you mention it…no, I don't know anything about that," said Yamamura.

"I figured. That's because I know that I was a student who didn't leave much of an impression on anyone when I first got here. Fortunately, my lively classmates pulled me in, and I was able to build relationships to some degree. Although that wasn't something I was prepared for," I told her.

"So, how did you get to be like you are now, then?" asked Yamamura.

"Even now, I don't really have good enough relationships with the people around me to be able to talk like I'm an expert," I explained, "But I'm sure it's at least partly due to the fact that, over the past two years, I've started making an effort to close the distance between myself and other people a little bit. It's only since then that I've been able to say the things I've wanted to say."

That was something Yamamura still couldn't understand.

"I… I'm probably scared. I'm scared to speak my mind. And I'm scared that the things I've ended up saying will spread, unintentionally. And I'm scared people will know," said Yamamura.

I'm sure that Yamamura's approach up until this point—picking up other people's ideas from the shadows and communicating them to a third party—had been the complete opposite of that. It wasn't surprising that the person accustomed to knowing would feel a strong aversion to becoming known.

"I'm not going to force you into anything. You can judge for yourself," I told her.

I slowly sat down in front of the vending machine, keeping enough of a distance between us so as not to make her too mindful of my presence. I could feel the slight vibrations from the vending machine on my back and hear the sound of the fan whirring. Yamamura wasn't the only one who feared loneliness. Human nature was the same whether we were talking about Yousuke or Kei, Ryuuen or Sakayanagi, or any other student for that matter. People cannot bear loneliness and cannot live alone.

That was exactly why it's important to have someone you can lean on, without the need for compensation. Even though I felt like it didn't apply to me personally, I understood that that was one solution. The contradiction within. No, facts like that weren't important right now. The person before me wasn't stupid. Yamamura didn't think that solitude was the correct answer and wasn't seeking it out. If she had someone by her side who could offer a helping hand in the right way, she wouldn't make a mistake.

"...Would you listen to what I have to say?" asked Yamamura.

Sensing no hostility from me, Yamamura started to speak up about the things that she had been bottling up.

"Ever since the previous special exam ended," she said, "a question has been floating around in my mind..."

She was talking about the details of what happened in Class A during the Survival and Elimination Special Exam. In a situation where it was determined that Sakayanagi had to choose a person to be expelled, she instead had people draw lots. No matter what method someone used to decide something like that, it was inevitable that there would be arguments for or against it. Since not everyone's abilities were the same, there was no way to make everyone happy, whether you decided by nominating someone or deciding via rock paper scissors.

Sakayanagi probably thought that a lottery was the closest thing to an equal decision that she could make, since she saw all the students other than herself as being the same. However, she now realized that it had been a bad move. She should have made sure to keep the people who were convenient for her, even if it meant being met with disgust from those who were spared. If Kamuro had remained, Sakayanagi's weakness would not have been exposed; however, it was not only Sakayanagi who had been wounded. Yamamura was one of the last two people to choose from in the lottery, standing on one side of the scale that separated life and death.

"When I hesitated to draw my lot, Sakayanagi-san said that she would stop the lottery. She said that...if I didn't have the courage to draw a lot, it meant the same thing as abstaining..." explained Yamamura.

If someone refused to draw their lot for a long time, it certainly wasn't unreasonable to be presented that choice. However, Yamamura felt that it had been too quick a decision, without enough consideration.

"In other words, Sakayanagi cared about Kamuro and was going to cast you aside?" I asked.

Yamamura nodded quietly. That wasn't just an idle conjecture; it was Yamamura's conviction.

"In that moment, what I felt from Sakayanagi-san was that she strongly wished for me to be expelled," said Yamamura. "I know that it was entirely reasonable, there was nothing I could say about it. At least, if you compared me with Kamuro-san, the value of having me expelled was clear to see. I didn't want Sakayanagi-san to give me special treatment, and I didn't want to be greedy, like, 'please think of me as a friend.' But...I was shocked... I realized that my existence amounted to only that much, that she was willing to just throw me away in an instant... Even though she told me that I was valuable and used me..."

Yamamura, after spending a long time being on her own, was discovered by Sakayanagi, who highly valued her abilities. However, Yamamura ended up learning that the difference between herself and Kamuro too different for Yamamura to even compete with her. Even though Yamamura was prepared for the fact that Kamuro would ultimately be the one Sakayanagi chose, she had thought that she would at least hesitate. The self-deprecating Yamamura's small wish would have gone mercilessly unfulfilled.

"There might indeed have been a difference between you and Kamuro, from Sakayanagi's perspective. But, Yamamura, isn't the question of whether she didn't care about you a separate issue?" I asked.

"...I want to believe that, but..." she protested.

I could guess that she probably hadn't had any contact from Sakayanagi since that day, which meant that she must have been alone all this time, wondering to herself and asking the same questions over and over.

"I've been wanting to contact Sakayanagi-san the whole time during this camp. But, as anyone would expect, I couldn't muster up

the courage to talk to her," said Yamamura.

From the sounds of it, Yamamura had spotted Sakayanagi several times, but ultimately, he wasn't able to approach her. I'm sure that for Yamamura, who usually waited for other people to call out to her, being in a shared room must've been a high hurdle.

"There are many, many more people who hang around her all the time, more than you'd think. Tokitou-kun even got wrapped up in trouble, in the middle of it all... It seems like he's had a challenging time," added Yamamura.

Yamamura told me about how Tokitou had tried to reach out and offer his hand to a listless Sakayanagi. However, Tokitou had been seen, and was called out to the experiential classrooms, to be interrogated.

"As a result, Tokitou-kun, he... Ryuuen-kun and the others physically held him down and threatened him."

That was probably an appropriate decision from Ryuuen, as he was facing tension in the face of the final exam for the school year. If the opponent you would be fighting from hereafter had unexpectedly become weak, then you should either leave said opponent alone or make them even more vulnerable. I couldn't ignore the fact that Ryuuen was slightly too extreme, though. It sounded like he intended to put out strong feelers and keep a watchful eye to make sure he was fully prepared for the final exam.

Having a confirmed match-up against Sakayanagi in the final exam, it was natural that Ryuuen didn't want anyone to encourage her and help inspire her to make a comeback. He was desperately eager to take advantage of a situation where she'd been hobbled after an unexpected defeat. Which, if we were to turn that around, that would be proof that Ryuuen recognized that Sakayanagi had no weaknesses and wasn't an opponent he could drop his guard around.

Yamamura told me that the attempted purge of Tokitou looked like it was going to go smoothly and quickly, until Housen and Utomiya from his same group appeared, ready for a fight, and there was risk of an all-out brawl breaking out. As a result, a number of students heard the commotion and the group dispersed, causing the situation to fizzle out without incident.

“Anyway, I’m impressed. You saw the whole thing from start to finish and no one noticed you,” I remarked.

“That’s all I can do, though…” replied Yamamura.



You could say that Yamamura was perfectly well-suited to the role of using her weak presence to gather information, and Sakayanagi's skill in quickly putting this ability to use was, once again, excellent. The only reason Yamamura was able to witness this incident was because she was concerned about Sakayanagi herself. It was certainly true that Sakayanagi was in the middle of a downward spiral right now.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Huh…?" replied Yamamura.

"What do you want now as Sakayanagi's classmate, after she almost cast you aside?" I asked.

"I, well…" she stammered.

"I want you to tell me how you feel," I added.

"Well, I…I know asking for more than one is extravagant, but I have two wishes. The first one is…" said Yamamura, "I want to know what she thought of me back then and what she thinks of me now."

"And the other one is?" I asked.

"…I think that… I think that losing really doesn't…suit Sakayanagi-san, after all… I don't want to see her continue like this and struggle in the final exam… I want her to win," said Yamamura.

There was no personal self-interest in that whatsoever—that is, she had no desire for Sakayanagi to win just because Yamamura was also in Class A; Yamamura was genuinely concerned about one of her fellow students.

"I see… All right," I replied.

With one more push, Sakayanagi might need support. And very soon, at that.

"You could try telling her that. No one has the right to condemn your actions," I told her.

"But… But what if…she doesn't even want to listen to what I have to say…?" asked Yamamura.

"If that time comes then… Okay. You can just hang out between some vending machines somewhere and we'll talk about it," I replied.

When I told her that, she stared at the vending machine, looking a little embarrassed, and nodded.

8.1

IT WAS JUST BEFORE 1 a.m. on the fourth day of camp. It was long past time for lights out, but Nagumo was quietly walking alone in the hallway. He knew that he'd be chided if he was discovered, but there wasn't any definite penalty. Of course, that wouldn't be the case if he refused to go back to his room after being found. He had considered the risks and had already seen what would happen, thanks to other students' actions in the days leading up today.

More importantly, he had already confirmed when the teachers would finish making their rounds at the end of the day. Therefore, Nagumo truly wasn't worried about being found. The lights in the lobby were kept low, and only the irritating sounds of the compressors of the vending machines lined up in a row could be heard at this time of night. Nagumo didn't sense anyone's presence, but his instincts were working, and they were saying that someone was right in front of him.

"You came as promised, I see."

He heard a lovely voice come from deep within the cafeteria cloaked in darkness.

"Not once in my life have I ever refused a woman's call," said Nagumo, calling back to the darkness.

"Yuck, what a totally pompous line. To be perfectly honest, you're the kinda guy that I absolutely despise."

"Relax. I don't like women like you either," Nagumo chuckled back scornfully, entering the cafeteria with his hands shoved in his pockets.

"So, that means there wasn't any need for threats, then. That might've been an unnecessary move on my part."

Soon, just as Nagumo's eyes adjusted, the figure of a female student emerged from the darkness.

"Did you really want to be all alone with me that badly, Amasawa?" asked Nagumo.

“Well, it’s not every day that someone gets the chance to be all alone with the former student council president, right?” replied Amasawa.

“Just checking. But what would you have done if I hadn’t shown up?”

“Well, obviously, I would’ve beaten your precious Asahina-senpai to a bloody black-and-blue pulp, of course, Nagumo-senpai.”

Seeing Amasawa answer that way, with a smile on her face, many would think she was joking and smile back. And Nagumo did just that. The smile didn’t reach his eyes, however, and he was convinced that the first-year student before him really would’ve done what she had said.

“And you demonstrated your real abilities in the archery game against Ayanokouji to make your threats more effective, I suppose?” said Nagumo.

“Well, yeah. If you don’t show people that you’re a girl who can really get things done, then ignorant people would easily ignore threats coming from you, after all,” said Amasawa.

“Okay, let’s get down to business. So? What’s your reason for calling me here that’s so important you’d go as far as issuing threats?”

“There’s a problem that I can’t solve without you, Nagumo-senpai. That’s what this is about.”

“You had many chances to bring it up and talk about it, even during this camp,” he said, keeping his focus as he answered. He sensed that the person before him wasn’t just a mere girl. Her presence was faint, even though she was right here in front of him, and she had a strange feeling about her, similar to Ayanokouji. Additionally, she possessed unusual abilities, which he caught a glimpse of during the archery game. Those facts alone were more than enough to put him on alert.

“I know this is really sudden,” said Amasawa, “but I’m thinking of severely injuring you right now, Nagumo-senpai, without mercy.”

“Severely injuring me? Wow, that *is* sudden,” he replied.

Amasawa tried to enjoy making him feel shaken by saying something completely unexpected, but Nagumo just chuckled in

exasperation, as though he wasn't taking it seriously.

"What, does that sound too unrealistic? Or do you not believe that you could lose to a woman?"

"Who knows? If you're asking if it's both, maybe it's both."

"Are you gonna run away?"

Amasawa circled around behind him as she spoke, blocking his escape to prevent the showboating former student council president from escaping like a quick little bunny rabbit.

However, Nagumo wasn't fazed, and he conducted himself in a composed and stately manner.

"Can I at least ask you why?" asked Nagumo.

"Why? Hmm. Yeah. All I'm going to tell you is that I'm simply taking out my anger on you," said Amasawa.

"Taking out your anger on me?"

"Yes, taking out my anger on you. Now then, if we take too long, the teachers are gonna find us. Besides, you can always feel free to go ahead and report it to the school later if you're not embarrassed about a girl messing you up. So, may I get started now?"

"Let me check with you, just to be sure. Do you seriously think you can win against me?" asked Nagumo.

She just laughed. "Yeah, I was kind of waiting for that line. In that case, let's get this show on the road, shall we?"

"It's easy for you to say that, but there's no benefit for me. It'll be a problem if I turn the tables on a girl who comes after me just for some stress relief."

"I mean, it's pointless to resist, and fine if you just get beaten up without fighting back. That way, even though you'll lose your pride, but you won't get penalized by the school or anything. So, I'll go ahead and recommend that."

"Are you not scared of getting expelled?" asked Nagumo.

"Of course not," Amasawa replied. "If I'm expelled, that's it. I have nothing to lose."

"Then it's impossible to try and talk you out of it, huh?"

“Yep. I have absolutely no ‘value’ at all. I’m invincible.”

Nagumo slowly pulled his hands out of his pockets. If he had been clutching his phone to call for a rescue, Amasawa would’ve immediately jumped to her feet and put a stop to that.

“I didn’t bring my phone,” said Nagumo.

“Oh ho…” replied Amasawa.

Amasawa, slightly impressed, licked her lips.

“Were you on alert, thinking that I brought an audio recorder or something? Go ahead, don’t be worried. Feel free to tell me the reason why you’re taking out your anger on me,” said Nagumo.

“You worked with Ayanokouji-senpai to get Yagami Takuya expelled, didn’t you? This is payback,” said Amasawa.

Although Nagumo had been prepared for lots of different possibilities, her answer wasn’t any of those, and he couldn’t hide his surprise.

“Yagami? Wait, don’t tell me, was he your boyfriend or something?” asked Nagumo.

“It’s not like that,” said Amasawa. “It’s more like we had a sibling bond that transcended that kind of relationship.”

“If that’s the case, then aren’t you going after the wrong person? I wasn’t the one who initiated that.”

“I know that. I told you: This is simply me taking out my anger on you,” Amasawa repeated. “Unfortunately, I can’t beat Ayanokouji-senpai, no matter how hard I try. I thought about beating the shit out of Karuizawa-senpai or getting her expelled, but I am a little scared of trying that too.”

“Scared? You think that Ayanokouji will come after you? I don’t think he’s the type who would really care, no matter what happens to Karuizawa,” said Nagumo.

“Ayanokouji-senpai has his own objectives. I don’t want to get in the way of that.”

Getting Karuizawa expelled would interfere with Ayanokouji’s plans. Since Amasawa knew about Ayanokouji’s circumstances, she thought that was something she couldn’t do.

“It’d be like a perfectly fitting ending for a story for a person like you to fall into ruin at the end, Nagumo-senpai. Like a punchline of a joke,” said Amasawa.

“That’d suit me, eh?”

Normally, Nagumo would feel disapproval and anger if someone said something like that to him. But right now he simply felt emptiness welling up inside him. Thinking that it would be pointless to waste any more time, Amasawa stepped forward.

“Last year and the year before that, it was Horikita Manabu who was always causing a stir at school,” said Nagumo, making Amasawa stop in her tracks. “And this year, it’s Ayanokouji. I bet it’ll be the same next year when I’m gone. Sure, I was here at this school for three years. I was student council president too. Even though I get a lot of attention in my same grade, I really didn’t amount to much at all; you could hardly say I matter. There’s nothing more futile than that.”

That was why he got so worked up and kept trying so desperately hard to have a showdown.

“It was once I got close to graduating that I finally realized it. That it wasn’t Horikita-senpai or even Ayanokouji who was to blame. It was on me, I was the one who couldn’t reach that domain,” said Nagumo.

That was why Nagumo couldn’t get angry when Amasawa said that it would be fitting for him to fall into ruin. His name, Horikita’s name, and Ayanokouji’s name would’ve gone down as equals if only he was stronger. Nagumo realized that there wasn’t any need to try and prove himself against them in a contest or whatever else; he was running alongside the track, not on it.

“But…that’s not the essence of it, either,” he continued. “I’m sure I wouldn’t have been satisfied even in that situation anyway.” After all, if the three of them were equal, Nagumo would’ve wanted to become superior, to become number one. “That’s exactly why I’m not going to stop competing. Next year, I’ll go up against Horikita-senpai again. And eventually, I’ll have a real showdown with Ayanokouji and settle things.”

He was able to be honest about his thoughts here with Amasawa, because she was someone that had absolutely nothing

to do with him. Although he didn't say this aloud, Nagumo was thankful for this opportunity.

"Anyway, before you do what you're going to do, I have a gift for you," said Nagumo.

Amasawa's interest had been piqued by Nagumo laying everything bare, since that was new, which is why she stayed still and heard him out.

"A gift? I'm the type of person who would just toss it away without opening it if it's from a guy she has no interest in," said Amasawa.

"I see. In that case, I guess you might end up throwing it away without opening it. After all, it's a message from Ayanokouji," said Nagumo.

"...Ayanokouji-senpai...?"

When Amasawa heard that name, she couldn't help but freeze.

"If you're lying to save yourself, then you're going to end up with even more wounds," said Amasawa.

"Go ahead, believe what I say or don't," said Nagumo. "Ayanokouji's message is: 'You still have value. Don't throw it away for nothing,'"

The reason Amasawa approached Nagumo at Social Group was all for the sake of this moment. Ayanokouji had noticed something off about her on that first day; she had pretended to be unaware of the Social Group rules even though she had received all of the information from Tsukishiro beforehand; and there was the contradiction born from the lie she told so that Ayanokouji wouldn't realize her real reason for approaching Nagumo.

The moment that Amasawa heard his message, she completely lost the will to fight.

"Is this just a simple coincidence? With this message, it's almost as though he foresaw that you'd do some reckless and self-destructive, and that you'd declare that you 'have no value,'" said Nagumo.

Amasawa was after Nagumo, and she intended to do something fiendish, as though she had nothing to lose. The things that Ayanokouji told Nagumo right before they had parted ways

actually happened, right before Nagumo's eyes. *I really don't like that son of a bitch*, Nagumo cursed him silently. Even so, Nagumo was feeling somewhat satisfied, since it would have been a waste to have a serious fight with Ayanokouji now, before hitting his stride.

"I'm sleepy, so I'm going to head back now. Make sure you do the same, before you catch a cold," Nagumo said to Amasawa, who was standing perfectly still, and then he left the cafeteria.

Chapter 9:
Courage to Step Forward

SUNDAY, the fourth and final day of camp, when we would be saying goodbye. We were scheduled to leave the lodgings we'd grown accustomed to at ten o'clock. The aforementioned match with Amasawa had been set for seven, before breakfast. I woke up at six, got out of bed, and headed to the lobby, which was still dimly lit. With a little time to spare before Horikita and Ibuki would emerge from their shared rooms, I considered the risks of waking up the still-sleeping students as I looked at my phone to kill time. The lobby was still somewhat chilly, which meant that the indoor heating must have just recently been turned on.

"It sounds like it ended up being nothing serious," I muttered to myself, alone in the quiet hallway as I looked through my messages.

The message that I had received from Nagumo in the middle of the night was a simple one: *"I'm not going to say thank you."* I was sure that if Amasawa had committed some fiendish act, the camp would've erupted into a terrible uproar afterward, so it was safe to assume that didn't happen.

Then, as I stared out the window for a while and watched the sun rise on the other side of the glass, I heard a person's footsteps.

"You're up quite early this morning, aren't you?"

It was none other than Tsubaki, from my group, who approached me and called out in a sleepy voice. If this was just simple coincidence, then chances were remarkably high that—

"I've heard from Hashimoto-senpai that you've been getting up early for the past two days or so, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Tsubaki.

Since going out in the morning wasn't especially something to hide, her knowing about it didn't seem like something to worry about. Even if Tsubaki had become aware of the special training I was giving Horikita and Ibuki, the probability of that information making its way to Amasawa wasn't exceedingly high.

"Were you looking for me?" I asked.

“Well, I wouldn’t say I was, like, actively looking. I guess I just thought I’d see whether you were here.” Tsubaki was the sort of person who didn’t really act any differently no matter who she was dealing with, but the way she was looking at me was a little curious. “But if you were here, then that would change things a little.”

“I don’t think there’s really any reason for you to come and see me anymore though,” I replied.

“Since that one special exam given to just us first-years has been canceled, yeah.”

That was a special exam where the student who managed to get me expelled would receive 20,000,000 Private Points. It was a phantom exam that only very, very few knew about, partly because Tsukishiro was involved.

“I wasn’t especially interested in the prize money in the first place. However, I’m lamenting the fact that I no longer have the right to get you expelled with impunity, Ayanokouji-senpai,” said Tsubaki.

“That’s a disturbing thing to say. Sorry, but I don’t recall doing anything that might cause you to resent me, Tsubaki,” I replied.

Once again, I tried thinking back on my interactions in my life at school, and nothing came to mind, as I expected.

“That sort of thing can often happen without the person in question realizing it, though. Don’t you think that someone could cause someone to resent them without knowing it?” asked Tsubaki.

It wasn’t like I didn’t understand what Tsubaki was trying to say. It was true that there are two kinds of resented people: those who did things that they knew they’d be resented for, and those who didn’t realize that they’d be resented.

“I can’t tell if you’re joking or serious,” I told her.

“Someone might come by, so how about we go for a little walk?” asked Tsubaki.

“It’s still dark outside though,” I pointed out.

It was getting a little lighter outside, but even so, visibility was poor, and it was quite cold.

“If that’s not inconvenient for you, I don’t mind,” said Tsubaki.

“It’s fine, I guess,” I replied.

I was planning to go outside for Horikita and Ibuki’s last training session anyway. So, Tsubaki and I left the lobby and walked out into the cold.

“I thought there would be a lot of snow deep in the mountains of Tochigi, but surprisingly there isn’t that much,” said Tsubaki.

“The temperatures in February can vary wildly. The past few days have been warm, haven’t they?” I replied.

While there was in fact snow on the ground, now there were only a few patches of it on the side roads. The water droplets on the cars and such that likely belonged to the camp’s staff had weakly frozen over, forming a thin, icy film.

“Do you like snow, senpai?” asked Tsubaki.

“I don’t particularly like or dislike it. I just think I enjoy it as scenery, when it falls. Do you like that kind of thing, Tsubaki?” I asked.

“...I think I like it. At least more than you do, senpai.”

Tsubaki crouched down on the side of the road, picked up a bit of remaining snow with her fingertips, and stood up. Then she put the snow in the palm of her hand and spread out her hand before my eyes, showing it to me.

“Could you take a look?” she asked.

When she said that, I stared at the snow in her palm. Since there was only a small amount, it quickly melted away due to her body heat.

“This school is cut off from the outside world. Who is the very first person you want to see if you graduate without incident next year, senpai?” asked Tsubaki.

“That’s a strange question to ask,” I replied.

“Perhaps.”

For me, the only people in the outside world who were more than mere acquaintances were my father and the people involved with him. I had no one-sided feelings of wanting to meet with any of them.

“Probably just family, I guess,” I answered, having decided on a somewhat safe answer that was unlikely to surprise anyone if they heard it.

“Family… Anyone else?” asked Tsubaki.

“Not particularly, no. I don’t have any close friends, so that’s about it,” I replied.

“I see… Well then, please allow me to ask you one more strange question.” Without waiting for my answer, Tsubaki continued asking me questions that didn’t seem to make any sense. “Let’s say, hypothetically, you had an older brother, Ayanokouji-senpai, but you didn’t know about him because your parents hid his existence from you for years. If you were suddenly told one day that he was your real family, would you be able to like him, as family? We’re assuming, of course, that he would be a genuine blood relative in this scenario.”

“That’s a difficult question,” I remarked.

As far as I knew, I didn’t have any siblings. But, since the hypothetical was operating on the idea that one had been hidden from me, that meant it would actually be possible. If that man did have a son other than me…what would I think when I met him, face to face? While I felt intrigued by the initial thought, I wasn’t feeling any astounding emotions rising within me.

“Maybe I wouldn’t really think anything of it. Of course, I think it would vary greatly depending on his personality and the situation, though,” I replied.

If we had been raised completely separately, it would probably be difficult to suddenly accept and treat each other as family.

“I suppose so. I think that I would probably have similar feelings, Ayanokouji-senpai,” said Tsubaki. “But if I knew that the other person had special circumstances and a sad past, I would also want to know them and get close to them. I would I’d want to know more about my older sister from whom I was separated.”

Even though Tsubaki had said “older brother” when she had asked me, she used “older sister” as a comparison in her response. While it could simply be a comparison using the same sex, it

sounded like her words came from experience, with strong emotions behind them.

"I'm lost. Ayanokouji-senpai, from this school—"

Just as she was saying this, Tsubaki's gaze turned in the building behind us. Because the appointed time was near, Horikita and Ibuki had appeared. Kushida was there too, for some reason.

"We've been interrupted... Another time," said Tsubaki.

Perhaps she had no intention of letting other students hear this conversation, because Tsubaki walked back to the building, looking like she was cold. As she passed Horikita and the others, she gave them a slight bow, but she didn't open her mouth.

"That was Tsubaki-san just now, wasn't it? What were you talking about at this hour?" asked Horikita.

"We just so happened to have woken up early. Today's the last day of camp, so we were just chatting, more or less. More importantly, why is Kushida here?" I asked.

"Ibuki-san had thoughtlessly let it slip that we are having a revenge match against Amasawa. Thoughtlessly," she reiterated, emphasizing just how foolish Ibuki had been.

"It's not my fault! It's Kushida's fault! She cleverly manipulated me into talking!" shouted Ibuki.

"We call that sort of thing 'listening,'" replied Kushida.

"Shut up! Anyway, it's no big deal if the audience grows by one or two people," huffed Ibuki.

"Well, there you have it," said Kushida, "I heard that they were going to be fighting with Amasawa-san, so my curiosity was piqued."

"If the two of them have agreed to you being here, then it's not my place to say anything. But what side are you rooting for?" I asked, since that was where my interest lay, personally.

"As far as I'm concerned, I would find it appealing either way, no matter which side loses," said Kushida.

Come to think of it, there was that incident with Amasawa during the cultural festival. That meant that, no matter which way the fight turned out, Kushida would be a satisfied spectator.

Kushida turned to look in the direction Tsubaki went, though she was no longer in view.

“Your conversation with Tsubaki-san earlier, could that have been something romantic in nature, perhaps? I’ve been thinking about this for a while, but you’re surprisingly popular, Ayanokouji-kun,” said Kushida.

“That so?” I replied.

I didn’t think that was Tsubaki’s intent at all, but it sounded like Kushida had a hunch. Horikita then opened her mouth to speak, following suit with what Kushida said.

“But you are somewhat aware of that fact yourself, right? You’re dating Karuizawa-san, too,” said Horikita, addressing me.

“Let me turn that around and ask you, then: Do you have confidence in your popularity?” I asked.

“Why are you asking me? I’m not popular,” said Horikita.

“At the very least, you got Sudou to like you,” I replied.

“Wait, what? Horikita did?” Tsubaki cackled, teasing her schoolmate. “You and that idiot make a good pair!”

“Stop making fun of Sudou-kun. He’s several times smarter than you are right now,” answered Horikita sharply.

“But I can beat him with my kicks!” shouted Ibuki.

I didn’t really understand how fighting was as a standard of comparison between them, but if Sudou were serious, he would probably be stronger than her.

“Well, anyway…” Ibuki trailed off, looked me up and down, and then spat out her next words with powerful intensity. “I have absolutely nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo clue how you could be popular!” said Ibuki.

And I’ve never seen anyone who could stretch out the word “no” so much before in my life.

“You agree with me, right, Kushida?” asked Ibuki.

“Huh?” blinked Kushida.

“Don’t ‘Huh’ me! I asked you, you agree with me, right? That you don’t think there’s anything good about Ayanokouji,” said Ibuki.

“...Well, that’s not quite true, though. I mean, if you look around you, you can see that there really aren’t any good, decent men around, right? Compared to that kind of riffraff, you can see that he is much better,” said Kushida.

That sounded like a compliment. Wait, no, it probably wasn’t.

“From my point of view, he’s the same as the rest of ’em...!” snapped Ibuki.

“Okay then, if it was between Ryuuen-kun and Ayanokouji-kun, who would you go out with?” asked Kushida.

Kushida’s question rendered Ibuki silent for a while. Then, a puzzled look appeared on her face. Finally, she reached her conclusion and broke her silence.

“That’s like choosing between curry-flavored shit and shit-flavored curry. I wouldn’t pick either,” shouted Ibuki.

Not wanting to get dragged into this, Horikita and Kushida quickly put some distance between themselves and Ibuki, almost like they were trying to escape to a safe haven. No one wanted to hear someone say things like that in such a loud voice. I’m sure that Ibuki would chase after me if I ran away though, so I figured I had no other choice but to be a human sacrifice.

“What kind of comparison is that?” I asked, since I might as well prod her about that part for the time being.

“Whatever. I just call it like I see it,” replied Ibuki.

While to some extent I didn’t mind being compared to anything, this particular simile was a bit hurtful. And I had to wonder which of those I was being categorized under, and which one I wasn’t. Actually, no, I didn’t like it either way. However... I decided to give the matter some thought. If I had to eat one or the other, I would probably choose the latter.

No matter how or how much the taste would be corrected, ingesting a large amount of E. coli would be extremely dangerous. On the other hand, while the latter might cause some damage to your senses of taste and smell, the ingredients were fundamentally still curry, which meant that the negative effects on the human body would be greatly limited. However, it was possible that if the

brain determined that it was dangerous due to the sensory input, it could cause unexpected health issues, so…

“Hey, Ayanokouji? You’re spacing out,” sapped Ibuki.

“It’s nothing…” I replied.

Having thought about it too deeply and now feeling a little out of sorts, I decided to just forget about it.

9.1

TODAY’S TRAINING was just a warm-up exercise, since their revenge match was scheduled for right after this.

“I’ve done all I can do. Now all that’s left is to see how well you fare in a real fight,” I said to the two of them after they had caught their breath.

“Yes, thank you. I’m sure that our chances have improved thanks to you,” said Horikita.

Horikita bowed politely, and then urged Ibuki to say “thank you” as well. Ibuki had no intention of complying though, because she ignored Horikita, turned the other way, and snorted out a “Hmph!”

“I’m not gonna say thank you. I think my way of showing my gratitude will be by making you eat my kicks someday,” said Ibuki.

If that’s the kind of thanks she gave, I hoped I would never receive them.

“For heaven’s sake…” huffed Horikita.

“All right then, I’m going to head on back. Good luck with the rest,” I told them.

“Huh? Aren’t you going to watch the fight, Ayanokouji-kun? I thought for certain that we’d watch it together,” said Kushida.

Apparently, Kushida, who had been watching from a distance, had been expecting me to stick around the whole time.

“If Amasawa finds out that I’m involved in this, it’ll be nothing but bad news for Horikita and Ibuki,” I replied.

If they carelessly made Amasawa wary, then a surprise attack wouldn’t work on her anymore. It would be better for me not to be

present, in order to increase their chances of winning, even if it was only by 1 percent.

“I see. In that case, I’ll make sure to watch carefully. I even brought my phone,” said Kushida.

I was sure that Kushida would think of it as an excellent photo opportunity if there were any embarrassing or unseemly moments for anyone involved. Since Kushida had declared she would be a witness, I decided to entrust that role to her. Besides, I had something else I needed to do this morning. It was a little before seven a.m. and there were no students using the park at this time of day, of course. That was why the student I had called to meet me here was waiting for my arrival, sitting on the bench.

“It’s cold. You didn’t need to come earlier than the appointed time,” I remarked.

“Please do not worry about it. I haven’t had many opportunities like this, where you would be the one summoning me, Ayanokouji-kun. It was fun even spending time waiting for you.”

“May I sit next to you?” I asked.

“I left a spot open for you for that exact purpose,” replied Sakayanagi with a smile, seeming no different than usual as she welcomed me.

“Let me get right to the point. I have Yamamura waiting for you in the dog park area,” I told her.

“Huh? The dog park? Yamamura-san? What is the meaning of this?” asked Sakayanagi.

“You hadn’t imagined that I might bring up Yamamura’s name?” I asked.

“You two are in the same group in Social Group, yes? Has her conduct caused some kind of problem?” asked Sakayanagi.

“So, you did know. That Yamamura and I are in the same group, that is,” I replied.

“It’s hardly surprising that I would know,” said Sakayanagi. “Naturally, I had already discovered which groups that students from my class were assigned to when we were on the bus. However, in this instance, I have been committed to sitting back and watching on the sidelines, so I have not participated in Social Group.”

Of course Sakayanagi knew where all her classmates were assigned, what groups they were in—I knew that. For that reason, once I told Sakayanagi what I had to say, there was no way she would be able to talk her way out of it.

“Do you remember what you said to me when we talked in the lobby on the second day of camp? You said, ‘You are in the group together with Hashimoto-kun and Morishita-san if I remember correctly, Ayanokouji-kun. How is Hashimoto-kun doing?’ That was it. You prided yourself on the fact that you saw where all the students from Class A were assigned, that you hadn’t missed a single one of them. And yet, you didn’t mention Yamamura’s name?” I asked.

That proved that Sakayanagi was unconsciously avoiding the topic of Yamamura.

“That’s…” she began. No matter what excuses she made, she couldn’t twist away from the conclusion that she had been avoiding it. “…Yes, I suppose you’re right. I admit that I did not mention Yamamura-san’s name at the time. However, that is no business of yours, isn’t it, Ayanokouji-kun?” said Sakayanagi.

“Yes, that’s certainly true. So I guess you could say what I’m doing right now is sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong,” I replied. However, I continued. Sakayanagi knew everything, so I wasn’t going to follow things up in a roundabout way. “You lost Kamuro. And at the same time, she entrusted you with her feelings. But that doesn’t mean that everything has been proceeding like normal in all areas. You haven’t even finished choosing who to put by your side, have you?” I asked.

A white cloud of breath escaped from Sakayanagi’s lips.

“Yes, it is true that has not yet been decided. Surely, you’re not telling me to assign Yamamura-san to that role, are you?” asked Sakayanagi.

“No, that’s not my intention. There are things that people are suited for and things they are not, after all.” It certainly wasn’t easy to envision Yamamura carrying herself around proudly, backing up Sakayanagi. “The Survival and Elimination Special Exam… Some students are still trapped in that place.”

“…And you’re saying that applies to me and Yamamura-san?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Yes. Yamamura differs from you significantly in terms of what position you two are in, but you’re both standing still and continue to suffer,” I replied.

Neither of them had been able to move on from the Survival and Elimination Special Exam. If Sakayanagi was the light of Class A, then Yamamura was the shadow. You could even say that they were impossible to separate, that they were tied together on an atomic level.

“If this is going to continue weighing on your mind, then you should bring the matter to a resolution,” I added.

“…You say such peculiar things, Ayanokouji-kun,” said Sakayanagi.

“Peculiar?” I repeated.

“I had thought you were only going to be watching from the sidelines from this point onward. Isn’t this excessive charity on your part?”

“Yeah, probably. I was thinking not too long ago that I should just sit on the sidelines from here on out.”

Sakayanagi needed no further assistance. She said that it would be fine to just wait for her to stand up on her own. However, the situation began to change significantly before the special exam, when Hashimoto made his betrayal. That was precisely why I was doing what I thought I needed to be doing right now.

“I’m not really telling you to do anything in particular regarding Yamamura; that’s not my wish at all. You are free to shorten the distance between you two, widen it, or just bid her farewell entirely. However, if you’re going to discuss it, now is the only time,” I said.

Neither side would gain anything by delaying the issue.

“Don’t you think the wisest choice would be to leave everything behind at this camp before returning to school?” I asked.

Sakayanagi pouted. “…But…”

Her resistance was frustrating. Of course, I certainly wasn't one to talk—we were equally bad at friendly relationships. And as she had no experience, she had no idea what to do.

"Like I said, I have Yamamura waiting at the dog park," I reminded her. "She's been waiting for you out in the cold for more than twenty minutes now."

"If that's the case, that makes both of us rather mean-spirited, Ayanokouji-kun. Our appointed meeting time was seven a.m. It has not yet even been ten minutes since we started talking. Does that mean that you have been making her wait since even before then?"

Yamamura would be having a tough time, being made to wait pointlessly. As for Sakayanagi, she would feel guilty for making Yamamura wait.

"That was also a part of my strategy," I replied.

This was Sakayanagi we were talking about, after all. She was quick to notice these sorts of things.

"I suppose I have no choice, then. I cannot very well let her catch a cold on my account. I will go say hello, at least," said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi, who could not admit her own weakness straight away, instead gave an appropriate excuse and stood up. That was fine for now. If she talked with Yamamura one-on-one, I was sure that they'd be able to have a real conversation.

"It's a bit of a distance, but I'm sure it'll be only about five-minute walk even for you, Sakayanagi. Head on over," I said as I stood up.

However...Sakayanagi wasn't taking the first step.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She ignored my question, and the silence continued for a few moments. It seemed like she was trying to walk, despite not moving forward whatsoever.

"...My legs...they..." stammered Sakayanagi.

Her legs? Could it be that they hurt? That's what I thought for a moment, but then...

“My legs…won’t move… Why is that, I wonder,” said Sakayanagi.

It turned out that the problem wasn’t physical, but mental. Even though she was acting stout-hearted in her words as usual, her body told a different story. It seemed like that change I had noticed due to Kamuro was manifesting itself here.

“I suppose you can’t let anyone else see you like this,” I remarked.

“…Yes, you’re right…” said Sakayanagi.

I grabbed hold of Sakayanagi’s left hand, helping her as she was puzzled and unable to walk. The tips of her fingers had gone cold.

“In that case, I’ll be your legs, just for right now. Then you should be able to walk, no problem,” I told her.

“…My apologies,” said Sakayanagi.

“It’s all right. This came from my own selfish meddling,” I replied.

Then, we slowly walked along, without exchanging a word.



Eventually, the dog park came into view. In the distance, Yamamura could be seen standing in the shade of a large tree, and although Sakayanagi was confused, she raised her hand to make her presence known. I gave Sakayanagi's shoulders a gentle push, and then she started walking on her own two feet, using her cane for support instead of me. From here on out, sticking around would just be intruding. The only way for Sakayanagi and Yamamura to each find solutions would be for them to talk together. With high hopes for both of them, I turned around and left them to it.

And thus, the four-day, three-night Social Group camp came to an end.

Chapter 10:
Who Is the Challenger?

SOCIAL GROUP CAME ENDED, and despite the changes it brought about in the relationships between students, our regular school lives resumed as usual.

It was my habit to meet up with Kei in the mornings, either in my room or in the lobby, and then we would go to class together, as was the established custom, but not today. About twenty minutes earlier than usual, I left my room alone, took the elevator down to the lobby, and then headed outside.

It was awfully chilly today, with fierce winds blowing. Soon it would be the end of February, and next month was probably going to be busier than I'd ever been. First, I needed to deal with the matter of Karuizawa Kei. That wouldn't require anything special. All I needed to do was proceed with my originally planned process, so long as it was quiet.

Next was the matter of Ichinose Honami, the class leader who couldn't pull ahead among the four classes, and who saw that there would be tough times ahead if she tried to fight with the other three classes. Her reading of the situation was correct, and now, as the end of our second year was approaching, she was currently in a slump, languishing in Class D. However...unlike the issue of Kei, that trajectory might require correction.

It would probably be best to draw a conclusion after the results of the year-end final exams came out. No matter what kind of growth Ichinose demonstrated, there wouldn't be any change to the overall outline. I had thought it would be fine to proceed with my plans as I had originally envisioned them; however...

It was just one thing, but a problem that I hadn't expected arose, which forced me to make some changes to my plans. While this would inevitably result in some harmful effects, change wasn't always a terrible thing. Just as soon as I started walking along the route to class, I immediately came to a stop.

"You're early," I remarked.

At the end of my line of sight, I saw someone waiting. I didn't realize that she was already waiting, since it was still a little while before we were scheduled to meet. She didn't hear me, and occasionally exhaled white clouds, but then she noticed my gaze.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Morning. Sorry for asking you to come out so early in the morning."

"It's all right. So, what did you want to talk to me about? Is it something that would be difficult to say over the phone?"

As classmates, we had the kind of relationship where we knew each other's contact information just as a matter of course. Normally, we could contact each other just with a single call or text on our phones. The fact that I didn't do so raised some questions.

"Yeah, maybe, in a sense," I replied.

Horikita stood next to me and eventually, we started to walk in step with each other.

"In a sense? That sounds loaded. What a frightening way of expressing it," said Horikita.

"It's nothing so alarming," I replied.

"Really?" asked Horikita.

Horikita looked at me with suspicion in her eyes, but she wasn't as prickly and hostile as when we first met. Her eyes also had a softness to them, the sort that you could have no qualms about describing as growing from a natural friendship.

"When I talk with you, Horikita, we often talk about things related to special exams and the class. But sometimes, for just a brief moment, I want to talk to you about subjects unrelated to those things," I told her.

"Hm? Sorry, I don't really understand what you're getting at. What do you mean?" asked Horikita.

In my head, I had first imagined this all being more informal, but I decided that phrasing could end up making the other person feel awkward, which is why I put it the way I did. Upon reflection, I regret to say that my words came out sounding clumsier than I had planned for.

“I wanted to have a meaningless conversation with you, Horikita, free from self-interest. If I put it that way, would you understand?” I asked.

“…I see?” replied Horikita.

She gestured like she was giving it some thought, but it sounded like she was lost.

“Anyway Horikita, we’ve become classmates, but we won’t have opportunities to talk like this forever,” I told her.

“Forever? That’s kind of hyperbolic. While that’s technically true, we still have more than a year until graduation, right? You don’t need to call me like this; I’m fine chatting with you anytime,” said Horikita.

“But if I were to get expelled in the final exam, then I wouldn’t be able to do that anymore, would I?” I replied.

“That’s quite a leap. There’s no way you would be expelled. Or that’s what I *would* say, but seeing as how easy it is for you to get a common-sense question wrong, I suppose maybe it is surprisingly possible…” said Horikita.

Horikita chuckled a little after giving such a serious answer, as though she found herself amusing.

“Wait, don’t tell me. Are you feeling anxious? That you might get expelled from school? Is that why you wanted to talk to me so early in the morning…?”

“I *am* a little traumatized from the last special exam.”

“In that case, why don’t you try and study some common-sense questions? You’re good at studying,” said Horikita, quipping at me as if to say, “*Come on, you know what you’re bad at, right?*”

“Then I ask you, Horikita: Can you remember terminology from games and anime as well as you can study?” I asked.

“Huh? …I’m not so sure about that. Before, when Onizuka-kun was rather aggressively trying to sell me on some game thing, he said ‘DP’…something or other. And I think ‘DEF’ too. And then ‘cooldown’ or something like that. But my brain just refused to remember those words and their meanings…”

“In my case, it feels kind of like that. I just can’t seem to make myself willingly want to learn it,” I explained.

Basically, I was trying to say that while I had a voracious appetite for learning, even I could be fussy or particular about the subjects.

“Don’t worry. Even if we’re not trying to cast you in a favorable light, from our class’s point of view, you are an absolutely indispensable presence. If you get hit with those common-sense problems you’re so bad at, I will definitely support you. So, in other words, there is no way you will be expelled,” Horikita reassured me in her clear and definitive way.

“In that case, I’m relieved,” I replied.

Horikita had seriously engaged with me in conversation about that topic, but then she gave my shoulder a left-handed chop. *Thwap!*

“Are you seriously worried about being expelled? Because you don’t look it. What did you really want to talk about here?” said Horikita.

“Actually, I’m not worried about myself, but more about the possibility of you being expelled, Horikita,” I replied.

“That does sound more realistic, I suppose,” she huffed.

Horikita made a face like she was offended and angry, but didn’t seem serious about it, and quickly went back to normal. Compared to when we first started school here, the variation of Horikita’s human emotions, like joy, anger, sadness, and pleasure, had grown greatly.

“The last special exam ended with only Kamuro’s expulsion. But next time, it might amount to more than that,” I told her.

“...So, we’re looking at a new expulsion happening,” said Horikita.

“Yeah. At least one person from our grade level, at a minimum. Depending on the content and how it unfolds, it’s possible that several may disappear.”

“...That many?”

“It would be better to think of it that way. The school told us before, remember? They told us that there weren’t students getting expelled in our grade level and our school careers have been progressing with low dropout rates,” I answered.

“So, they’re going to force us to take an exam that will increase the number of students who get expelled? That’s… Well, that’s a little tyrannical. There haven’t been that many failures in our grade level. Normally, that should be a good thing,” said Horikita.

That was true, if you looked at it in a positive light. However, sometimes, the act of screening became a high-handed necessity.

“I suppose it depends on how it looks to the outside world. For one, the government is involved in this school’s operation. Supposing if their set goal is that ten students are tossed out per year, then that would mean that our year hasn’t met that quota. If they simply interpreted that to mean that we’re an excellent grade, that would be fine, sure, but whether the people in charge are aware of or care about those details is unknown,” I replied.

“You’re saying that the school is going to make the curriculum stricter to align with policy decided by the government?” asked Horikita.

“Actually, they were forced to change zero to one last year because no one had been expelled. I wouldn’t be surprised even if multiple students were to be expelled as a result of the year-end final exam,” I replied.

That was the advice I had gotten from a third-year student over winter vacation. I had to wonder if that would apply to more than the Survival and Elimination Special Exam. However, the truth was that the third-year students shouldn’t have been told anything about the future of the second-year students.

“Don’t you think this is just…overthinking things?” asked Horikita.

“It’s just speculation, of course. I just feel that way based on my perspective, from what I can see at the moment. But I can’t show any concrete evidence,” I told her.

“In that case… All right, then. I’d like for you to work hard,” said Horikita, asking for my cooperation half seriously and half jokingly.

However, my mind had already been made up.

“If there is a situation at the end of the school year where I can lend a hand,” I told her, “I will do everything I can to help.”

“That’s another answer that is very unlike you,” said Horikita, “I feel like you’ve been awfully cooperative lately. A little too cooperative. Like with the recent matter of training. You didn’t even make a sour face when we talked about the matter of Amasawa-san.”

“There have been lots of situations before now where I’ve left everything to someone else,” I replied, “I need to lend a hand, at least a little.”

“An admirable endeavor. But…as I thought, this isn’t like you. It’s out of character for you to be this cooperative,” said Horikita.

“Who can say? Maybe it’s some kind of trap,” I replied.

“I would rather you not, if possible,” huffed Horikita.

At this point, Horikita and I looked each other in the eye. Perhaps the same thought had gone through our minds at the same time.

“Even though you invited me to chat with you about nothing, we ended up talking about exams anyway,” Horikita chuckled.

“Guess so. That kind of defeats the purpose of calling you out here. Okay. Exam talk is over.”

With that, I had brought an end to that topic.

“By the way,” I remarked, “I heard the results from Kushida. It sounds like you put up a good fight, but you lost against Amasawa.”

“She really is strong after all, that girl. Even though I cast aside my pride and fought her two on one, in the end, we still couldn’t beat her.”

However, Horikita and Ibuki had landed some hits on Amasawa, from what I heard, and as a result, Amasawa had acknowledged the two of them for it.

“I’m sure you’ll put up an even better fight next time,” I told her.

“Two-on-one?” asked Horikita.

“You don’t like that?” I asked.

“No. Besides, Ibuki-san said that she was never going to team up with me ever again.”

“Don’t worry. She’s rather forgetful.”

“Come on, that’s an overstatement,” replied Horikita, chuckling. “Speaking of, as soon as we started fighting, Amasawa-san seemed to notice your influence. But she seemed rather happy about it. What’s your relationship with her?” asked Horikita.

“She’s an ex-girlfriend,” I replied.

“Are you being serious right now? Or are you joking?” asked Horikita.

“Sorry, that was a joke,” I answered.

“If that’s true, that’s not funny at all,” Horikita replied harshly. “I would like to hear the truth come out of your mouth sometime, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. But don’t—”

“Expect anything from you. Yes, I know,” said Horikita.

Horikita’s eyes creased happily as she showed me a brief smile, and then her face changed again. I guessed that I was also learning a lot of things from Horikita, although this relationship between us would soon be over. In the days to come, Horikita might go through some of the most painful experiences she has ever had. But there was no need to continue to be anxious. In the future, she would be guided by both her own personal growth and the support of her fellow classmates.

10.1

NOW, WE ROLL BACK the clock a bit to before Horikita and I walked to school, and even back before Social Group. To a time shortly before we left for camp, when Hashimoto came to my room, looking for help. Why did Hashimoto commit a seemingly foolhardy act of betrayal? Why did he take on that risk, and why at that point in time? The traitor himself divulged many of those particular details to me.

“...Before I continue, there’s something I really want to confirm with you, Ayanokouji,” said Hashimoto.

Hashimoto must've had extraordinary determination to bring this up with me. The thing he wanted to confirm was just how much information I had at the moment—a crucial factor in his mind.

"Ryuuen invited me to betray my class long before that special exam. Not on the level of a temporary partnership or anything like that, but on the premise of transferring classes," said Hashimoto.

Of course, there wasn't any benefit for Hashimoto in transferring to Ryuuen's class, as he was enrolled in Class A. Putting aside cases like with Katsuragi, who had lost his place, if Hashimoto was saying 'long before,' then he was talking about a time when Class A had established an even more stable position than they were in right now.

"Of course, I didn't take his offer seriously at first. But soon afterward, Ryuuen told me that I would definitely regret it at the end of the school year if I didn't transfer classes," said Hashimoto.

"Regret it? Because Ryuuen himself is convinced that he'll win?" I asked.

"By the sound of it, not even you know about it, huh. By 'it,' I mean the particulars of the bet that Ryuuen and Sakayanagi agreed upon."

"A bet, huh. I don't know if this is the same thing, but I did hear a little bit about some brief exchange they had during the previous Uninhabited Island Special Exam. Unfortunately, I don't have a grasp on the exact details of that."

At my response, Hashimoto rubbed his fingers together and made a sound, as if that was precisely what he had wanted to hear.

"That's great. Then it made sense for me to come here after all," he said.

The corners of Hashimoto's mouth curved up into a small smile after receiving my confirmation on the gist of the story. Then, Hashimoto laid out the details of the bet that had been made between the two parties.

"When I first heard it, I thought it was a joke, but apparently they were serious." concluded Hashimoto.

"I see. So it was at that time that the impetus for your betrayal in the Survival and Elimination Special Exam arose, then," I replied.

It was at this stage that it became clear to me that Hashimoto did not simply act on a whim.

“I mean, it ain’t unreasonable to have some doubts about the bet itself though, right? No matter how you look at it, there are more inconveniences for Sakayanagi,” he said.

“Yeah. But knowing Sakayanagi, she wouldn’t turn down the bet because of those inconveniences,” I answered.

Sakayanagi was the type of person who believed she would be victorious in the end, just as much as Ryuuen.



“So, which do you think? Do you think Sakayanagi compromised? Or were there certain conditions attached?” asked Hashimoto as he leaned forward, unable to contain his overflowing emotions.

“Both are conceivable, but the particulars of the bet will eventually come to light. With that in mind, it would have to be the latter. I guess they must have loaded Ryuuen’s side with Private Points,” I replied.

“Good. This conversation will go quick, then. Yes, that’s it. Because, in that case, they could make as many adjustments as they want.”

“Who knows about this bet besides you and the parties involved, Hashimoto?”

“If Ryuuen isn’t lying, then no one else. You would be the fourth person. Well, I’m guessing that neither one of them would like to see the bet disappear due to it being carelessly leaked.”

That supposition on Hashimoto’s part was probably correct. It would be preferable to go public only after everything has been finalized. The only leak was to Hashimoto, so that Ryuuen could set a trap, and doing so must have been a considerable risk. If that was around the time when the Uninhabited Island Special Exam was over, then that would mean over half a year had already passed since then.

“Man, it was a long time… Until this day came,” sighed Hashimoto.

That meant that Hashimoto had been worrying about this all alone, without telling the secret to anyone.

“Will Sakayanagi win or will Ryuuen win? To be honest, I had no way to judge… Well, no, I was thinking that Sakayanagi would probably win, just by a little.” The way Hashimoto quickly amended his statement was like he was trying to correct a lie. “But even so, it was like, fifty-five to forty-five or somethin’ like that. Nothin’ seriously decisive, y’know?”

I agreed on that point. It would have to be nine to one, or at least seven to three, to know decisively how it would turn out, otherwise there was no telling how a match would turn out.

“That’s why I’ve been lookin’ for a decisive ‘it factor’ for a long time. And then, I decided to just make one, and…”

Hashimoto slowly turned his gaze toward me.

“You mean me?” I asked.

“Ayanokouji, if you were to follow Sakayanagi, I’d be prepared to die together with my current class without any hesitation. That’s why I advised Sakayanagi to do it… I told her to draw you over to her side and make you an ally,” said Hashimoto.

And Sakayanagi refused. So, he was saying…that was why he betrayed her? It made sense, but the core of it still remained unclear. I knew that the outcome of the confrontation between Sakayanagi and Ryuuen could not be predicted. I also knew that he thought that Sakayanagi could win if I joined her side. However, none of that changed the fact that his actions were far too reckless.

“I’m going to make sure Ryuuen wins. Whatever the setup of the special exam at the end of the year, I’m gonna thoroughly devote myself to assisting, ’cause if I miss this opportunity, then in all likelihood it’s gonna be me who disappears,” said Hashimoto.

Of course, Sakayanagi was going to be as cautious as possible with Hashimoto, and likely would not give him any information whatsoever. Even so, if there was a confirmed traitor in her class, then no matter how you looked at it, Sakayanagi would inevitably be at a disadvantage. Supposing the total test scores of all students in a class were used to determine the winner, all that Hashimoto would have to do is intentionally score zero points, and their class would suffer considerably.

“If Sakayanagi had followed my instructions, I would’ve followed her and betrayed Ryuuen at the end of the year. Putting aside whether that was before or after I betrayed her in the previous exam, though,” said Hashimoto.

Though he was speaking with a lot of spirit and vigor, I wasn’t sure to what extent he was telling the truth. The only thing that I knew for certain as I listened to Hashimoto was that everything this man said was vague.

“It’s fine if you want to let Ryuuen win, but have you tried making that proposal with him, the same one you did with

Sakayanagi?" I asked.

"You mean about bringing you over, to make you an ally, Ayanokouji? Yeah, I did, of course. His answer was the same as Sakayanagi's, at first. But he'd do it, depending on certain conditions. He said that if he could defeat Sakayanagi in the final exam, he'd pull us both into his class."

Ryuuen said something like that? Considering past experiences, Ryuuen was the same as Sakayanagi. It was patently obvious that he was not the kind of person who would try to win by bringing me into his ranks. Besides, it would take a large amount of funds—40,00,000 in fact—to bring over two students from another class. Did that mean that Hashimoto was seduced by Ryuuen's superficial lies or something?

No... That probably wasn't it. It was the person before me, Hashimoto, who wasn't telling the whole truth. If it were me, I would make absolutely certain that I was in a perfect position, by preparing the rules to save myself, behind the scenes of this reckless betrayal. If I didn't know for certain whether Ayanokouji Kiyotaka might move to another class of his choosing, I wouldn't use that as a decisive factor. It would be bizarre if the payoff for betraying Sakayanagi wasn't an enormous sum.

A contract to transfer 20,000,000 Private Points...

Then, it would make a certain kind of sense. If Hashimoto was complicit in Sakayanagi's defeat in the year-end final exam and had that kind of accomplishment under his belt, then he would earn that right from Ryuuen. If that was it, then it would be a challenge worth undertaking, even if it came at the great cost of committing a betrayal. Also, even if Ryuuen couldn't come up with such a hefty sum immediately, if he was collecting the class's Private Points each month, he could certainly pay that amount by graduation time.

After all, it ultimately didn't matter at all to Hashimoto which class won or whether I was in it. If he had the right to be in Class A in the end, he would be victorious. Everything he did was for his own sake. That was the conclusion I had come to from the many scenarios that I had simulated in my head. Hashimoto had confirmed Sakayanagi's true intentions by betraying her in the Survival and Elimination Special Exam.

If Sakayanagi accepted the idea of having me transfer to her side from here, then the rest would be simple. If they were to collect Private Points from everyone in Class A, it was highly likely that they could reach 20,000,000 points with ease. Then, if they offered it to me and I accepted the class transfer, Hashimoto could just choose to fight alongside Sakayanagi and me, with her and me as the two figureheads.

If Sakayanagi refused the idea, then Hashimoto could just enter into a secret agreement with Ryuuen and get 20,000,000 Private Points. However, while that latter scenario had the advantage of graduating from Class A, there was no avoiding the risk of expulsion that would come from his act of betrayal. Not only would he be making an enemy of Sakayanagi, but he could also be at risk of being targeted by third parties. Even he fact that Hashimoto had approached me like this and told me all the details about his betrayal was all for his own sake.

“What do you want from me?” I asked.

When I asked him that, despite his nervous expression, Hashimoto grinned.

10.2

THE SOCIAL GROUP CAMP was over, and now, it was a moment where time was passing slowly, leisurely, but surely. Sitting on the sofa in the career counseling office, Sakayanagi quietly passed the time waiting for the arrival of a certain someone. Standing beside her with arms crossed and a quizzical expression on his face was Mashima, her homeroom instructor.

“Who in the world are you planning to talk to here? And what about?” he wondered aloud.

Mashima, who had been brought here without being told anything, glanced at Sakayanagi for answers. Even though he didn’t understand what was going on, he certainly sensed that there was something unusual happening.

“You seem restless, Mashima-sensei. Please do not worry. You will soon find out,” answered Sakayanagi.

“But…” he protested, since more than ten minutes had already passed since the two of them had entered the room.

“…He’s arrived,” announced Sakayanagi.

Shortly afterward though, Sakayanagi sensed it. She sensed that, the moment a hand was placed on the door, the young man would appear.

“You are five minutes late, Ryuuen-kun,” said Sakayanagi.

“Y’know, everybody always says that the star of the show always shows up late,” replied Ryuuen.

It was none other than Ryuuen Kakeru who had opened the door to the career counseling office, with his homeroom teacher Sakagami standing behind him.

“What is this all about, Mashima-sensei?” asked Sakagami.

“Not a clue… I’m afraid I’m not sure what’s going on here either,” replied Mashima.

The two teachers exchanged puzzled looks after having been brought together here, neither one of them able to get a grasp on the situation. Ryuuen sat down on the other sofa across from Sakayanagi, his legs spread open wide. The two students sitting and the teachers standing upright made for a strange sight.

“Even if it was through deception, you certainly made Hashimoto-kun do something rather drastic,” said Sakayanagi.

“Well,” Ryuuen shot back without a moment’s delay, “I’m sure he’s gotta be anxious bein’ under you, and I sure don’t blame him.”

“I wish that were all it was. I’m sure he must have been seduced by the sweet words of a clever, cunning scoundrel. He completely believes a lie to be the truth and is under the impression that a truth is a lie. He might be a victim as well,” said Sakayanagi.

Their back-and-forth exchange of words had begun, leaving their teachers behind.

“Yer sure in good spirits for somebody who’s sunk so low,” remarked Ryuuen.

“It is true that I have experienced emotions that I have never felt before. But if you thought that was the end, I’m afraid such thoughts were premature,” replied Sakayanagi.

“Heh,” Ryuuen chuckled. “Looks like Ayanokouji went and did somethin’ unnecessary, didn’t he?”

Ryuuen had naturally grasped the fact that Ayanokouji had contacted Sakayanagi during Social Group, and now that it was over, she was standing tall again. Connecting the dots wasn’t too difficult.

“It is as you say. He… I mean, Ayanokouji-kun saved me,” said Sakayanagi.

Taking in Sakayanagi’s gaze as she sat directly in front of him, Ryuuen intuitively sensed that there had been a change in her, who used to only look down on others. On the other hand, Sakayanagi had sensed something as well. She sensed that the young man before her now harbored a conviction even stronger than he did when they met.

“You have been saved by Ayanokouji-kun too, I see,” said Sakayanagi.

“Hah! Don’t make me laugh. See, this is why we’ll never see eye to eye. I don’t remember Ayanokouji ever savin’ me. Hell, if anything, he gave me hatred. Hatred, and a need for revenge,” said Ryuuen.

When Ryuuen was defeated in a ring where he had absolute confidence in himself, his pride was trampled.

“I see. Hatred, is it? So that’s what drove you this far,” said Sakayanagi.

“And it’s different for you?” asked Ryuuen. Sakayanagi smiled in response, to which Ryuuen spat, “What’s so funny?”

“I am sorry. I apologize if it appeared to be a rude smile. I was simply happy, is all. I was happy that you have splendidly recognized Ayanokouji-kun’s abilities in the process of getting to this point,” said Sakayanagi.

Ryuuen, the person before Sakayanagi now, had experienced those abilities firsthand.

In that case, that makes him qualified, thought Sakayanagi, unlike that time when she’d been furious at Hashimoto. *No, that’s not all there is*, she added, quickly changing her current line of thinking. After the Kamuro and Yamamura incident, there was a change to the emotions inside her.

“Are you sayin’ that you zeroed in on it at an even earlier stage?” asked Ryuuen.

It was already a well-known fact that that Sakayanagi had her eyes on Ayanokouji from the start. However, Ryuuen did not know where they had their first point of contact, so he thought he might as well ask.

“Yes. Unlike you, who discovered his existence here at this school, these eyes have unfortunately been following him ever since my early childhood,” said Sakayanagi.

Ryuuen froze in response to such a triumphant attitude.

“…Now ain’t that a deeply interestin’ statement. You sayin’ you knew him back when he was a little brat?” asked Ryuuen.

“I knew him well, yes,” Sakayanagi said, “I would interpret it as me being something akin to a childhood friend.”

Upon hearing that statement, Mashima inwardly recalled a time when Sakayanagi had said something like that before. But Mashima wasn’t going to do something so thoughtless as come between these two.

“I lost to Ayanokouji. I always thought that no matter how many times I lost, as long as I won in the end, it was all good. But that guy crushed that indomitable will of mine mercilessly; he smashed it to pieces. He crushed it so bad that it left me dumbstruck,” said Ryuuen.

But more than a year had passed since then, and Ryuuen was about to return to that stage once more.

“I suppose that means that we have the same ultimate goal, even if our motives differ. Oddly enough, Ryuuen-kun, I have been hoping to fight with him for a long time. For much, much longer than you have. I have only one year of school life remaining, however, so before that time is up, I’m afraid I must have anyone who would get in the way of that disappear,” said Sakayanagi.

“I’m in complete agreement with ya there,” said Ryuuen, “So I guess I’m gonna have to beat you quick and take my revenge on him.”

Sakayanagi, who had always looked at other people with cold eyes, felt the inside of her chest getting hotter—but not in response

to Ryuuen. It was because she was thinking about Ayanokouji, waiting for her ahead.

Ryuuen felt the same. His emotions were running high, and Ayanokouji was the target, waiting for him ahead of Sakayanagi.

“Your vengeance will not be realized. You will suffer failure before that happens,” said Sakayanagi.

“Hey, you’re the one who set up this whole showdown at the throne; it’s just that your schemes are off the mark,” said Ryuuen.

As the back-and-forth heated up, Mashima couldn’t remain silent any longer, and jumped in.

“It would seem you have carried this conversation forward as you’ve pleased,” he said, “but now I think it’s about time that you explain the situation.”

“My apologies,” replied Sakayanagi gently. “I suppose it would be better not to waste any more time. Shall we get down to business, then?”

“Yeah, let’s,” said Ryuuen.

Sakayanagi had the two teachers stand side by side and turn toward her. Ryuuen also stood up and turned to face the teachers, standing in front of Sakayanagi, who rose to her feet with her cane.

“The two of us are about to make a large wager. Now, these things would ordinarily be handled verbally. If the people involved cannot place their trust in one another, then commitments are made with some sort of written contact in place. However, because of the subject matter in this instance, we decided that it would be safer to have our respective class’s homeroom instructors present,” explained Sakayanagi.

A wave of nervousness washed over Mashima and Sakagami upon hearing what the conversation was about.

“What sort of arrangement are you two planning to enter?” asked Mashima.

“Whomever loses in the final exam will leave the school. That’s what this is,” Sakayanagi declared, laying out the stakes.

“The loser will…leave? What are you saying? We haven’t announced the details of the exam or its rules yet. At this stage, we

don’t even know if there will be a system in place where students would be expelled,” said Mashima, his tone harsh despite his confusion, making clear that there was no guarantee they would be able to have their opponent expelled anyway.

“Mashima-sensei, is there perhaps something you are misunderstanding? This has nothing whatsoever to do with the content or rules of the exam. All that we are betting upon is which of us will be the winner, which will result in the loser voluntarily withdrawing from school. That is all there is to it,” explained Sakayanagi.

“That is why we have brought you teachers here to be witnesses, to make it official,” Ryuuen added. “Even if Sakayanagi cries or screams, you’ll make sure she gets tossed outta school, as per the agreement. Oh, and in the unlikely event that I happen to lose, the same goes for me too, of course.”

It was a dangerous proposition, wherein both parties were willing to accept expulsion if they lost, utterly severing any chances of escape. In order for them to execute this plan without incident, the cooperation of the school was essential, as the administration had the power to enforce it. Once Mashima grasped the situation, he tried to speak, but his words were slow to come.

“Are you really planning to make such a wager? You have a Protect Point—”

Sakayanagi, who was calm and composed in contrast to Mashima, spoke up on that point of uncertainty.

“Because the terms are for voluntary withdrawal, Protect Points have no meaning. Also, in the interest of fairness, we have decided to ask for additional Private Points to make up for the difference in Protect Points, but we have kept the amount to a minimum. If we took away his money, there really wouldn’t be anything left in his class, after all,” said Sakayanagi.

“It’s like they say, don’t count your chickens before they hatch. If you lose, there ain’t no point in countin’ the money,” quipped Ryuuen.

Acknowledging that this all wasn’t a joke, that the two students were serious about this arrangement, Mashima straightened his posture, and his expression turned stern.

“Are the two of you both really sure about this? If we grant you our approval, that means we will have to enforce a compulsory expulsion after the results of the final exam come out. Both of you have important leadership positions in your respective classes. It’s inevitable that a great deal of confusion will follow,” explained Mashima.

“Yes. It will be extremely difficult to rebuild a class after one of us has been defeated—perhaps even virtually impossible to repair. In other words, it would be inevitable that one of our classes would end up dropping out of the four-way competition before we advance to our third year,” said Sakayanagi.

As she spoke, she once again thought of Ayanokouji. His ideal scenario, of a four-class competition, was no longer possible once she agreed upon this bet with Ryuuen. Supposing even if Ayanokouji were to transfer to adjust the balance of power and steer the ship, even if he came over to Ichinose’s class to save it from the verge of collapse, it wouldn’t be enough.

“And I assume you wouldn’t wish our bet to be called off in the event of a tie?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Yeah, I ain’t gonna accept a tie. If it does come to that, we can just decide by lottery, the same as how you abandoned Kamuro,” said Ryuuen.

“That sounds like it could provide some amusement. Let us look forward to it, then,” said Sakayanagi.

Both sides had cut off any escape routes, but neither one of them expected that there would be a draw. There would only be victory or defeat—two sides of the same coin. After Sakayanagi and Ryuuen agreed in the presence of both homeroom teachers, the wager was made official.

The loser would disappear.

The end-of-year special examination, in which the stakes were expulsion, with no escape—the curtain would soon rise.

Postscript

HEY ALL, it's Kinugasa with a hernia here, who managed to get this book to launch in four months' time this time around, some way or another. Thank you all for your continued support this year as well, everyone.

I say things like a year really does fly by fast, but seriously, before I knew it, I realized that one of my children is going to be starting primary school this spring. I believe that, socially speaking, it's a child's role to play to the best of their ability every day when they're in kindergarten and preschool. But, man, to finally dive into society, including studies... As a parent, I'm half hopeful and half worried.

Anyway, that's enough about me. Let's talk a little bit about *Classroom of the Elite*. Continuing from the last installment, the story has now gotten into the third term of the second-year arc. After the somewhat hard-hitting developments from the last volume, I've brought you something that feels a little more relaxed this time. And, in the next installment, we'll finally be getting to the final special exam of the second-year arc, with the year-end final exam story. As those who have already read this volume will understand, it's expected to be a story that will have a significant impact on the main characters that have appeared up until this point.

And also, the third season of the *Classroom of the Elite* TV anime is now airing. It would make me incredibly happy if you would check that out as well!

Now, then...as I briefly touched on at the start in this postscript, I'd like to talk about the situation with the hernia in my neck. It's been day after day after day of me feeling like there's nothing I can do, and the pace of my work has slowed considerably as of late. The pain is so severe that I sometimes don't even want to sit in a chair. If my ratio of time spent was six hours of work to four hours of rest when I was healthy, I've managed to compensate for the decline in my speed by working for nine hours and resting for one hour.

However, as one would expect, there's no way that I can continue at that rate forever, and I think my body has reached its limit...

Therefore, I've been considering taking a little bit of time in the near future to completely devote my time to resting and focusing solely on recovery. In that case, it might be unavoidable that the next volume's release will be delayed. I am determined to work harder than ever before once I've recovered, so I sincerely appreciate your patience and understanding. *Classroom of the Elite* is number one, of course, but there are also many other things that I want to do besides that.

So then, everyone, I'll be praying that we can meet again as soon as possible!

See ya again!



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